



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

Mato Kousaka

Illustration by Gaou





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

3

By **Mato Kousaka**

Illustration by **Gaou**





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



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.

“Jade. Which direction is the boss room?”

“D-direction? You don’t want the route  
we’ve mapped out, just the direction?”

“This may be the Great Labyrinth, but it’s  
not so great a labyrinth that exploring  
it has to be grating, okay...?!”

“Urk...the words *great* and *labyrinth*  
are starting to sound like nonsense...”







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



**Mato Kousaka**

Illustration by **Gaou**

  
NEW YORK

## Copyright



**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.3

©Mato Kousaka 2021

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001



Visit us at [yenpress.com](https://yenpress.com) • [facebook.com/yenpress](https://facebook.com/yenpress) • [twitter.com/yenpress](https://twitter.com/yenpress)  
[yenpress.tumblr.com](https://yenpress.tumblr.com) • [instagram.com/yenpress](https://instagram.com/yenpress)

First Yen On Edition: June 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Emma McClain, Maya Deutsch

Designed by Yen Press Design: Madelaine Norman

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kousaka, Mato, author. | Gaou, illustrator. | Ward, Jennifer (Jennifer J.), translator.

Title: I may be a guild receptionist, but I'll solo any boss to clock out on time / Mato Kousaka ; illustration by Gaou ; translated by Jennifer Ward.

Other titles: Guild no uketsukejou desu ga, zangyou wa Iya nanode boss wo solo toubatsu shiyō to omoimasu. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2023-

Identifiers: LCCN 2023022303 | ISBN 9781975369460 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975369484 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975369507 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975369521 (v. 4 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: CYAC: Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | Monsters—Fiction. | LCGFT: Action and adventure fiction. | Monster fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K684 Id 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023022303>

ISBNs: 978-1-97536950-7 (paperback)

978-1-9753-6951-4 (ebook)

# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)



[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[34](#)

[35](#)

[36](#)

[37](#)

[38](#)

[39](#)

[40](#)

[41](#)

[42](#)

[43](#)

[44](#)

[45](#)

[46](#)

[47](#)

[48](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



# 1

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh, I wanna go hoooooooooome!” receptionist Alina Clover wailed the moment the clock struck midnight.

It was the dead of night at Iffole Counter, and the office was empty.

Surrounded by mountains of documents and potions serving as nutritional supplements, Alina was working overtime yet again. She lay face down on her desk as tears poured from her eyes.

“I really thought that was all I had left...!”

Her voice trembled, hoarse from exhaustion. Yes—that should have been the last of the day’s work. Her goal had been to leave before the date changed, and with enormous concentration, she had finally gotten through every one of those accursed quest forms.

Or so she had thought, until she found the huge stack of unprocessed documents hidden at her feet.

“Yeah, that’s right... *I* was the one who temporarily put them there a few hours ago when I couldn’t fit the whole pile on the desk...!” Alina whined. “But—but why did I have to find them *now*, of all times...?!” She leaned back into her chair, ready to melt away like some semisolid creature.

“*Oops overtime*,” the kind you found just when you thought you were done with your original overtime, was incredibly brutal. With attack power that high, an accidental encounter like this would end in total mental collapse for the weak-willed.

“...Heh... Heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh-heh.” Alina’s wails gradually transformed into a bout of eerie chuckles.

This had been going on for a week now. Things were so bad that she’d actually started laughing about it.

Alina’s jade-green eyes were tinged with a slimy glow as they turned to the

newspaper abandoned on the desk beside her.

It was the adventurer newspaper printed by the guild. Here in Iffole, the city of adventurers, it was the most common source of information, and most residents read it. It featured a wide variety of news related to adventuring, such as the latest info on dungeons currently in progress, the activities of noted adventurers, and sale details for equipment and relics.

And the indirect cause of Alina's present suffering was featured right on its front page.

The headline was simple: STRUGGLING IN THE GREAT LABYRINTH.

The Great Labyrinth was a new dungeon, discovered only a few weeks ago.

Incompetent adventurers were chomping at the bit to challenge it, and one after another, they were going missing inside. It was clearly a difficult dungeon—fewer than half of those who ventured into it had managed to return. More than 90 percent of the mountain of quest forms that Alina was currently slogging through were related to this dungeon.

Furthermore, when she flipped to the following page of the newspaper, the next headline read:

SILVER SWORD FINALLY HEADS OUT, ONE MEMBER SHORT

Silver Sword—the Adventurers Guild's strongest party. It was composed of the best of the best, but its members had recently suffered a spate of serious injuries. Due in part to that and their inability to recruit a frontline attacker, they had been taking a back seat of late. But upon hearing how little progress was being made on the Great Labyrinth, it seemed they were finally sliding back into action.





*It's a bit late for that, though.*

“Heh-heh-heh-heh.”

A hollow laugh spilling from her lips, Alina staggered to the changing room. She opened up her locker, revealing a rough cloak unbefitting of a girl.

“You adventurers all suuuuuuck! ♪”

She was so mad that she'd started humming.

“That boss better diiiiie! ♪”

Once she'd flung the cloak over her shoulders, the girl who had been wobbling with exhaustion was nowhere to be found.

Instead, a terrifying pair of eyes flashed eerily, a little bloodshot from lack of sleep.

“I'll kill you.”

## 2

“Th-this is the new dungeon...the Great Labyrinth...”

A bunch of adventurers had gathered at the newly opened dungeon entrance, and they were all in an uproar.

The commotion surrounded four adventurers who had recently come back from the dungeon alive.

The party was in tatters, exhausted both mentally and physically from wandering the Great Labyrinth for the past few days. It was impressive enough that they had managed to escape without losing anyone. They looked absolutely awful, a vivid testament to the terrors of the new dungeon.

“Those four were lucky to get back at all, but look at the state of them...”

“This means any groups that went in before them and still haven’t come back are probably...”

Someone gulped. Before jumping to the dungeon via the crystal gate, plenty among them had said things like, “Great Labyrinth my ass, how hard can it be?” but now the adventurers were as silent as the dead.

Just then, they heard loud, ringing footsteps as a new party appeared from the crystal gate.

Assuming it was yet another reckless adventurer, those already present turned around, only to be surprised once again.

“It’s...it’s Silver Sword!”

But in truth, the main reason for their shock was not the appearance of the wounded members of Silver Sword, here despite their cessation of activities. No, the real surprise was the lone adventurer lurking quietly behind them.

Fully clad in a hooded cloak, the adventurer was equipped with no weapons or armor.

“The Executioner?!” several people cried out in shock.

The Executioner—a mysterious adventurer who would show up unexpectedly whenever progress was at a deadlock and solo bosses that should have required full parties of four, clearing dungeons in the blink of an eye.

Previously thought to be a figure of urban legend, the Executioner had recently shown up multiple times in the role of Silver Sword’s frontline attacker. And now they were openly challenging the Great Labyrinth.

“Whoa, is that the real deal?!”

“No way, this is the first I’ve seen him... He’s shorter than I expected.”

Under the adventurers’ looks of confusion and awe, the Executioner—or rather, Alina in disguise—heaved a sigh. Despite suffering the double punch of sleep deprivation and nutrient deficiency caused by continuous overtime, she spurred herself on, raising her hand into the empty air.

“Skill Activate: *Dia Break*.”

With that chant, a white magic sigil appeared at Alina’s feet. Light converged in her outstretched palm, flaring up and driving away the darkness of the dungeon as a giant silver war hammer materialized in her hand.

“...Th-there it is! That’s a Dia skill! They say only the Executioner has one...!”

The adventurers forgot all about the Great Labyrinth as they watched the Executioner with rapt attention. Incidentally, Alina had anticipated the crowd and the number of eyes that would be on her, so she’d worn a mask underneath her hood, firmly protecting her face from view.

With her war hammer lightly slung over her shoulder, Alina quietly asked a question of Jade Scrade, the party’s leader and tank. “Jade. Which direction is the boss room?”

“D-direction? You don’t want the route we’ve mapped out, just the direction? ...Well, okay.” Her question seemed to trouble him, and he broke out in a cold sweat as he activated his skill.

“Skill Activate: *Sigurth Beast*.”

Red light gushed forth from his Sigurth skill, wreathing his eyes. With his



newly strengthened senses, he closely observed the Great Labyrinth.

“East and west... No, definitely east. Straight east from here. I feel something with extremely dense ether in that direction.”

“H-hey, you hear that?!”

On hearing what Jade said, the adventurers began to stir with excitement.

“Yeah, I’ll remember that. The boss room is east from here...! I’m gonna head in before Silver Sword gets the jump on me!”

Everyone scrambled to be the first into the Great Labyrinth, as if just now remembering what they’d come for.

Watching them from the corner of her eye, Alina said simply, “Roger,” and quietly approached the wall in the direction Jade had indicated. She then readied her war hammer.

“...Hey, Alina. I think I know what you’re about to do...,” Jade muttered. “But the Great Labyrinth is a great labyrinth. And being a great labyrinth, y’know...”

When Jade hesitantly tried to stop her, Alina disregarded him with a curt “shut up,” clenched her teeth, and glared at the cold wall. “This may be the Great Labyrinth, but it’s not so great a labyrinth that exploring it has to be grating, okay...?! ”

“Urk...the words *great* and *labyrinth* are starting to sound like nonsense...” Behind them, their healer and white mage Lululee Ashford was holding her head in her hands.

Heedless of the girl’s anguish, Alina readied her war hammer, facing the high wall of the Great Labyrinth currently blocking her way. “*Hryahhh!*”

She slammed the weapon into the wall with all her might, adding in her resentment over all the extra work it had caused her. Instantly, there was a big *gaboom*, and the dungeon wall came tumbling down.

Alina passed its remains and proceeded to mow down the next wall standing in her way.

The Great Labyrinth shuddered with slams and bangs. Ignoring all protests, Alina rapidly tore down each wall in a straight line while moving in the direction

Jade had indicated.

“.....”

The other adventurers who had been watching froze, speechless in the face of such a violent strategy.

“Hey...we were never able to break the walls...were we?”

“Y-yeah, my relic arma couldn’t even scratch them...”

“Um, sorry to butt in,” came a casual voice as a hand clapped down on the stunned adventurer’s shoulder. It was Silver Sword’s rear attacker, with his distinctive red hair—the black mage Lowe Losblender. “We’ll take care of the boss, so wouldn’t it be a good idea for you to make some money defeating the roaming monsters while you have the chance?”

At that, the adventurer snapped to attention. “W-well, I suppose that’s true...”

“If the Executioner’s here, the boss’ll go down in an instant!”

“Hey, hurry it up! Let’s hunt some monsters!”

Without realizing they’d merely been gracefully sent away, the remaining adventurers hastily vanished into the depths of the labyrinth.

### 3

“You can get through a dungeon like this...?” Jade’s bewildered voice came from behind as Alina slammed through yet another wall, progressing steadily ahead.

“They say the underground labyrinth took fifty years to clear...” Lowe, following Jade, sounded almost exasperated. “And people were speculating that this one would take just as long, but...”

“There’s no way the ancients who made this dungeon could have imagined someone would destroy the walls to make a beeline for the goal.”

“But thanks to that,” Lululee said, “there’s now a path that leads straight to the exit, making it easier for lost adventurers to come back alive. This is killing two birds with one stone... Though I feel a little bad for the ancients. They must have put so much thought into all the labyrinth’s little tricks and traps.”

“You guys are too chatty.” Alina silenced the muttering trio behind her with a glare.

They had already reached the depths of the Great Labyrinth, and there was no sign of any other adventurers around. Alina’s mask was annoying her, so she took it off.

“Don’t look at me like I’m a rule-breaker, here. It’s their fault for making such flimsy walls.”

“They’re not flimsy, though...,” said Jade. “Anyway, I never thought you’d approach us and volunteer to help clear a dungeon.”

“I didn’t say I’d help.”

“Huh?”

“I said that I wanted to kill the boss as soon as possible to put a stop to my overtime!”

“...”

The others looked at her, as if to say, *What's the difference?* But Alina ignored them and glared in the supposed direction of the boss room.

"Listen...", she spat, low and quiet. "Next week, I have to go to the receptionist joint training seminar, no matter what...!"

"Huh?"

"But the extra work never ends, the dungeon isn't getting cleared, and my overtime just keeps getting worse... If things stay this busy, the higher-ups will say, 'We don't have enough people, so you need to stay,' and they won't let me go to the seminar...!"

Squeezing the handle of her war hammer, Alina bashed aggressively through another wall that stood in her way. She heard Jade mumble something like, "She's clearing this incredible labyrinth for the sake of a receptionist training seminar...?" but she ignored him.



## 4

After proceeding rather violently in a straight line for some time, Alina reached a part of the maze that looked different from what they'd seen so far.

They were no longer in a hallway, but in a large open space. And strung throughout the room was a giant white spiderweb so thick, it was impossible to tell what the place had originally looked like.

"Here we go...the boss room," Alina announced.

Deep in any dungeon lay a floor thick with stagnant ether. And at the back of this floor, one could find a large room in which a strong monster had settled down to lord over the rest. These were called boss rooms.

The threads of the spiderweb had to be radiating chilled air, because the chamber was as cold as a midwinter morning. A little way inside, clinging to a thread hanging from the ceiling, was a giant spider.

Its whole body was an eerie purple color. It had eight goggling eyes and a pair of large fangs.

"Yeeeeeeek! I hate spiders!" shrieked Lululee, disgusted.

"Die!!!!" Ignoring Lululee's girlish scream, Alina whacked the creature, sending it flying.

Alina's war hammer had struck the giant boss without a second's delay, flinging it into the wall with a nasty *splat!*

"Yeeeeeeeeeeek! This is so grooooooooooss!" Lululee wailed.

Now on its back, the spider flailed and struggled with its eight legs, before its vigor gradually waned. By the time the legs stopped moving, the edges of its enormous body were turning to mist and disappearing.

"Arachne...! An arachne in its nest is a tough one! Just saying. Though I guess you already took care of it." Jade gave everyone a belated heads-up, just in case, then returned the sword he'd drawn to the sheath at his waist. He also

had his relic arma shield up, but the boss had died before he'd managed to pull aggro, so his job as the tank was done.

"Damn bug," Alina spat, shooting it a hateful glare.

But at that very moment, a new hostile aura swelled behind her.

"...! Alina, behind you—!" Jade realized what was happening with a start, but by the time he'd cried out, the other arachne hiding beyond the nest had leaped straight for Alina.

"*Kshaaaaaa!*"

With a disturbing cry, the arachne spat a bundle of white thread from its fanged mouth. It immediately ensnared Alina's body, keeping her from moving.

"Alina!"

Jade whipped out his sword. Just one of the arachne's threads was steely enough to support the spider's massive weight. Once someone got tangled in the webbing, it would be impossible to—

"Hmph!" But with a single snort to rally her might, Alina broke out of the threads with a tremendous *snap!*

"Whoa!"

It was so intense, Jade staggered. Seeing its trusty thread torn apart with brute strength alone also startled the arachne, and it promptly jumped to the side. Meanwhile, shredded threads fluttering down around her, the newly freed Alina muttered in a low voice, "Must be nice, being a spider... You get to hole up in a labyrinth, spend all your time making a cozy little home, then do nothing but relax there..."

Alina raised her silver war hammer, a murderous aura rising from her, which was far more than the single arachne deserved. Her weapon glinted dangerously.

"But as for me... Because of you, I haven't been able to spend any time in the home I love...!"

In an instant, Alina launched off the ground, a bloodcurdling scowl on her face as she hurtled toward the arachne.

“Hurry up and die, nest and allllllllll!!”

Her resentful cry thundered through the boss room just as Alina pulverized the arachne in a single swing of her war hammer.

## 5

After trouncing the giant spiders, Alina returned to her path through the Great Labyrinth.

“That reminds me,” Lululee said as they were walking. “You’re going to the upcoming receptionist joint training seminar, right, Alina? Silver Sword will be attending as speakers, you know.”

Lululee puffed out her chest proudly as Alina blinked. “Speakers? At the receptionist seminar?”

The seminar would be held in a week. It was a big annual event that brought together new receptionists from the many quest offices in Iffole. Two or three—mostly newbies—from each office would gather at the guild headquarters for a three-day conference full of lectures.

Jade was the one to answer Alina’s question. “It’s a special lecture just starting this year. The goal is to teach receptionists about adventuring work. All we’re doing is a demonstration fight, though.”

“Eugh... So you’re going to be there, too...,” Alina groaned.

“You make it sound like we’re as bad as overtime.”

“This is you we’re talking about. I’m sure you’ll be standing at the back of the room, stalking me the whole time.”

“Urk!”

The stalker in question, having been called out, jerked his shoulders and froze awkwardly. Nevertheless, his lips curled in a dauntless smile.

“It’s true, I might have done that before... However! I’m a changed man!” Opening his eyes wide, he clenched his fists hard in front of his chest, then began to speak with passionate enthusiasm. “I realized something. If I’m going to get you to notice me, Alina, I first have to rid myself of the dishonorable title of ‘stalker’ and rise to the status of ‘regular person’...! And so I have decided to



amend my stalker-like behavior to earn your esteem. I call this new strategy my Image Improvement Campaign!”

“Why don’t you shut up and just focus on breathing, then? That’s all it would take.”

“... Alina...”

Her biting words instantly extinguished the flames burning in Jade’s eyes. But after a fleeting glimpse of tears, in the next instant, the fire was back, as if nothing had happened.

“No, I won’t be discouraged. While you’re at the guild headquarters for your seminar, I’ll enact my destalkerfication plan and get you to see me in a new light...!”

“They say you should start by becoming friends,” Lowe muttered apathetically. “But in your case, you’ll first have to get Alina to see you as a normal person. Sounds like you have a long road ahead.”

Beside him, Lululee nodded firmly. “That’s about what I’d expect for someone as romantically clueless as Jade.”

“That aside, I’m surprised to hear you’ll be attending, too.” Jade tilted his head, puzzled. “I thought for sure that the only receptionist coming from Iffole Counter would be that newbie Laila... Considering how long you’ve been working, you’re hardly a rookie, right, Alina?” he pointed out keenly.

“...W-well...” Now the roles were reversed, and Alina was faltering.

It was true—the receptionist joint training seminar was for newbie receptionists who had just started at their respective offices. After three years on the job, there wasn’t much point for Alina to attend it now.

Of course, the original plan had been for only Laila, the newbie receptionist in her first year of work, to go to the seminar. However, Alina had threatened—or rather, “made a request” to—the office chief, her boss, and won the right to participate.

Alina needed to go to this seminar, no matter what.

“Well, I have my reasons,” Alina said. She folded her arms and looked up at

the ceiling, her eyes sparkling. “Besides, seminars are like paradise...! Each day is uneventful, and all you have to do is listen to lectures. You don’t have to deal with annoying adventurers, the lectures end according to the schedule, and you’re guaranteed to go home on time... There’s no overtime whatsoever! It sounds like a dream come true...!”

“Hmm.” Lululee’s face stiffened as if she’d just realized something. “Since it’s multiday, will you be staying in the training hall at the guild headquarters?”

“Yeah. Is there a problem?”

“N-no, um...” Lululee trailed off, apparently hesitant to explain. Then, glancing at Alina with upturned eyes, she said, “Er... Alina, please swear to me you won’t laugh.”

“I won’t laugh.”

“A-at the guild headquarters...”

Lululee clenched her small hands and resolved herself. “...there’s a ghost!”

“Well, I’m finished here, so I guess I’ll go home and sleep.”

“Alinaaaaaaaaa! Don’t pretend you didn’t hear meeeeeeee!!” Lululee frantically grabbed at her robe.

Alina shot her a clear look of exasperation. “Come on...a ghost? So what?!”

“Like I told you, Lululee,” Lowe cut in, “ghosts may be scared of Alina, but Alina will never be afraid of ghosts.”

“Keep out of this, Lowe!” Lululee scolded him flatly. “You couldn’t sense a ghost if it bit you!” With a start, something dawned on Alina.

“Oh, right. You use white magic, which governs healing... That means you’re like the total opposite of a ghost... You can see them!”

“I can’t see them at all.”

“Hmm, maybe I’ll buy some cake on the way home.”

“Listen to meeeeeee!”

“I mean...what’s the big deal? You can’t see them, right?”

“Technically, that’s true. But I hear about people seeing them all the time! Which means they’re there! I just can’t see them!”

“If you can’t see them, then what’s the big deal?”

“It’s a huuuuuuge deal! What if I suddenly gain the ability to see them, and then, just as I’m peeking under the bed...my eyes lock with theirs?! What if my foot pokes out from under the covers and a specter grabs it?!”

“...”

A little weirded out by how abnormally frightened Lululee was acting, Alina tilted her head. “I’ve never even heard anything about ghosts haunting the guild headquarters ...”

“To be precise, they’re said to appear in the training hall.”

The guild headquarters had a building specifically for conducting training sessions. It was intended not only for receptionist seminars but also for training all sorts of new employees, including research and search team members. The training hall also had rooms where those attending could stay, so it was invaluable for large seminars with lots of attendees. Naturally, those attending the receptionist seminar would be using those rooms.

“Haven’t you heard, Alina?” said Lululee. “Every year, when they hold the receptionist seminar, there are sightings... Someone will hear a death rattle in the middle of the night or catch sight of a reaper...”

That reminded Alina that she didn’t know very much about the seminar. Not many people seemed to want to talk about it.

As Alina grew increasingly suspicious, Lululee continued. “A long time ago, the guild headquarters was an S-class dungeon called the Fortress of Ash. It was a very difficult dungeon in which many adventurers lost their lives. Until the Silver Sword of the time cleared it, that is.”

“Everyone knows that...”

The story of how the Fortress of Ash, a former S-class dungeon, had been fully cleared and repurposed as the current guild headquarters was famous.

It was the final dungeon the current guildmaster, Glen Garia, had cleared back

when he was still an active adventurer and the leader of Silver Sword. The other members of Silver Sword at the time had all died in battle in the Fortress of Ash, leaving only Glen behind—proof of just how difficult a dungeon it had been. Even now, the heroic tale of how they cleared the dungeon in exchange for their lives was the stuff of legend among adventurers.

“The truth is that people have reported sightings of a reaper ever since the Fortress of Ash was a dungeon.”

“A reaper?”

“Back then, the Fortress of Ash was the sight of countless strange disappearances. A party member who was walking right next to you might suddenly vanish,” Lululee said, turning pale. “There was never any sign they’d been attacked by a monster, and no matter how thoroughly they searched the dungeon, no one was ever found. Even fifteen years later, no bodies have ever turned up. They must have been spirited away by a reaper...to the land of the dead.”

Lululee was getting paler by the second. As Alina wondered whether she should stop the conversation, Lululee scared herself still more.

“People whisper about ghost sightings every year, but they only happen on the day of the receptionists’ seminar...and only in the training hall where the receptionists stay...! And now you’re going to sleep there! Aren’t you scared?!”

“Well, even if the ghosts are real, I already work overtime late at night when the office is deserted. If I was scared of that kind of stuff, I’d never finish my work.”

“That does sound pretty convincing...!”

“...By the way, Lululee, did you know?” Lowe said, lowering his voice and narrowing his eyes to further stoke the girl’s fears. “Talking about stuff like this will summon *it*.”

“Eeep!”

“And they say that *it* targets the scariest of the scaredy-cats... You better be careful tonight, eh? Make sure you look behind you when you’re washing your hair in the bath, double-check your reflection, and make sure no doors are left



open a crack...”

“Heyheyheyheyheyhey!”

“C’mon, Lowe, don’t mess with Lululee,” Jade cut in.

Thanks to Lowe’s half-hearted teasing, Lululee was white as a sheet, her teeth chattering.

Jade shrugged, as if to say *good grief*. “As you can see, Alina, Lululee has no sixth sense and zero ability to combat ghosts. So if you get frightened, feel free to come to me.”

“I’d rather have *you* exorcised,” she replied.

“Are you saying I’m an evil spirit?!”

Ignoring Jade’s complaints, Alina made her way out of the Great Labyrinth.

## 6

Earlier that week.

A few days before Alina disguised herself as the Executioner and cleared the Great Labyrinth, Iffole Counter was holding its monthly morning assembly.

Despite the formal name, it was really just a brief address from the office chief where he officially shared a few business matters with the other employees. Most of it they had already read about in documents circulated around the office. Apparently, these assemblies had once been held daily, but they had grown tedious, and their frequency was eventually decreased to once a week, and then to once a month.

At this point, they were basically just a formality. But that morning's assembly was a little different.

"Um, so headquarters raised an issue with us today...", the chief began, deviating somewhat from his usual opener. "Due to the exceptional amount of overtime hours logged here at Iffole Counter, we've been told by guild headquarters to work on decreasing it." The chief frowned uncomfortably.

Alina's breath caught at the announcement. Beside her, Laila's gaze wandered awkwardly.

Iffole Counter prided itself on being the largest of the guild's many offices, and its receptionists had a lot more work to do. It was well known that they put in a lot of overtime as a result. But lately, with the uproar over the rumor and the appearance of a new hidden dungeon, overtime hours at Iffole Counter had skyrocketed, and headquarters could no longer simply turn a blind eye.

The more senior receptionists also had a fair amount of extra work, but Alina was pounding out the most overtime hours by far. And Laila had been following her example lately.

If the others accused them of making trouble with headquarters, Alina couldn't exactly argue. But it's not like she could simply make the extra work go

away. What was she to do?

Alina braced herself for the chief's next remark, and, falteringly, he continued.

"I'm sure you know all about this, but reforms have been proposed to the guild to improve labor conditions. They're telling us to reduce overtime as much as possible, maintain reasonable working hours, and promote a healthy environment that supports our employees both mentally and physically. Overtime is only meant to be used in special situations, and we shouldn't take it for granted."

*That's just idealism.*

The words almost popped out of Alina's mouth, but she held them back.

She could abandon her work and return home on time. But if she did that, she would definitely fall behind. She might be defeating bosses as the Executioner and eliminating extra work by force, but that meant that Iffole Counter should have been facing even *more* overtime. Reducing it any further was simply beyond her power.

Nevertheless, Alina wanted nothing more than to work reasonable hours in a "healthy environment that supported her both mentally and physically"—that was precisely the peaceful life she was after.

But reality was not so convenient. *I'm not working overtime because I want to.* As Alina fretted over this, the chief continued his remarks.

"We are, of course, the largest office in Iffole, which means there's more work on our plate. I'm fully aware that decreasing overtime isn't something we can achieve overnight, and I'm grateful for how much you all do each day."

*Oh?* Alina blinked. She had thought for sure they'd be hit with some totally unreasonable, borderline harassment crunch order—something like *"The higher-ups got mad at us, so no more overtime. That said, we're not going to do anything about it, such as decreasing your workload or hiring more personnel. We basically have no plan for improvement, but we expect you to find a way to finish your work during regular hours."* However, it seemed that wasn't the case. The chief's statement seemed to be heading in a different direction.

"And so I met with HR back at headquarters to discuss strategies for reducing

overtime. Thanks to their invaluable help, we've come up with some *special measures*."

*HR?*

Alina hadn't been expecting to hear that department come up, and she tilted her head in confusion.

The HR department had the right to decide on assignments for all Adventurers Guild employees, receptionists included. Every year, when the annual personnel rotation was coming up, it was a tradition to pop into the HR department's offices and jokingly tell your acquaintances there which department you would like to work in. Then, invariably, they would place you somewhere completely different.

And the chief of Iffole Counter, the largest office in the guild, had personally gone to that same department and managed to win them a set of "special measures for the sake of reducing their overtime." In other words—

*Sob...!*

Inwardly, Alina clasped her hands in front of her chest and cried, thanking God—no, thanking the office chief.

*—we're going to get more receptionists, right?!*

The HR department had the power to decide where employees were sent. "Special measures" from them had to mean that this overtime-ridden hell pit of an office was finally going to lawfully hire more receptionists.

*After three years of dogged persistence...! How long I've waited...! Finally, I'll know true peace in my life...*

Thinking back over the hell she'd endured until now, Alina quietly wiped away tears.

It turned out that the office chief, who sat like a rock behind his desk and was famous for doing nothing, still did some good work on occasion.

"I thought I'd inform you of the details of these 'special measures' during today's morning meeting," the chief continued. "This is going to be especially relevant to all you receptionists, so please listen closely."

Alina watched, completely moved and nodding vigorously, as the office chief cleared his throat and raised an index finger.

“So without further ado—whoever comes up with the most effective business betterment plan will be receiving special birthday leave!”

As the chief’s proud declaration rang out across the office, everyone else fell silent.

“...What?” Alina blurted, her voice low.

At her stunned reaction, the office chief puffed out his chest and chuckled smugly.

“I know. Shocking, isn’t it? The Adventurers Guild has never had a system of birthday leave. Those of us in the civil service have to adhere to an established schedule—”

“Hey...”

“But just this once, HR has agreed to allow it. Of course, it won’t be labeled ‘birthday leave’ in the documentation—HR will handle all of that.”

“...”

Alina widened her eyes. She was speechless.

Not from joy, of course.

*That’s...that’s not it, Chief!!*

Nothing of the latter part of his smug, idiotic explanation reached her. The blood had drained from her face, and it was all she could do to stiffen her muscles into a poker face to mask her loathing.

Her hands trembled. She had been so sure they were going to do something useful, like hire more receptionists or bring in some temps during busy periods. Between that stupid office chief and HR, there had to be plenty of other things they could do. *In fact, shouldn’t you be the first one to propose a plan, Chief?*

“...Tch.”

Alina bit her lip, just barely managing to keep the torrent of insults ready to spew forth from her mind locked in her chest.

No, she understood. The office chief could be a little inattentive when it came to work. But his warm and gentle personality kept relationships cordial, he was well-known, and he had an invisible asset—connections. When they screwed up and had to apologize, when they needed connections to lay the groundwork for something, or when there was an unexpected incident they had to resolve amicably without causing a fuss, nobody was more valuable. In such situations, he proved extremely reliable.

However—considering the man had climbed his way up to the position of office chief based on that skill alone, he had absolutely nothing to offer otherwise. It was wrongheaded to expect him to understand the workplace environment or to do anything to better it.

And since HR handled time off and vacations, this idea was exactly the sort of thing they'd suggest.

*It seems like if anyone's going to do something about the overtime at Iffole Counter, they'd need authority on par with the guildmaster himself.*

A few months ago, there had been a little incident involving Guildmaster Glen Garia, and he'd promised to increase the number of receptionists at Iffole Counter, even if it meant abusing his authority.

If that promise were fulfilled, overtime at Iffole Counter would most certainly decrease. Alina had been eagerly awaiting the annual personnel rotation, all while working overtime night and day.

*Ngh... Still, birthday leave, huh...? I kind of want it...*

Despite realizing she was falling for the office chief's ploy, Alina couldn't resist the offer's appeal, and she let a flicker of desire show on her face.

For some reason, she always met with tragedy on her birthday.

It would always get busy right around that time. She'd be alone in the empty office late at night, dying from work, only to realize a few minutes before the date changed, *Oh yeah, today was my birthday...*

Then she would stagger home, use whatever was on hand to make herself a slightly fancy meal, and slam it down, only to wilt into her bed and sleep until morning, with no one to celebrate or even notice what day it was. This lonely



cycle had plagued her for the last several years.

If she could only get that birthday leave, then even if things got apocalyptically busy or if the office was smack-dab in the middle of overtime hell, she'd be sure to get the day off simply because it was her birthday. That's what birthday leave meant, after all—a day off on your birthday.

*I just need an effective proposal...!*

The gears in Alina's head were already turning as she tried to figure out how to get that birthday leave.

She wasn't after presents or for anyone to celebrate her birthday—she didn't care about stuff like that. She just wanted to spend the day however she liked.

*But as for an effective business betterment plan...I can't think of anything.*

*Nghhh.* Alina clenched her teeth.

She'd been so desperate to deal with her own leftover work that she'd never considered what could be done about the workplace as a whole.

In truth, being a receptionist was a one-woman show. It looked as if everyone was helping one another, but in fact, the general rule was to steer clear of others' work and not get involved.

The reason was simple. If you were stupid enough to start helping out with someone else's work, you would soon be dragged down into a bottomless swamp.

And nobody wanted to brave that swamp. Everyone valued themselves and their own time. Even newbies were mercilessly flung into the deep end with a "the rest is on you, good luck!" the second they finished learning the basics. Alina had completely departed from tradition by showing the ropes to Laila.

*A business betterment plan...*

She was fresh out of ideas. Her mind had gone totally blank.

Alina felt a cold sweat begin to form on her skin. The office chief was such an easygoing guy, he'd probably accept anything that sounded vaguely plausible. Unfortunately, she couldn't even come up with that.

## 7

“A business betterment plan, huh?”

After the morning assembly, as Alina was busy worrying about the proposal, Laila stared up at the ceiling listlessly. She was two years younger than Alina—a brand-new receptionist who had only started that year. “I’m just a newbie; I can’t think of anything.”

“Relax... I’ve been here *three years*, and I have no idea how to handle Iffole Counter’s workload during regular office hours...”

“To be honest,” Laila grumbled, pouting, “I wish the chief would just hire more staff instead of coming up with this complicated reward scheme.”

Laila had only been at the office a few months, but she was already starting to figure out how useless the office chief was. The man may have succeeded on account of his connections, but once you saw him in the office, it was obvious he was a total good-for-nothing.

*Wait, wouldn’t the fastest way to improve things around here be to whack the office chief and force the guild to swap him out with a new one...?*

An ever-so-slightly violent notion crossed Alina’s mind, but she hastily shook her head.

*No, no, calm down. There’s no guaranteeing that the new boss would be any better, and I can’t risk ruining my peaceful life by becoming a criminal...!*

The only bosses she was allowed to whack were the ones living comfortably in the depths of a dungeon. Unless someone foolishly challenged her, as the guildmaster had, she wasn’t allowed to use violence.

As Alina groaned, deep in thought, a stack of documents spread out on Laila’s desk caught her eye.

“Laila. What are those?”

“They’re for the newbie training next week. It sounds like you’re supposed to

have at least two people attend from each office, but since things are so busy here, they're making me go alone... You went in your first year, right?"

"Oh... Back then, it fell during a particularly busy period. I was working a bunch of overtime, and in the end, I never got to go."

"..."

Catching Laila's look of pity from the corner of her eye, Alina started looking through the documents.

"Does anything in there interest you?" Laila asked.

"Yeah, this here—"

She was looking at the schedule for the three-day training seminar. It included rough summaries of what sorts of lectures would be taught. Alina was pointing to one in particular, which was to be held the morning of the first day. It had only a brief description.

*Lecture: Guidance for New Receptionists*

*Speaker: Rosetta Rhuberry*

Laila looked puzzled. The lecture only had a title and speaker name and featured no additional info. "What is it about this one?"

"The lecture doesn't matter... I'm interested in the speaker!" Alina raised an index finger. "Rosetta Rhuberry is an old hand from Iffole Counter. She's a really capable receptionist—a legend who came up with the style all receptionists adhere to today."

"Oh, now that you mention it, I've heard her name before." Laila widened her eyes, finally putting two and two together. "Isn't she the one who wrote the bestseller *If You Want to Be a Receptionist, Then Eat Beans*?! I read it from cover to cover when I was preparing for the receptionist placement exam!" Laila puffed out her chest for some reason. "She introduced our cute uniforms and established a whole new image for receptionists, revolutionizing a profession previously thought to be difficult, plain, and boring. She's the whole reason it's every girl's dream to be a receptionist these days...!"

Yes, Rosetta Rhuberry was a living legend who was practically synonymous

with the receptionist profession.

During her time at Iffole Counter, she'd adopted one groundbreaking idea after another, such as treating adventurers like valued customers and learning elegant mannerisms in order to offer higher-quality hospitality.

Thanks to her, there were more and more aspiring receptionists each year, and the business, which was once run out of a single office, had branched out and become decentralized. Having more offices made it easier for adventurers to take quests, too, and the annual number of quests received had soared over the past decade.

Not only that, but the sight of this new wave of beautiful receptionists had increased morale among adventurers and significantly lowered their death rate.

Her methods had become the foundation on which today's receptionists stood. But—

"I don't care about any of that stuff, though," said Alina.

"What?!"

"The truly amazing thing about Rosetta Rhuberry is her grit in the office. She was known as the 'iron woman of desk work.' They say that even when three dungeons were simultaneously discovered and adventurers were coming in droves, she handled everything alone without any major errors..."

"Alone?!" Laila's eyes were open as wide as they could go.

"Well, they *do* say there weren't as many adventurers back then as there are now, but that's still some incredible processing skill. Superhuman, even."

"T-true..."

"She was highly valued for her skills, and she received a rare transfer to the head office while still working as a receptionist. She's left the profession now and assumed the position of office head at guild headquarters. She's a self-made woman, and an incredibly talented receptionist. A lady like her is sure to know a few tricks to improve efficiency...! I bet she can figure out a way to resolve Iffole Counter's chronic overtime!"

Alina huffed and clenched her fists. "I can see it now—that birthday leave is

gonna be mine!”

“Are you serious about this, Alina...?!”

“Of course I am... Besides, only eighty percent of me is after the leave. The other twenty percent thinks this might be a real solution to Iffole Counter’s overtime problem.”

“Huh, but just a while ago, weren’t you saying, ‘Soon the personnel rotation will bring our office more receptionists...’ like an oracle?” Laila asked, suddenly recalling a past conversation. “If that really happened, the overtime would dry up in a flash.”

Alina scowled and shook her head. “That’s still supposed to happen. But either way, that personnel rotation only happens once a year. It’s still months down the road. That’s a long time to wait, and they say you should do everything you can before resigning yourself to fate, right...?”

“I see... Well, I don’t really get it, but that expression does sound rather cool.”

“At any rate, Laila. I’ll be joining you at that seminar.”

“B-but we’re so busy. I don’t know if the office chief will let you go...”

“It’ll all work out. The busy period has just come to an end.”

“Huh?”

Putting on a sunny smile, Alina stood up from her seat.

And so, Alina, disguised as the Executioner, brought the overtime to a close and officially secured herself a place at the training seminar.

## 8

Returning to the present—

It was morning when Alina's carriage left Iffole, bound for the Adventurers Guild.

That day marked the beginning of the three-day seminar.

Alina zoned out and gazed at the scenery beyond the window, her butt bumping on the hard seat every time the carriage rolled over a stone. She was currently thinking about how to distract Laila, who was sitting across from her, from the present topic of conversation.

"So, Alina, I hear he's shown up again! The Executioner!" Laila's eyes sparkled with excitement, and her pigtails trembled fiercely as she clenched a newspaper in her hands. "They say he gallantly finished off another boss...! And not only that, but he also destroyed the hard walls of the Great Labyrinth and forced his way straight through it! What the heck?! How did he even think of such an original strategy?! This is going to add a lot of spice to my daydreams...! What if I wander into a dungeon and get into trouble, and he destroys the walls just in time to swoop in and rescue me? Or crumbling walls could be about to bury me, and he dashes in and uses his body to block the rubble?! There's so many possibilities! Ahhhhhh, he's so coool!"

Scattering hearts all over the place, Laila opened up the newspaper and shoved it in Alina's face. It was open to an article recounting how the Executioner and Silver Sword had cleared the Great Labyrinth faster than any other dungeon in history.

As she gazed at the paper, however, Laila's expression took a turn, and she breathed an uneasy sigh. "Has the Executioner finally become a member of Silver Sword, then...? What do you think, Alina...? The guild hasn't commented at all."

"It doesn't really matter if he joins or not," Alina answered apathetically.



“It *does* matter!” Laila insisted imperiously. “If Silver Sword can hold on to the Executioner, then he’ll have a reason to stay in Iffole as an adventurer!”

“...? Whether he joins Silver Sword or not, the Executioner isn’t going anywhere, is he?”

“You can’t say that for sure...! I mean... Since...!” Laila said. She glanced at Alina, her eyes moist with tears. “Mysterious and super-strong characters always vanish at the end of stories, right...?! They’ll say something like, ‘Now my job is done...’ and go off somewhere...!”

Spewing nonsense logic, Laila covered her face with her hands and began to sob. Alina’s lips twitched in the face of the other girl’s overpowering love for the Executioner.

“Can you understand my woes, Alina...?” she said. “Ever since I heard someone say that at an Executioner Investigation Club meeting, I haven’t been able to think about anything else...”

“Hold on, what club is—?”

“I soak my pillow with tears every night imagining how lonely I’ll be when he leaves Iffole!” Crumpling the newspaper in her hands, Laila cried out, “That’s why whether the Executioner joins Silver Sword or not is very, very important to me!”

“...”

Alina could have sworn she’d just heard Laila casually reference a rather terrifying organization, but she’d have to put that aside for now. “At any rate, we’ve just about arrived at guild headquarters. Put away that newspaper, come on,” she said, forcing the subject of the Executioner to a close.

Laila’s expression instantly darkened. “...We...we’re already there...?” The smile vanished from her face, and she hunched over, losing all her previous enthusiasm.

“...? You sure look glum.”

“That’s— Well, I mean, I mean...”

“What? Tell me.”

“...Please don’t laugh at me.”

“I won’t laugh.”

Alina offered her a trustworthy nod, and Laila grew willing to talk at last. Clenching her fists, she cried out, “Because there are ghosts at guild headquarters!!!”

“Hmm, what should I have for lunch today?”

“Alinaaaaaa!! Please don’t pretend like you didn’t hear meeee!!!”

*Oh yeah, I think I had a similar conversation just recently,* Alina thought as she furrowed her brow and peeled Laila off her side. “So you’re scared of the training hall ghost, too, Laila?”

“You *aren’t*? Well, I guess you don’t look very scared.”

“Don’t ask me questions if you’re just gonna answer them by yourself!”

Sighing, Alina folded her arms and put on a serious expression. “Anyway! The first task of the day is to attend Miss Rosetta’s lecture. I’ll get a business betterment plan straight from the iron woman of desk work and bag that birthday leave...!”

“Do your best...,” said Laila, sounding a little fed up.

And with that, their carriage passed through the iron gates of guild headquarters.

## 9

The guild headquarters was bustling with activity, despite the early hour.

Jade had just finished putting the final touches on the demonstration battle for that day's seminar, and he was about to leave the office. The headquarters staff were all running about the office preparing for the large seminar, which would host receptionists from all over Iffole.

But that wasn't the only reason for their fidgety restlessness—especially when it came to the male employees.

The men, who were normally listless from overwork, walked with a spring in their step that day, and color seemed to return to their faces. Their hair was perfectly coiffed, and they were wearing freshly laundered, wrinkle-free uniforms. A silent effort was apparent in their grooming.

Though they had plenty to do, they kept glancing out the windows.

Eventually, one of the men looking outside exclaimed, "Hey, the receptionists are here!"

Instantly, the staff abandoned their desks and documents and crowded around the windows.

"Whoaaa! There's so many receptionists...", said one man, his tone especially heartfelt. "They're like angels on earth... I can feel my exhaustion fading away."

They had all been impatiently awaiting this day, when a wave of beautiful receptionists—and young newbies, at that—would surge into headquarters.

"Who's the cutest?" someone naturally asked, and soon the whole staff was buzzing with debate.

"That black-haired girl with green eyes!" someone exclaimed instantly, and Jade, who was about to leave the office, twitched to a stop.

*Black hair and green eyes. That was Alina.*

“Huh? Come on, let me see!”

“She’s pretty cute, huh...? And she seems pure and reserved, like she’s not flaunting it. It’s no good when they come on too strong. She has a delicate figure, too—it makes you want to protect her. I wonder if she has a boyfriend.”

*Pure? Delicate? Makes you want to protect her...?*

Jade’s face stiffened as he listened to their daydreams. He’d unconsciously started listening in.

He wondered what they’d say if they saw that “pure,” “delicate” girl swinging a war hammer with murder in her eyes?

No—he didn’t have to imagine it, he knew. They’d be totally disillusioned. He could vividly picture her giving them all the cold shoulder.

Still, it irritated him.

“...”

A dark, indescribable feeling welled up in his chest. Yeah, receptionists were popular, and comments like those weren’t exactly unusual. Receptionists were so beautiful that it was rumored looks were part of the selection process, and it was well-known that a lot of men were after them—not just adventurers. He could understand why the other men had waited all year for this day.

But even so, the way they looked at Alina irked him.

*...No, I have to stick to my Image Improvement Campaign...!*

Jade bottled up his feelings. Meddling in Alina’s business now would only bring her unnecessary attention, and then her war hammer would be flying at him in a heartbeat. If he didn’t want to inconvenience her, it really was better for him to stand by quietly and focus on breathing. He had to hold back his impulse to involve himself whenever he saw her.

*...I guess I’ll just memorize their faces.*

He could put a lid on his feelings, but he couldn’t extinguish the murderous hostility that colored his gaze. He opened his eyes wide and committed to memory the face of every man who had the hots for Alina.

## 10

“...Th-this is...the training hall...” Laila stood beside Alina, her voice trembling slightly as she looked up at the building before them.

It loomed quietly, hidden in one corner of the guild headquarters grounds.

The old stone walls were packed with crawling vines and looked about to crumble, and the window glass was covered in dust. Black swans had made their nests in the eaves of the building, and the fluttering of their wings sounded as they flew off. A stormy sky in the background, cut through with a single streak of lightning, was all it would take to complete the transformation from training hall to demon lord’s castle.

Faced with such a disquieting atmosphere, the other receptionists were understandably intimidated, whether they knew the rumors or not.

“This place is ancient!”

“Is that all you have to say?! Alina!”

“I mean...”

“Isn’t it a little weird that the training hall is so decrepit when the main building is so clean?!”

“Well, you have a point.”

Though the guild headquarters’ exterior was a cold and rustic gray, the interior was fully renovated, leaving no trace of its past as a dungeon. The training building, however, was clearly untouched.

“Can’t you feel it? It’s like, if you go in, you’ll be hit by a sudden storm, the suspension bridge will collapse, you’ll be cut off from the outside world, and someone will get murdered in a locked room...!”

“Don’t worry. There was no suspension bridge on the way here, so it’s fine. If we don’t head inside, we’re gonna be late.”

The inside of the building turned out to be just as imposing.

Even the entrance hall was a total period piece. It had a vaulted ceiling cutting through multiple floors, but the heavy stone construction prevented it from feeling open. Instead, it was more like a high-ceilinged prison.

And the pièce de résistance—

“Heyheyhey, look over there, Alina...! There’s no way something like that is normal!”

Standing in the center of the entrance hall was a statue of a monster, its teeth bared. The stone sculpture, which depicted the creature chowing down on a human, could only be described as upsetting.

It seemed unlikely this place saw a lot of traffic. The building had no windows, and the airflow was atrociously bad. Despite the sunny weather outside, the interior was cold and damp.





Though there was a carpet in the hallway, it was very old, and there was black dirt stuck in the corners of the flagstone halls.

“Alina, that black stuff has to be the blood of past adventurers... Ahhh! Doesn’t that large stain on the ceiling look like eyes and a mouth? I feel like it’s smiling at us...” Each of Laila’s discoveries only frightened her more. She reported them all to Alina, clinging to her and making it incredibly difficult to walk.

“I guess this place hasn’t changed much since it was a dungeon,” Alina observed.

“I bet the builders attempting to renovate it died one after another under suspicious circumstances, and they had to abandon the project...! It’s all due to the curse of fallen adventurers past...! That has to be it.”

“I bet it just doesn’t see much use, so it’s never been a priority to renovate it.”

“I don’t want to hear your ultrarealistic conjectures!”

As Laila wailed in the background, Alina headed for the specified lecture room. The three-day receptionist joint training seminar had finally begun.

# 11

The first thing on the curriculum was a tour of guild headquarters.

“The large structure in the center is the main building, where guild headquarters’ central functions are gathered. Over there are the training grounds. We’ll be going to those later as a part of the seminar, but take care not to approach them otherwise. The cafeteria is in the east building, across the outdoor hallway—”

A member of the staff acted as a guide, leading the receptionists around guild headquarters. Perhaps it was inevitable while traveling as such a large group, but they could feel headquarters staff watching them as they passed. It almost felt like they were performing in a parade.

Alina had been to guild headquarters a number of times for work, so the tour—meant for new receptionists—bored her.

“Guild headquarters is pretty big, huh...?” said Laila beside her. She seemed impressed, and her eyes were darting every which way.

“It did use to be a dungeon, after all,” said Alina. “They say it’s as big as a small town.”

“Woow.”

Dungeons were one of the legacies left by the ancients who had once lived in these lands and cultivated an advanced civilization.

Granted amazing powers by a presence known as Dia, they had founded the abundant nation of Diania here on the continent of Helcacia. The powers of the ancients were incomparably greater than current technology, and inevitably, what they left behind far surpassed anything in the modern age. Compared to dungeons, buildings constructed by today’s humans were like toys.

“I’d probably get lost if I was here by myself.”

“Don’t worry. Any business a receptionist would have at guild headquarters

would be confined to the office in the main building... Well, if you flub something up, you'll have to come here, so you'll learn soon enough." Alina's eyes slid away from Laila and took on a faraway look.

"...Alina, I'm getting the impression that's happened to you more than once..."

"..."

Finally, they arrived at the courtyard behind guild headquarters.

"Wow, it's so big!"

It was an enormous space entirely covered by grass. And standing in the center of it were four stone statues.

"These statues depict the members of Silver Sword two generations prior. If you want to discuss the history of guild headquarters, they're the people you start with. Glen Garia, the current guildmaster, was a member of their party, and this dungeon was their final mission before disbanding. After that, Glen Garia assumed his present post," the guide explained dispassionately. "They gave up their lives to clear the Fortress of Ash, an S-rank dungeon that was said to be unconquerable at the time. These statues were erected in honor of that great achievement."

The tour group grew solemn hearing about such a heavy subject so early in the seminar.

Several sad stories about the former S-class dungeon, the Fortress of Ash, survived to this day. One of those concerned the fall of that generation's Silver Sword.

It was a famous tale among adventurers, and Alina had heard it from the ones who'd hung around at her family's tavern.

It was fifteen years ago, before Alina's earliest memory, that Silver Sword cleared the dungeon. Many adventurers lost their lives in the unconquerable Fortress of Ash, and Silver Sword had also challenged it multiple times, only to return empty-handed, over and over. After many attempts, the party finally defeated every boss on every floor...but the only one to return safely was their frontline attacker, Glen.

Naturally, many adventurers at the time held great respect for Silver Sword, for their lofty will to clear the dungeon even at the cost of their own lives, and for their eventual success—and even more so for Glen, who remained brave in the face of losing his comrades.

Immediately following those events, Glen retired from adventuring. He was only twenty-five and still young, so many adventurers had inevitably tried to recruit him to their parties.

However, Glen had stubbornly rejected all invitations, saying: “The adventurer Glen Garia died with his party.”

“Let us take the opportunity to look back on guild history,” the guide said, snapping Alina out of her pondering.

*W-wait...! This is that thing where they point at you and say, “Okay, you over there, why don’t you tell us what you remember?”...!*

The other receptionists grew similarly tense.

While preparing for her receptionist exam, Alina had studied an awful lot about guild history, but frankly she’d already forgotten it all. She had zero confidence that she’d be able to say anything correctly if put on the spot.

But then, ignoring the receptionists as they warily prepared themselves, the guide began explaining it herself.

“At the suggestion of the first generation of saints, the Adventurers Guild began managing exploration undertaken with the goal of clearing dungeons, which we continue today in the form of ‘quests.’

“Many adventurers were migrating to the continent around that time, and the number of the dead and missing was incredibly high, so we began using quests in order to manage their number.”

Apparently, she wasn’t going to pick anyone out. Alina breathed a sigh of relief.

The Four Saints had laid the foundation of the Adventurers Guild.

They were the first four adventurers to land on the Helcacia continent, back when it was still a den of monsters. They were the ones who made it possible

for people to settle in such a formerly dangerous region—the forebears of adventurers, so to speak. Their bloodlines continued to the modern day, and in the Adventurers Guild, their descendants held an authority over and above even the guildmaster.

But they remained largely uninvolved in government or business affairs, and these days, they merely watched over the region and had little to do with ordinary people.

“Gradually, the number of adventurers increased, as did the number of dungeons discovered and quests issued. As time passed, things became more organized, leading to the Adventurers Guild we know today.”

After finishing her explanation, the guide started walking again, only to pause a moment and add, “You are free to eat and drink in this rear courtyard. The staff use the area during lunch break, so you may eat your lunch here as well, if you like. Now, we will head to the training grounds to observe a battle demonstration. The current iteration of Silver Sword will be serving as special instructors. Please do try to remember your dignity as receptionists... Rein in your excitement and do not make a fuss.”

That warning seemed to imply something, generating an air of concern among the receptionists. Picking up on this, the guide added, by way of explanation, “This is our first attempt at incorporating a battle demonstration by active adventurers—Silver Sword specifically—into the receptionist joint training seminar, and some reporters for the newspaper have come to gather material. I will reiterate...please maintain decorum while observing the battle and do not behave in ways you might be embarrassed to see in print.”

With that final reminder—which felt a bit like a prediction of bad things to come—the guide turned on her heel and headed for the training grounds.



## 12

“I’m the leader and tank of Silver Sword, Jade Scrade. Nice to meet you.”

The moment Jade casually introduced himself—

“Oh my Godddddd! Jaaaaaaaade!!!”

“The real Jade is so handsome, I’m going to die.”

“I love you!! I stan you!!! I’ll stan you for life!!!!”

“Holy cow the real deal is about a million times cooler than what you see in the newspaper and his voice and eyes and height and armor are all so perfect whatever god made him has to be a genius!!!”

“So strong...and charming...and handsome...so precious...hngh!”

“Pardon me! Someone’s passed out!”

—the newbie receptionists, forgetting the warning they’d received only minutes before, all rose to shriek at Jade, unable to restrain themselves.

Some were covering their faces, moved to tears. Others passed out, their nosebleeds arcing through the air as they fell. Already, the receptionists had lost all traces of decorum.

Behind them, the fed-up guide furrowed her brow.

It was no wonder she was exasperated—the newspaper reporters were capturing everything on film and taking detailed notes.

It seemed like the reporters were taking this pretty seriously, with multiple people filming.

Watching this careful preparation, something dawned on Alina—the reason they had gone to the trouble to get the guild elite, Silver Sword, when any random party of adventurers would have been enough for a receptionist training.

*So they’re trying to get some publicity, huh...?*

As the foundation of the great city of Iffole, the Adventurers Guild was a public fixture that didn't have to worry about going bankrupt. And for that reason, it had various obligations. One such obligation was to regularly broadcast the message that they were diligently training every day, doing their best to provide a service to the people of Iffole in return for their support.

In other words, they had to make it clear that they were not getting complacent and slacking off.

This battle demonstration, then, was a good opportunity for publicity. By hiring first-class instructors and showing the money and effort they had invested in training their receptionists, they could prove they were striving to offer greater-quality administrative services to adventurers. Or that was their goal anyway.

*...Looks like hiring a "first-class instructor" backfired on them.*

As she watched the newbie receptionists going wild, Alina coolly analyzed the situation.

The guild had gotten greedy, aiming to exploit the popular and good-looking members of Silver Sword for attention. But as you could tell from the receptionists' reactions, Jade Scrade had a hell of a lot of crazy fans.

It made sense—he was the strongest tank in the guild, and he had famously good looks. Hiring him might've been a good way to get media coverage, but the Adventurers Guild hadn't counted on how little self-control the young receptionists would have when faced with the real thing.

On the inside, of course, Jade was nothing but a stalker creep with the tenacity of a cockroach.

"Jade is so popular...!" Laila said from her place next to Alina. "Some people have even come with handmade fans! As an Executioner stan, I can't let them beat me! The next time the Executioner shows up, I'll bring a handmade fan, too...!" She seemed frustrated as she analyzed the girls going wild over Jade.

As the receptionists got more and more worked up, Alina kept her face as expressionless as she could manage. She wanted the others to settle down quickly so they could get this demo battle over with already. The only thing

Alina was interested in was that lecture from the legendary receptionist Rosetta Rhuberry.

“I’m glad you’re all full of energy. That’s the sort of spirit you need to handle adventurers.” Jade employed some polite remarks in an attempt to cast the receptionists in a better light. This was one area where he was indeed exquisitely skilled.

Just as that thought passed through Alina’s head, Jade’s gaze happened to meet hers.

“!”

For an instant, she froze.

*This is bad. In reality, that man is just as crazy as the fangirling receptionists.* He often forgot his position and called out to Alina in public, as if they were good friends. If he were to carelessly do so here, where newspaper reporters were watching—

The blood drained rapidly from Alina’s face, but then something unexpected happened. Jade averted his eyes, as if she were a stranger, returning his attention to the matter at hand.

“...?”

They were both at work, so that was the obvious response, but *Jade* shouldn’t possess that kind of discretion. The gesture made Alina frown and left her with a strong sense of unease.

He was being distant... No, that wasn’t right. The word *cold* was a better fit.

At the very least, the Jade Alina knew wouldn’t act like that where she was concerned.

“...”

As Jade somehow managed to pacify the wild receptionists and pull off Silver Sword’s demonstration battle without a hitch, Alina remained uneasy.

## 13

“Your demo battle was so cool, Jade!”

A shrill voice reached Alina’s ears as she was walking with Laila to the next lecture room.

She looked over to find Jade surrounded by newbie receptionists in the middle of the hallway.

The young receptionists—or rather Jade Scrade groupies—were swarming around their idol, full of excitement.

*They’re at it again...*

They’d learned nothing from their guide’s harsh scolding earlier and were now shrieking and smiling, refusing to pass up this valuable opportunity to freely interact with Jade. But at the same time, they were carrying out an invisible battle, and a ghastly, beastlike aura seemed to emanate from them as each receptionist tried to outmaneuver the girl beside her.

As Alina watched them, she felt neither hate nor exasperation.

*...They’re so young.*

That was all she thought as she let out a self-deprecating *huff*.

They lacked experience, and as such, they couldn’t truly understand what an event like this, where receptionists gathered from every office around Iffole, really meant.

Away from their usual workplaces, they’d cut loose and have too much fun. But their actions would become the seed of rumor and spread through Iffole at the speed of light.

And to make matters worse, this was the guild headquarters, a frequent destination for guild staff in Iffole. Headquarters would become a hotbed of rumor, stories would spread to the four corners, and before anyone knew what had happened, everyone in Iffole would be talking about them.

Within days of the seminar, these girls currently so enamored with Jade would hear rumors about themselves like “The receptionist from such-and-such office did this or that at the seminar...” and would blanch, finally understanding how small the world of receptionists really was.

Just because their offices were physically distant didn’t mean one should underestimate the receptionist network. And through these bitter experiences, the new girls would grow as members of society.

As Alina watched over the young, innocent girls with the peaceful eyes of an all-knowing veteran warrior, Jade abruptly turned her way, and their eyes met.

*Geh, again...!*

Instantly, the peaceful smile vanished from her face, and she reflexively stiffened.

This was Jade, and so now that the demo battle was over, she was sure he would gleefully shove aside the other girls and walk over to chat her up. Well, she could forgive him for making the newbies jealous, but now that she was in her third year as a receptionist, she wanted to avoid becoming the target of gossip. And she really couldn’t stand the idea of people thinking she was one of Jade Scrade’s groupies.

*Stay away stay away stay away stay away...!!!*

Alina opened her eyes as wide as possible and slammed him with all the hostility she had. Beside her, Laila let out a little “yeep!”

But just as he had at the demo battle, Jade quickly and coldly looked away and resumed dodging the newbie receptionists with a smile.

“...?”

Had her murderous aura finally reached him? No—this was a man who would carry on no matter how loudly and clearly you cursed him out. There was no way he could be driven away by a mere look.

Alina felt the same sense of unease she had at the demo battle. It was then that she finally remembered what Jade had said back in the Great Labyrinth.

He was enacting an Image Improvement Campaign to rise from the status of

stalker to that of ordinary person.

*...I see, so that's what he meant.*

Basically, he was dialing back his typical overfamiliarity and consciously placing distance between himself and Alina. If that was what was going on, then she welcomed it. In fact, keeping a proper distance was basic courtesy for an adult, and it was simply unheard of for an elite guild adventurer and a mere receptionist to become any closer than necessary, and—

But even as she thought this, the way Jade looked coldly away from her made something prickle in Alina's chest.

“ ... ”

“Is something the matter, Alina?” Laila asked.

“It's nothing. Let's go to the next lecture.”

Scowling, Alina passed by Jade's side.

## 14

Finally, the time had come.

Alina sat down at a long table, fidgeting as she waited for the speaker to arrive.

She was in a big, fan-shaped lecture hall that had been created by merging several rooms on the third floor of the training hall. The inside was shaped like a wide cone with a flat tip, and the podium was at the bottom. Alina's seat was right by the window, through which she could look down at the courtyard.

"I swear I'll find a way to eliminate my overtime...!"

Fire blazed in her eyes, and she clenched her fists. Just then, a middle-aged woman appeared at the podium.

Though her figure was a little on the plump side, she wore quality work attire, and her hair was tied up in a refined bun. Her posture was excellent, and her careful gestures as she lined up her papers on the podium radiated a sense of dignity and calm.

She raised her chubby cheeks in a smile. "Good day to all you cute receptionists. I am Rosetta Rhuberry, the speaker for this lecture. I'm so glad to be here."

*There she is—!*

In the face of Rosetta's friendly, cheerful smile, Alina gulped.

The legendary receptionist, Rosetta Rhuberry, was right in front of her.

Despite her position as office chief at guild headquarters, she was neither intimidating nor arrogant. But from one glance at her smile, you could tell just how many years she'd been a receptionist. In the woman's aura of experience, Alina sensed a compatriot—another corporate drone. She was a powerful old hand who had overcome many battles with overtime. Alina was sure she must know how to surmount it!

“I-it’s her...!”

At her side, Laila’s eyes went wide—she’d also picked up on Rosetta’s quiet aura of strength. Alina took in a breath, readying her feather pen like a warrior readying his sword.

Was this just a lecture? Nay—it was a battle.

She was going to do it. Through this lecture, she was going to find out a way to conquer her overtime.

“Well then, let us begin the lecture.” With a dignified smile, Rosetta announced the beginning of the fight.

\*\*\*

“—And that concludes the lecture. We will now move on to the question-and-answer session,” Rosetta said with a smile, ending her elementary lecture right on time.

Instantly, Alina’s eyes shone. She had been waiting for those words.

“Yes!!”

She immediately thrust her right hand into the air. There was no way Rosetta’s eyes could miss her spirit. No other hands were raised, and Rosetta smiled wryly with an *oh my*.

“The enthusiastic young lady over there. Go ahead.”

Rising to her feet, Alina calmly began to speak.

“I won’t beat around the bush. What should a receptionist do to eliminate overtime?” She asked the question briefly and directly, without affectation.

But Alina’s question made Rosetta twitch, and her smile froze. Her red-painted lips quietly muttered, “Oh-ho.” Her eyes shone sharply, and something in them changed. No longer was her gaze that of someone looking upon an innocent, newborn kitten. Now they held a sense of certainty. She was gazing at someone who had reached the same level of corporate hell that she had.

Alina and Rosetta locked eyes for a moment, and a choking silence enveloped



the lecture hall. The eerie quiet made Laila swallow awkwardly beside her.

Eventually, Rosetta's indomitable laughter broke the silence. "...Those eyes of yours—that air. You're no newbie."

"I've come from Iffole Counter. It's my third year since joining."

"I see...then you are...aware of reality." Rosetta giggled and then spun away from the audience and said, "...All right. Then out of respect for your spirit, I will induct you into a secret art."

Startled, Alina immediately sat down in her chair and readied her feather pen so as to not miss a single word. The other receptionists, who had seemed bored as they listened to the lecture, all picked up their pens as well. As all eyes gathered on her, Rosetta turned around. Now she was once again the seasoned receptionist who had fought through hell on the front lines.

Slowly, she began to speak. "First of all, I take it for granted that not only will I work on weekends, but I will also put in about a hundred hours of overtime a month."

The words that carelessly spilled from Rosetta's mouth made Alina doubt her ears for a second. "...What did you just say?"

But Rosetta continued her answer with a kind smile, disregarding the frozen Alina. "I understand quite well what you're trying to say. But think about it. Why do you hate overtime in the first place? Because it is difficult. But there is a trick to stop thinking that way. That is the true secret of how I became the iron woman of desk work—you must *imagine your clients' happiness*."

Struck by Rosetta's unexpected answer, Alina meant to say something like "I see," but instead, her genuine thoughts popped out of her mouth on reflex. "Huh?"

"What should I do for them next, what can I do to make them happy? If you focus on that, endless strength will well up inside you. Once you've grasped this secret skill, then a hundred hours of overtime will feel like not enough."

"What...?" Alina couldn't understand what she was hearing.

With Alina paralyzed in front of her, Rosetta's tone gradually grew more

heated, and her words became even more incomprehensible. “It’s true that processing papers is boring and takes a lot of time. That’s what I thought at first—because I only ever thought of quest forms as lines of letters and numbers. But listen—don’t think of them as mere pieces of paper—try talking to them. Like, ‘Oh, this person is challenging the same dungeon again—they must really like it,’ or ‘This person must be stuck.’ There are so many charming discoveries to be made. If you think about things like that, your work will end in a flash and cease to be a struggle...!”

Rosetta folded her hands as she turned her eyes to the heavens, like a maiden in love. Scratch that, there was no “like” about it—she had real love in her eyes. “Work is so wonderful. It’s because you think of work as *work* that you find it painful. So yes... Try changing your mindset. Fall in love with work. Waking or sleeping, your work and your customers are always on your mind... If you can reach that state, you’ll be released from the concept of labor.”

“...”

“All right! Starting tomorrow, you can become a super receptionist, too! When times are tough, remember the smiles of your customers. If you do that, you’ll be able to work even harder.”

“.....”

At this point, Alina’s eyes were practically rolling back in her head.

She hadn’t noticed that she’d dropped her feather pen, and her soul had begun to escape from her half-open mouth.

It was all she could do just to say, “...Th-thank you very much,” in response. Laila had blanched beside her, and the other receptionists were speechless.

She’d been utterly defeated.

The living legend. The former super receptionist Rosetta. This woman—

*...She’s just a workaholic...!!!*

If you can work a hundred hours of overtime without being aware of it, there’s no line between work and your private life. She was a maniac who took on more work as a break from her job.

But that was something only a workaholic could do—it would be impossible for anyone else. What she'd gained from years on the job wasn't knowledge about how to work efficiently, it was just a burning infinite passion for the work itself.

"A-Alina...are you alive...?"

"...I'm dead..."

Alina was so devastated, all she could manage was a weak reply as Laila checked her vitals.

## 15

Seeing that it was time to go, Jade headed for the iron gates of guild headquarters.

Once lunch break hit, the rear courtyard would fill with staff. And that day, the weather was particularly nice and pleasant, so everyone would be sitting on the lawn, eating their meals. After being chased around relentlessly by the newbie receptionists, Jade had decided to avoid the rear courtyard as he sneaked out of guild headquarters.

*I have no choice. Guess I'll eat in town today...*

Though he had managed to finish the demonstration battle intended to garner publicity, the staff in charge of the seminar had been furious at the receptionists' behavior and had basically taken it out on Jade, noting sharply that he was "*so good* at handling the receptionists." It would probably be best to avoid those girls as much as possible.

"Ah! Jade, perfect timing!"

But right as he was trying to sneak out of headquarters, a familiar voice called for him to stop.

"Laila?"

He turned around to find Alina's junior coworker Laila running up to him, her pigtails swaying. Knowing that she wasn't likely to chase him around, he was relieved—but only for a second, as the next thing out of her mouth made him blanch and sent a shiver down his spine.

"Jade, this is bad...!" she cried. "Alina is on death's door!"

"Alina's on death's door?!"

His heart leaped in his chest.

It didn't seem like many people would be able to harm her. But this was guild headquarters, after all, and there were lots of people watching. When her Dia

skill was activated, Alina was the strongest person on the continent, but she couldn't use her powers openly.

Plus, Jade was trying to stay away from her as part of his Image Improvement Campaign. He wasn't likely to notice if some disaster befell her.

Without her skills, Alina was only a fragile maiden. Anything might happen to her here.

"Yes...! Alina, she—she...!" As Jade grew paler by the second, Laila's face twisted mournfully, and she cried, "She can't seem to recover! The workaholic was too much for her...!"

"...The workaholic?"

Puzzled by Laila's strange word choice, Jade glanced behind her. There, under the shade of the trees, alone on the edge of a bench, sat Alina, curled up and hugging her knees.

"A-Alina...?"

Jade instantly called off his Image Improvement Campaign and timidly approached Alina.

Beneath the bright, sunny sky, Alina was emitting a pitch-black aura. Dark, gloomy air seemed to hang stagnant where she sat. He couldn't see her face, which was buried in her knees, but it was clear that she was terribly dispirited.

Jade had witnessed Alina like this once before, when the guildmaster found out that she was the Executioner and put her on a carriage bound for guild headquarters. Believing that she would be fired from her receptionist job, she had been cursing everything and lamenting her fate, like livestock being shipped off to market.

Did that mean she had suffered something similar again—a shock so bad she felt her life was over?

"Wh-what happened...?" Jade asked.

"Well..." Laila sat down beside Alina, gazing at her with pity as she rubbed her back. "In the lecture just now, Alina got hit by a hard-core workaholic's fanatical 'I love work' spiel, and now she's dying..."

“A w-workaholic’s...fanatical spiel...?” Jade looked at Alina cautiously.

When he listened closely, mixed with the sounds of people enjoying their lunch break, he could hear her muttering, “Workaholics are scary... Workaholics are scary...”

“Alina heard that a legendary receptionist was having a lecture today, so she was very excited to ask her about how to eliminate overtime.”



That reminded Jade of something.

Alina had disguised herself as the Executioner and headed out to conquer the Great Labyrinth right after adventurers started struggling to get through it. He found it a little strange—normally, she would have hung on a little longer. Plus, she had been oddly fixated on attending this seminar.

“...I see, to get rid of her overtime... So that was the reason...”

“But...not only did she find no clues to solving her overtime problem, she also got a really shocking answer from the lecturer. She said that ‘If you don’t like overtime, you just need to learn to love work,’ which only made things worse...”

Alina hated overtime more than anything, so a completely incomprehensible notion—like overtime being wonderful—would likely be a one-hit KO for her.

“A legendary receptionist and a hard-core workaholic,” mused Jade. That rang a bell for him, and he put a finger on his chin. “Do you mean Office Chief Rosetta?”

“You know her?”

“Yeah. Sometimes I visit guild headquarters at night to use the training grounds, but no matter what time I go, the lights are always on in her office...”

Rosetta was famous at guild headquarters for loving her work. Normally, she was a kind and mild-mannered woman, but whenever she talked about her job, you could catch a glimpse of her madness. Alina, who hated overtime, and Rosetta, who loved work, were bound to be like oil and water.

“A-anyway, you should eat something, Alina. You have to attend the seminar in the afternoon, too.” Jade lightly shook Alina’s shoulder, and she turned her face to him, her eyes glazed over.

“...Oh...it’s Jade...,” she muttered in a low voice, like an invalid. “Seeing your face...puts me a little at ease... Ha-ha... We worked together on that overtime, after all...,” she muttered. This was Alina, who tended to insult Jade with every other word, saying he was annoying and in the way.

“O-oh...”

This was bad. To the side, Laila shook her head in resignation.



## 16

Glen Garia was walking through the rear courtyard of guild headquarters.

When he had time in his busy schedule, he would often go on walks like this. It was calm and sunny that day, with a gentle breeze blowing across the green lawn. The spot was peace itself.

There weren't many left who remembered the time when this place had been a field of death, overflowing with ferocious monsters, where you would lose your life if you let your guard down for even a moment.

Glen stood in front of the statue of Silver Sword from two generations prior.

One of the stone monuments was of Glen, but it felt like someone else to him. No—it *was* someone else—Glen back in his adventurer days, when he'd been foolish and known no fear or sadness. That was someone else, a whole other person.

Feeling nostalgic as he thought back on his old friends, he muttered in the silence, "Lynn—just a little longer."

His peaceful gaze moved to the most delicate of the four statues, a girl. She had been Silver Sword's healer, still a young adventurer. It had been too early for her to die on the job—she had only been fifteen years old.

"For you...I could do anything."

A sharp light flashed in his gentle, narrowed eyes. People said he had a stern face to begin with, but now it stiffened even further. Glen's fists, thick and hard after years of battle, clenched.

*I've already made up my mind.*

He would get her back, no matter what the cost.

"...It's almost time. Just you wait, Lynn..."

The slight tremble in his voice dissipated in the air without anyone to hear it.

## 17

Somehow, Jade managed to get Alina, who was still reeling from the workaholic's, aka Rosetta Rhuberry's, attack, to eat her lunch. But he never ate his own and wound up walking around guild headquarters instead.

That was because, after seeing Alina and Laila back to the seminar, he happened to catch sight of Glen from behind.

“ ... ”

The man had to be going for a walk. And before Jade knew it, he was quietly following behind him as he headed to the rear courtyard at an easy pace.

Jade wasn't planning on doing anything in particular. It was just that something about Glen had been weighing on his mind.

The man in black.

He was thought to be deeply involved in the recent incidents involving the resurrection of dark gods. He was a dangerous individual who used adventurers as pawns to raise these deities. And yet they had never been able to trace him.

Jade thought there was a possibility that the man in black was actually Glen.

Before, on the day of the Centennial Festival, there had been an adventurer called Heitz, who'd plotted the resurrection of a dark god. Despite having been stripped of his adventurer's license, he had gotten permission to enter the guild's underground prison and had reached the subterranean book depository. The only person who could have allowed Heitz to do both was Guildmaster Glen.

But that wasn't enough to prove that Glen was the man in black. The system to get approval was basically a formality, and finding some loophole to get an application through would be possible for someone else in the guild besides Glen.

Of course, the guild had also questioned who might have let a dangerous

person like Heitz into the underground prison. But not a single person had doubted the guildmaster. Instead, they'd settled on the simplistic idea that the man in black must have pulled some kind of trick.

All that just went to show how much Glen was trusted, both inside and outside the guild. Jade trusted him, too, of course.

Glen had once wielded his blade as Silver Sword's frontline attacker—the strongest adventurer of them all. And as a fellow adventurer and member of Silver Sword, Jade respected and trusted him from the bottom of his heart.

*...I hope I'm just overthinking things...*

Glen cut across the rear courtyard to stand in front of the statues of Silver Sword.

After a slight hesitation, Jade took a step forward and called out to Glen. "... Master."

"Oh, if it isn't Jade. What do you need?" Glen turned around with a friendly smile on his rugged face. The wrinkles of many years on his sun-darkened skin lent him an air of dignity, and he had a physique as impressive as any adventurer's. He was just as strong as when he retired, and he emitted a majesty appropriate for the chief of such a massive organization.

"..."

Despite having called out to him, Jade wasn't sure what to say and floundered.

There was no point in asking him, *Are you the man in black?* He would never confess so easily. In fact, asking would only make him more wary.

No, those were just excuses. The real reason was that he didn't want to ask.

Jade knew his hunches were usually right, after all.

He never managed to say anything, so Glen began to speak instead. "You see this statue of the healer girl here?"

"...? Yeah."

"She looks so much like my daughter. I often find myself coming to visit her,

since my daughter died when she was still young.”

After this casual confession, Jade found himself unable to speak for a while.

When he finally replied, all he said was, “...I’m sorry for your loss.”

Glen looked away from Jade and up at the sky.

“Though I call her my daughter, she was adopted—she was nothing like me in looks or personality... But she taught me something important. Without her, I would have become the sort of boring man who simply follows rules.” He muttered this into the silence, as if delivering a soliloquy. Then his gaze returned to Jade, and he gave a toothy grin. “I’m proud of her.”

For a while, Jade was unable to look away from the man’s carefree smile. It wasn’t the dignified face of the guildmaster nor was it the face of a seasoned adventurer. It was the happy look of a father proud of his child.

Could someone who made an expression like that truly summon the terrifying dark gods that would inevitably destroy this land? Could Jade really suspect him of such a thing?

“Oh, so did you need something from me, Jade?”

“...Ah, what was it again? I can’t remember.”

“Hey now, you’re too young to be forgetting things.” With a hearty *ha-ha-ha*, Glen clapped a hand on Jade’s shoulder. His hand lay there heavily. “Jade—your strength is the real deal. You can fight back with Sigurth skills even in a battle of Dia skills between dark gods and the li’l miss. I imagine you’ll be the guildmaster one day. Learn lots while you can.”

True or not, Glen headed out, leaving Jade with those words.

## 18

Left to his own devices, Jade wasn't sure what to do.

Standing there in front of the statues of Silver Sword, he glared at the ground as his mind raced with worry.

The members of Silver Sword depicted in the statues lost their lives right as the Fortress of Ash was conquered. Glen was the only survivor, and at the time, many adventurers expressed their condolences. Then Glen retired and was immediately appointed guildmaster. His refusal to crumple after such a painful incident, along with his brave conduct, had gained him a lot of support.

Glen had also been the one to introduce the process by which receptionists checked adventurers' license cards for their rank. Before then, the decision to challenge difficult dungeons beyond one's rank had been at an adventurer's discretion. Glen had forbidden it across the board. That had decreased reckless activity, lowering the death rate among adventurers by a large margin.

As guildmaster, he had thought long and hard to come up with strategies to ensure as many adventurers as possible survived. He had changed the guild's policy of writing off adventurers' deaths as simple individual responsibility.

How could someone like that choose to sacrifice adventurers in order to revive dark gods...? Jade couldn't even imagine it.

"Jade."

Suddenly, a quiet voice called out to him, and Jade lifted his head.

He turned around to find a tall woman standing nearby. She wore a tight bun without a hair out of place and silver-rimmed glasses. Her shapely lips were pulled in a straight line—an unfriendly, blank expression—and a tense stuffiness radiated from her entire body.

It was Fili, the guildmaster's private secretary.

"Was the guildmaster here? He said he was going for a walk about twenty

minutes ago and hasn't been back since. There's a mountain of documents I'd like him to look at as soon as possible, but he always uses his skill to get away." Her expression was as dispassionate as ever, but Jade could see a faint glow of anger in her eyes. They seemed to say, *I take my eye off him for one second and he just vanishes!*

If Glen used his Sigurth skill—*Sigurth Chronos*—to stop time, there was no way for her to follow him. Fili was his private secretary and bodyguard, so that must have upset her.

"He was just here," Jade said, "but he left around the time I arrived."

"Is that so? Thank you very much." Furrowing her brow slightly, Fili quickly turned around and left.

"Hey, Fili," Jade called out suddenly, bringing her to a stop.

"What is it?"

"Have you noticed anything strange about the guildmaster lately?"

"Anything strange?" Fili frowned quizzically at Jade's sudden question. He figured that was a reasonable reaction.

But Fili attended the guildmaster around the clock as his private secretary and bodyguard. If Glen were the man in black, then odds were high that Fili had seen him doing something suspicious.

"Yeah. Like sneaking around or contradicting himself. Anything is fine, but if you've noticed something—"

"I'm unable to reply regarding his private life," Fili declared flatly, cutting Jade off. "My main job is managing the guildmaster's schedule and personal security. Beyond that, I do not interfere in his affairs."

"Yeah, of course..." Jade scratched his head. This was exactly the reply he'd expected. Given Fili's personality, as well as the nature of her work, it was unlikely that she'd be willing to chat about Glen's personal life.

"Sorry for asking something strange," Jade apologized casually. "I hope you find him soon."

He was about to leave, when Fili's quiet voice sounded behind him once

more. "...Jade." He came to a stop. "You suspect that the guildmaster might be the man in black, don't you?"

Jade's heart thudded. "U-uh..."

She'd said it so suddenly that he wasn't able to hide his reaction.

As he hesitated, Fili's usual cold gaze pierced right through him.

"I have stood at the guildmaster's side and watched him all this time. I can assure you that he cares for adventurers more than anyone. He's not the sort of foolish man who would bring danger upon the world by reviving a dark god."

"...Yeah, of course. I agree," Jade finally replied, albeit with mild regret. *Dammit*, he thought.

Perhaps he had been too overt. The odds that Fili had already sided with the man in black were not zero. And that wasn't the only reason he was rattled, either. As far as he knew, Fili would be the last person to say something like that.

The guildmaster's secretary maintained a precise division between work and private life and drew a clear line between herself and others. She would never overstep the boundaries she had laid and make assertions. She would never side with anyone and never reject anyone. Jade had believed her to be the type of woman who could calmly carry out her job, even if someone was being killed right in front of her.

Even if she had noticed Jade's suspicions about the guildmaster, she would never have reproached him for it, much less defended Glen's character in his absence. That just wasn't who she was.

"But..." As Jade was struck dumb by Fili's unexpected behavior, she continued. "Though he is a great man, he's also human, and he likes to use his skill to escape when there's a stretch of troublesome desk work." Fili eyed Jade closely.

"...?" Not understanding the implications of her words, Jade furrowed his brow quizzically.

Fili pulled out a classy pocket watch and checked the time, then breathed a

short sigh. “No matter how much I search for the guildmaster, I’ve never once been able to find him. I’m a little tired from running around headquarters looking. Let’s talk for ten minutes.”

“...Sure.”

As soon as Jade agreed, without even the slightest pause, Fili started lecturing him in a tone one might use at a business meeting.

“Long ago, the guildmaster was not the friendly, good-humored man he is today. In fact, I’ve heard that adventurers at the time and even the other members of Silver Sword kept their distance from him.”

“Huh?” Jade blinked at this unexpected revelation.

“Cold, stubborn, and egotistical, he was devoted to following the rules—people even called him heartless.”

Jade widened his eyes slightly. Knowing the guildmaster now, it was impossible to imagine him having such a reputation.

The guildmaster Jade was familiar with was the total opposite of the man Fili was describing. Despite his rank, he didn’t act arrogantly—he was affable and treated everyone impartially... His character was one of the reasons so many people supported him and why he had Jade’s respect as guild leader.

“A certain event led to a great change in the guildmaster’s personality,” said Fili.

“A certain event?”

“The arrival of his beloved daughter.”

A daughter. He’d only just heard about her from Glen.

It was the first he’d ever even heard that Glen, a single man, was a father. And according to him, she was already dead.

That said, considering his personality, it seemed somehow natural for him to have a child. The way he would approach anyone impartially while maintaining perfect distance reminded Jade of how some men would mellow out once they had a family to take care of.



“Her name was Lynn Riche.”

But when Fili uttered that name, Jade was struck speechless. “Lynn...Riche... The healer of Silver Sword...?!”

She had been a member of Silver Sword when Glen led the party. She was one of the members who had died, leaving Glen behind.

Jade looked up at the statues in front of him. The healer was still a young girl. The name LYNN RICHE was carved on the plate at her feet.

“Lynn Riche was an orphan, and the guildmaster adopted her. The truth was suppressed, but the two of them were indeed father and daughter.”

“ ... ”

“However, when Lynn Riche was selected as a member of Silver Sword, some adventurers who thought especially badly of the guildmaster kicked up a fuss. Wherever the rumors came from...they said that Glen Garia had bribed the guild to get his own daughter into Silver Sword.”

“ ... ”

It sounded like a group of adventurers weren’t convinced of Lynn Riche’s legitimate admission into the elite party and had raised an uproar over suspected nepotism.

This sort of thing was very common when new members of Silver Sword were selected. More than half of it was simple jealousy, but the rumors that Lynn was Glen Garia’s daughter must have further intensified matters.

“If it was such a big deal back then, does that mean people are still after him?”

It wouldn’t be strange for someone who coveted the guildmaster’s position to try taking him down by digging up his past. But ever since Glen became guildmaster, there had been no sign of any such internal conflict, and his time in office was going quite peacefully.

“Of course not. After all, anyone who spread rumors or got particularly nasty was silenced.”

“ ... ”

“By the time Lynn Riche joined Silver Sword, those in important places had already outlined a plan for Master Glen Garia to become guildmaster. Of course, Lynn Riche was selected because of her abilities, so there was nothing shady going on. But they must not have wanted needless rumors going around at such an important time.”

Jade understood just how weak an individual was in the face of an organization. But despite the icy feeling this produced in his gut, he felt something else was off here.

Fili was talking a *lot* more than usual.

The guildmaster’s secretary never wasted her words. While on the job, she would only speak if it was necessary for work. It was unusual for her to chat so frankly about her master’s past.

“Having Lynn as his daughter made the guildmaster grow as a person. But he lost her.”

“...”

“Occasionally, people compare me to a heartless doll, but I do believe I understand the feelings of others.” After opening with a characteristically sarcastic remark, Fili lowered her eyes slightly. “Right after clearing the Fortress of Ash, Master Glen Garia retired from the field and was appointed guildmaster. At the time, many adventurers were drawn by his resilience and ability to move on—but can a father really get over something like that so quickly? He saw his daughter die right in front of him.”

“...”

“I cannot even imagine how dear Lynn Riche must have been to the guildmaster...” Fili paused a moment, then averted her eyes and continued quietly. “If it were for her sake, he might just...”

He might just do something *foolish*.

Unable to voice the rest of her sentence, Fili fell silent.

For the first time, Jade noticed a brooding shadow in her expression, though he wasn’t sure exactly what it meant. She was closer to the guildmaster than

anyone else. Had she noticed something amiss about him lately?

But Fili was a frighteningly diligent secretary and the guildmaster's capable bodyguard. Her job demanded that she follow the guildmaster and take whatever secrets she learned to the grave. Even if she died, she would reveal nothing.

"That is all I can tell you. Please turn in your report regarding today's demonstration battle. The reporters have submitted a number of questions as well, so make sure to write up your replies. Now, if you'll excuse me," Fili said in her usual stony manner. The shadow that had fallen over her profile was stashed away again, and she headed off, leaving Jade alone once more.

## 19

“I need to get back soon, or Fili will scold me...”

Glen scratched his head as he headed for his office.

He’d called it a walk, but he *had* wandered around for quite a while. He could imagine Fili simmering quietly back at the office.

“Glen.”

The guildmaster came to a halt at the sudden address. When he turned around, he found a man a little past middle age, his back straight as a board.

“Swordmaster?!”

At the man’s appearance, Glen hastily fell to one knee.

The Swordmaster was one of those to inherit the blood of the Four Saints—the founders of the guild and the original adventurers who first settled the Helcacia continent.

The Four Saints were like the monarchs of this land, and though they weren’t directly involved in governance, their authority outclassed the guildmaster’s.

Naturally, they were not the sort of people who could simply go for a stroll through guild headquarters.

“Oh, I was just a little worried about you,” said the Swordmaster.

“About...me...?”

“Today is the anniversary of Lynn’s death, isn’t it?”

Glen fell silent before the Swordmaster’s gentle yet sharply narrowed eyes.

The Swordmaster was both ruler of the land and the man who’d taught Glen to wield a blade. He was also the one who’d entrusted Lynn to him, giving his underdeveloped humanity a chance to grow.

Lynn was kind and full of energy, while Glen was cold and silent... They were

like oil and water—completely incompatible. The Swordmaster alone had patiently watched over this imperfect family. He'd always shown concern for Glen and Lynn, and when the latter was appointed to Silver Sword amid much disapproval from within the guild, he had supported them from behind the scenes.

"Glen...how about you go visit her grave?" the Swordmaster muttered softly.

Glen raised his head with a start. "...Is it all right?"

"What do you mean by that? It's your right as a father to remember your daughter." Smiling kindly, the Swordmaster clapped a hand on Glen's shoulder, then began to walk away.

Glen watched the man's back, straight despite his age, in stunned silence. He remained kneeling in the hallway, unable to speak, until the Swordmaster was out of sight. Quietly, Glen stood.

As he clenched his fists, a cold flame rose in his eyes and wavered.

"...Just you wait, Lynn," he murmured.

Nostalgic memories flooded his mind as he headed back to his office.

## 20

“...She was abandoned?”

Glen first met Lynn when he was eighteen years old.

He'd been summoned by the Swordmaster Genon, whom he respected as his teacher. The man said he had a “minor request,” and when the young Glen had reluctantly shown up, he found a little girl waiting for him.

To be frank, she was shabby-looking. It was easy to believe she was an abandoned child.

“Yes. Could you be this girl's father for me, Glen?” the Swordmaster asked, with the tone of someone asking his student to run an errand. It was completely unreasonable.

“...Hey, listen here.” Glen grimaced. This wasn't the first time Genon had asked something ridiculous of him, but Glen had to draw the line somewhere. “Can you please stop casually springing stuff like this on me? This is a big deal, you know. If she's an orphan, then you should give her to an orphanage,” Glen said coldly, detaching himself from the situation.

But Genon only shrugged lightly, like he was used to this. “Hmm, that's exactly what I'd expect to hear from Glen the Heartless.”

“...”

“That's why no one wants you in their party. If you hadn't gotten into Silver Sword based on skills alone, you would've been a solo adventurer your entire life.”

As his master said, back then, Glen was a committed believer in skill alone, without a friend in the world.

If he deemed a member of his party to be a burden, he would cut them out without a second thought. And if he determined mid-battle that someone couldn't be saved, he would abandon them without mercy. He was a cold man.

Adventuring was just a job to Glen, and he didn't need anyone or anything that didn't produce results.

People made fun of him behind his back, saying he was cold-blooded or heartless, and with the exception of Silver Sword, Glen had never stayed in a party for long. In fact, had Silver Sword not occupied a special position as the guild's elite party, it would have disbanded long ago.

"What's your point?" Glen demanded.

"Oh no, I'm not here to lecture you today. And as it happens, all the orphanages I might have handed this child off to are full. Do you recall that recently discovered dungeon? ...Countless adventurers died there, and their children have been turned loose in the streets."

"..."

Glen examined the girl once more. She must have been living outside for some time. Her hair had been left to grow wildly, her dress was torn here and there and covered in mud, and her limbs were as thin as those of a skeleton.

And yet the girl's eyes were more animated than anyone else's. Her chestnut-colored irises flashed brilliantly, fixed keenly on Glen and full of hope and expectation.

Shaking off her gaze, Glen declared, "Then please put her back where she came from. If she's been able to live on her own this long, then she can keep doing it. I have no obligation to take her in, and there's no rule that says an adventurer must rescue orphans."

"I thought you would say that. And so I'd like to propose this as a kind of training."

"...Training?"

"Family training. You must learn to give and receive love. You're a little too stubborn about these things, you see."

"..."

Here it was, his master's usual lecture: Glen was too harsh on others and too hardheaded, and he needed to have more consideration and affection for his

allies.

The skills in swordsmanship and fighting and the adventurers' knowledge his master had taught him were all difficult to master and extremely useful. His lectures, however, were the one thing Glen had no interest in.

What was wrong with seeking results? Being an adventurer was hard work; he couldn't play buddy-buddy with some third-class wannabes who would only drag him down. It was a waste of time to hang around newbies with bad technique and judgment, and he wasn't obligated to wait around until they got better. The most logical thing to do was to abandon the weak right away.

"I don't understand how that sort of training will be useful for adventuring," Glen said.

"But look, this girl already thinks of herself as your child."

With a start, Glen realized that the girl was already trotting over to him. She grasped his fingers and looked up at him with her sparkling eyes. At this, even Glen faltered.

"..."

Glen had always been told he lacked a human heart—no one had ever looked at him like that before.

Everyone feared him or looked at him like he was a monster. They all kept their distance, never coming any closer than necessary. And that was just fine by him. Adventuring was his job. You didn't need feelings when it came to work. All you needed to do was dispassionately carry out the role you were given.

Glen was disgusted by the overfriendly look in the girl's eyes. His face twisted up, and he flailed, pushing her away. "I can't do it."

"I told you, this is training. You can't refuse."

"What...?!"

"And you can't return her to where she came from, either. You must raise this girl until she becomes a full-fledged adult. I'll provide financial aid, if needed... Though I'm sure money isn't an issue for you."

"But—!" Glen refused to accept it and continued trying to argue.



That was when the loud *guuuuuurgle* of an empty stomach cut him off. The girl widened her eyes in surprise—she must have been taught manners as a young child, because she blushed and averted her eyes.

“I...I’m...hungry...,” she said, grasping Glen’s armor with her thin little hand.

“...”

And that was how Glen met the girl—Lynn.

From that day forward, at his master’s insistence, Glen became a father.

## 21

Lunch break was over, and Alina was listening vaguely to the monotonous voice of the afternoon lecturer.

Rosetta was no longer standing at the podium. They'd begun a practical lecture on reception work with a different speaker.

Alina had managed to recover from the workaholic's polluting influence in time for the afternoon session. To restore her sanity, her brain had classified that morning's incident as a dark memory that must never be revisited and sealed it away.

That said, Alina had no interest in the remaining seminar. Her original goal had been to find some clue to eliminate her overtime, and that idea had already been blasted to smithereens, taking all her motivation with it.

*Urk... My birthday leave...*

She cried inwardly. Had the very idea to rely on advice from someone else been a mistake? No, that couldn't be it. Learning things from the knowledge of those who came before was the most basic strategy for improving one's work, and—

Tuning out the lecture, Alina started coming up with a new business betterment plan, this time on her own. She was *going* to secure that birthday leave. The afternoon practical lectures were all for newbies anyway, so she didn't need to pay attention.

*Business betterment plan, business betterment plan... Nghhh, I can't think of anything... If I had a good idea, I'd already be implementing it...!*

She fumed and fumed, but in the end, she had no ideas. Still irritated, Alina looked out the window to try to clear her mind.

*Huh?*

From where she was seated, Alina had a perfect view of the rear courtyard

with the statues of Silver Sword. She caught sight of some familiar faces there, and her irritation waned slightly.

It was Glen and Jade. They were standing in front of the statues, talking about something.

*Must be nice being an adventurer, doing what you want...*

She resented them a bit for their freedom. Soon enough, Glen walked off. Then Jade started strolling away as if something were on his mind, when—

—he looked up and met Alina’s gaze.

“...!”

The sudden eye contact almost made her yelp. She was on the third floor. She had never imagined he would notice her from such a distance.

When their eyes met, Jade smiled cheerfully and waved at her.

But that was all he did.

He didn’t call out “Alina!” or deliberately say anything that might give others the wrong impression.

That was great and all, and she was glad he was being less annoying.

But what was this—this feeling of distance, as if she were on the other side of an invisible wall?

“...”

She felt uneasy. This wasn’t right. What was he doing, acting like some harmless run-of-the-mill guy? It was almost as if she was just a receptionist, and he was just an adventurer. The truth wasn’t that neat and tidy. It was messier than that. They were irritatingly close—too close for polite smiles and pleasantries. There was no reason for them to hide their feelings, and—

*Wait, what am I thinking?*

Alina instantly pasted on a frown and turned away. Why should she fret over someone like Jade?

## 22

*“Haah, it’s finally over...”*

Alina slumped onto a bench outside. It was dusk, and they’d just finished the long first day of the seminar. It ended at the same time as work hours, so those on their way home were heading for the front gates.

*“It’s nice that we’re guaranteed to have no overtime, but this seminar is tiring in its own way...”* Alina sighed.



“It’s true,” Laila replied. “I’m pretty worn out.”

“You were sleeping the whole time, Laila.”

“I’m tired from oversleeping.”

“...”

“I’m impressed that you were able to stay awake...” Laila tilted her head and looked at Alina with awe and wonderment. “Didn’t you lose sleep because of the Great Labyrinth overtime, too?”

“There’s a trick to it, okay?” Huffing smugly, Alina proudly stuck up an index finger. “You’re at your limit, but you can’t even afford a lunch break, so no naps...and you can’t openly sleep in the office, because it’ll affect your personnel assessment... When that happens, you close one eye at a time!”

“...Huh?”

“You let your right eye sleep, then you let your left eye sleep... By resting them alternately like that, bit by bit, the end result is that you’ve closed both eyes, and it keeps you awake when the sleepiness hits.”

“...I don’t think I’ve ever felt more sorry for you, Alina...”

“Why?!”

Alina’s knowledge, gained from three hard years in the receptionist trenches, seemed to shock Laila so much that she deliberately changed the subject. “A-anyway, the cafeteria was really crowded, wasn’t it?”

Once the seminar had finished, Alina and Laila went to the cafeteria to get dinner, but it was already crowded, and all the seats were filled. Realizing that they’d arrived too late, like total losers, they had dejectedly moved to a bench outside.

“I didn’t think the cafeteria would still be so crowded at dinnertime... I figured the only ones using it that late would be the receptionists staying overnight and thought we could take our time. But that proved to be our downfall.”

“The fact that so many people are using the cafeteria after hours is a little... terrifying... I’m sure they’re all putting in overtime, too.”

“Well, guild headquarters is pretty far from the city, so there aren’t any restaurants nearby. And besides, I hear the head office has way more overtime than the branch offices.”

“I’m so hungry... I hope a table opens up soon.”

Apparently, you could get hungry even from sleeping. Laila rubbed her stomach as she shed silent tears. Then suddenly, she stood up.

“Alina, I’m going to go check out the cafeteria. If I’m lucky, maybe I can snag us some seats!”

“Huh? Hey—!”

Laila must have been *really* hungry. No sooner had she spoken than she was running back toward the cafeteria.

“...So impulsive...” Alina sighed as she watched her foolish junior disappear into the distance. Just then—

“Done with the seminar?”

—a voice came from above her, as if the speaker had been biding his time for a chance to jump in.

Alina looked up to see an unfamiliar man standing nearby. He was wearing a guild uniform, so he had to be a member of the staff. He was still young, and he wore an awfully gentle smile.

“...? Hello.” Figuring he was just being friendly, Alina returned his greeting.

But the man didn’t leave. “You’re one of the receptionists here for the seminar, aren’t you?”

It seemed the smiling man was not just here to say hello. Alina quickly sensed trouble, but she was too late. The man continued in an overly familiar manner. “Which office do you work at?”

“...Iffole Counter,” she answered reluctantly. She couldn’t exactly lie to a member of the staff.

The man nodded like he was familiar with it. “Oh, the biggest one, huh? That must be tough.”

“Do you have some business with me?”

“Oh no, nothing in particular. I was just thinking this might be a good chance to get to know you.”

Alina wasn't sure what made this a “good chance,” but either way, the man was aggressively approaching her. At this point, she wanted to give the guy a good whack. But of course, she couldn't do that at guild headquarters, with so many people watching.

“I'm afraid that is not why I'm attending this seminar.” She put on a bright business smile and tried to resolve things peacefully.

But the man wouldn't back down. “Hey, working hours are over now, so there's no need to be so formal. You're going to be staying in the training hall tonight, right? I've got overtime, too, so why don't we take a walk as a break and share our work woes...,” he said as his hand reached out toward Alina's shoulder and—

“Ow, ow, ow!!”

—yelped out of nowhere. Someone had grabbed his arm from the side and stopped him.

“If you have complaints about work, I'll listen,” came a low voice. It was Jade.

“J-Jade Scrade...?!”

“Why don't you tell me what's on your mind. I have something of an understanding about office work, too. Besides, I remember you... You were in the main office this morning.”

The blood drained from the man's face as Jade stared him down. Jade held the same rank as the bosses, and if he figured out which department the man belonged to, who could say how it might affect his next assessment?

“If I look into it, I bet I can find out which department you work in,” Jade said. “And if I know that, I'll be able to understand your *concerns* even better.”

“Th-that's fine, though I appreciate the sentiment...!” the man said, thoroughly flustered. He left pretty quickly after that.

“...What was that all about...?” Alina breathed an exasperated sigh.



Jade flicked her an awkward glance, then looked away coldly, just as he had before. “This may be guild headquarters, but you should watch out when you’re alone. See you.”

After saying his piece, Jade started to walk off briskly, when Alina snatched at his clothing and stopped him.

“Huh?” “Ah.”

Jade’s cry of surprise and Alina’s gasp as she realized what she was doing came at the same time.

Alina hastily released Jade as her gaze swam. “Uh, um... Thanks for helping me,” she said, her voice slightly monotone from embarrassment. After that, she clammed up, and an awkward silence fell. Jade had missed his moment to leave, and neither of them said a word or looked at the other for several seconds.

It was very strange for him to be so quiet.

Normally, he’d say something creepy before he left, and Alina would respond with insults and abuse to make things even. Wasn’t that how their relationship was supposed to go?

None of that was happening now. It wasn’t like she *wanted* to insult Jade, but —

She didn’t like this.

Alina balled her hands into fists on her lap, and before she knew it, she was saying, “Y-your...Image Improvement Campaign is having the opposite effect!!”

“Whaaaaaaat?!”

She felt like she could literally hear Jade stiffen up.

“You’re even more annoying than normal!” she said. “...It’s fine, so just go back to the way you were, okay?!”

“I-it’s fine?”

“Not really, but that’s okay!” Alina cried, squaring her shoulders like a whiny child. “It throws me off when you act all distant! Like it just kinda, you know...!

It's creepy for a guy who's always so annoying, calling out *Alina, Alina*, to suddenly act so mild and harmless, okay?!"

But then she tapered off. "S-so, um..." Eventually, she looked away and pouted. "...Stop acting so cold."

Her quiet words rang out in the silence.

Jade was stunned, his mouth hanging open in shock.

"A-anyway!" Unable to withstand any more silence, Alina scowled to hide her embarrassment and thrust a finger at Jade. "Go back to being a stupid pervert stalker! Got it?!"

"F-fine."

After hearing Jade's dazed reply, Alina huffed. She hardly knew what she was saying.

The one thing she knew was that she didn't like it when Jade acted distant. She didn't know why she didn't like it, and she didn't want to think about it, either.

"Could it be...?" After Jade gasped in realization, his face froze. "Have I upset you, Alina...?"

"That's right."

"...Sorry."

"As long as you understand."

"Thanks for being honest with me. I'm not good at this sort of thing..." Jade said, scratching his head awkwardly.

"You're a lot worse than that—you're *incredibly* bad at it."

"Ngh!"

"...But..." Alina muttered, turning aside with a *hmph* and puffing out her cheeks slightly. "You don't need to change."

## 23

“Oh, it’s Master Jade.”

Laila had just returned from the cafeteria, and when she saw Jade, she widened her eyes in amazement.

“Laila,” said Alina. “Were there no free tables?”

“No one seemed like they were leaving anytime soon... I stuck around for a while, but then I gave up and came back...”

“Yeah, the cafeteria is most crowded around this time,” said Jade. “In the afternoon, everyone eats outside, so there are free seats. But people who know how it is will generally bring something light from home for dinner.”

“Ngh...,” Alina groaned. “At times like these, outsiders are at a disadvantage, huh...?”

“Oh! That reminds me, there was something I wanted to ask you, Master Jade.” Laila raised an index finger, as if she’d just remembered something.

“What is it?”

“Have you heard the rumor about the reaper?”

Laila seemed to have a lot more energy now than she’d had in the seminar, and she leaned forward eagerly. “Tonight, we have to sleep in the training hall everyone’s been talking about... The very place people have seen a reaper...!”

“Yeah, I’ve heard the rumors, but they’re just rumors.”

“See, even Jade agrees,” Alina cut in.

“Aghhhh! What am I supposed to do with you two? Your sense of fear is totally busted...!” Receiving no sympathy at all, Laila held her head in her hands. “What’ll you do if it actually shows up, dressed in a black robe, under the cover of darkness...?! It’s a reaper! It might try to take us to the other side at any moment!”

“...A black robe?” Jade’s eyebrows twitched, and he frowned.

“That’s what they say. What about it?”

“Oh...” Jade’s demeanor changed, and he fell into thoughtful silence.

Laila tilted her head quizzically.

“All right,” he declared at last. “Then tonight I’ll stay at the training hall as well.”

“What?” Alina stared at him, blatantly aggravated. “You staying over won’t stop a haunting.”

“H-hey, cut it out, Alina...!!”

“Oh, I’m just a little curious about something, that’s all. I planned to use the training grounds tonight anyway, so this works out.”

“I’ll feel so much better with you there in the training hall, Master Jade! You’re the strongest tank ever—!” Laila was cut off as she staggered back a few steps. Someone had bumped into her shoulder.

“Whoa!” Alina cried out as she grabbed Laila and stopped her from falling. She then looked over toward the culprit—an adventurer who had already sped off without apologizing.

“...? Someone was in a rush...,” Alina said with suspicion.

Just then, she heard someone call out, “Hey, they’re saying they found a new dungeon!”

“It’s called the Civi Cathedral, and it’s seven floors. The thing’s huge...!”

“Hurry! The quest offices are already getting crowded. We’ve gotta get in right away!”

Alina instantly froze.

A new dungeon and a gigantic one, at that. Those words were like a curse to Alina, and her brain refused to process them.

But the sight before her was clearly no dream. Office staff who had been on their way home with sunny faces instantly turned on their heels and strode back toward headquarters, stone-faced like hardened overtime warriors.

Adventurers rushed out of the cafeteria and over to the guild headquarters' crystal gate, carrying plates of half-eaten food.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Laila went as pale as a corpse beside Alina. The two of them stared straight ahead and fell silent for a while.

“...Did you hear that, Alina?” Laila asked at last.

“...Yes. Quite clearly...”

Right after she said that, Alina collapsed on the spot. She placed her palms on the ground and hung her head.

“If they've found another dungeon just now, then...by the time we get back from the seminar...the office will already be a hellscape!”

“And he said it was seven floors, too. How long will that take to clear...?” Jade added.

Aggravated by Jade's unnecessary addition, Alina shot him a sharp glare. Then somehow, she found the strength to stand. “W-well, at the very least, we'll be safe for the rest of the seminar. We're busy training! We should just forget about the rest of the world and focus on our—”

“You all, over there,” a quiet voice called out to them, cutting Alina off. Turning around, Alina saw the employee who had served as their guide that afternoon. “You're receptionists from Iffole Counter, right?”

“...? Yes, we are...”

“Please come to the main building's office a little later. Your branch sent something for you.”

Alina's cheek twitched. That didn't sound good. “They...sent something...?”

She and Laila would only be gone for a few days. If it couldn't wait until after the seminar, it had to be quite the emergency.

Alina had a very bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“B-by the way, what is it...?” Alina timidly asked the staff.

The woman delivered the bad news in a voice as flat as the one she'd used on their tour.

“Unprocessed quest forms taken at Iffole Counter.”

“...”

“I took a verbal message from the Iffole office chief as well: ‘We’ll never manage to keep up with you two gone, so we’re sending some of the forms your way.’ Ordinarily, we would like to avoid this sort of behavior, since it risks loss of documents and information leaks, but given that this is an emergency situation, we have allowed it.”

Her final words, “Take great care in handling the documents,” seemed to echo cruelly in the distance.

Alina was speechless as her eyes rolled back in her head.

“Wh...what the heeeeeeeellllll?!!”

At that moment, Alina felt one of her cherished beliefs—that seminars would always end on time and never involve overtime—audibly shatter.

After dinner, as a shadow of despair fell over Laila and Alina, Jade walked them back to their lodgings at the training hall. All he could do to help them was carry the stacks of documents that had been sent from Iffole Counter.

*Obviously, I can't hang around in their room late into the night and help them...*

This was different from the usual overtime situation at Iffole Counter. Jade planned to stay at the training hall and find out the identity of this black-clad "reaper," but he had to refrain from any behavior that might raise suspicion, such as spending too much time in the receptionists' rooms.

That said, the staff at Iffole Counter weren't completely heartless, and the amount they'd sent was far less than the usual overtime. With both Alina and Laila working on the forms, they shouldn't take too long.

*Still, it seems like nothing ever works out for Alina...,* thought Jade.

Not only had she been traumatized by a workaholic that afternoon, but she'd also been sent overtime even at the seminar—something completely unheard-of. Was she being haunted by some kind of malicious ghost?

While Jade fretted, he heard light footsteps approaching from a distance.

As they drew nearer, he heard a distressingly cheerful cry. "There you are, my cute little guinea pig!"

This was not a voice he wanted to hear, and he reflexively dashed off the moment he heard it. But by the time his ears had picked it up, it was already too late. Jade had no time to escape before something soft grabbed his arm.

"Goooot youuu!" the voice said happily, as its owner embraced Jade's arm. It was Shelley, an elite member of the guild headquarters' research team.

With a broad smile on the face that was rumored to be one of the prettiest in the guild, Shelley pressed her bountiful chest generously forward to envelop

Jade's arm. But Jade merely heaved a long sigh.

Her next words made the reason for his reaction obvious.

"Hey, Jade. Can I perform a littttle bitty experiment on you? I want to prove a theory I just thought up." She finished up by shooting him a wink. The whole thing was outrageous.

With a weary look, Jade escaped from Shelley's arms. "Give me a break. No way."

Shelley was a talented scientist at the forefront of research into relics and skills, but she was also a dangerous character who was always plotting to experiment on Jade, taking advantage of his robust constitution.

"Oh, come on, now. Don't say that. It's just a teensy-weensy experiment. I only want—" Shelley groped around in the pocket of her white coat, then pulled out a black rock and thrust it at Jade. "—to try implanting this god core into your body." The imprudent researcher smiled as she made this ominous suggestion.

"Like hell!!" Jade quickly backed away from her, his face pale. "Shelley, do you even think of me as human?!"

"I think of you as a guinea pig that I can experiment on."

"That is not true and isn't helping your case one bit!" Jade was trembling as he pointed at the god core that Shelley was rolling around in her palm. "And, Shelley, I thought I told you not to walk around with that where everyone can see it."

The existence of the dark gods had only been revealed to a select few involved parties within the guild. Though the god core looked like any old glossy black rock, if a researcher of Shelley's caliber were to walk around with it as if it were important, people would start getting curious.

"Don't you think sneaking around and trying to keep it hidden will only make it more conspicuous? I'm joking, of course. I'm keeping it strictly confidential, so don't worry," she said, shooting him a pretty smile. "If anyone sees, I'll simply say it's my pet rock."



That was incredibly worrying.

Still, she was the only one with the skills to analyze the god core, and her hypotheses—the fruit of many years of experience and her genius’s intuition—were impressively reliable. In fact, Shelley had already solved one of the mysteries of the god core: that it allows a dark god to gain a Dia skill for every person they kill—invaluable information when preparing for battles to come.

“...So what did you learn this time?” Jade asked. “I’m about to head to the training grounds.”

“Oh dear, are you busy? My apologies. Perhaps we can talk later.” Shelley raised a hand to her cheek, as if she was disappointed. “Frankly, my theory this time feels more like fantasy, so before I report it to the higher-ups, I wanted to use you for a trial run...”

“You’re doing things backward.”

“Oh well. If you change your mind, come to my lab anytime.” With a soft giggle, Shelley left.

After escaping from her clutches, Jade headed for the training grounds, making a mental note to lock his door so he wouldn’t get attacked in his sleep.

“He managed to get away...,” Shelley grumbled as she holed up in her lab in guild headquarters.

The lantern on her desk illuminated a black rock the size of a fist. It was the god core that the dark god Silha had used as a power source.

Over the past few months, Shelley had spent all her time analyzing this rock, but there was one thing that just didn’t make sense to her. She’d hoped to resolve that question that very day by making Jade her guinea pig.

As Shelley stared at the god core, the question burning within her popped out of her mouth. “Why is there is no mark of Dia on it...?”

This had been bothering her of late.

These relics were part of the ancients’ legacy and were made with their incredible power and technology. Thus, research into relics was invaluable as a means of learning more about the ancients who created them.

Relics had a few things in common. They all featured a magic sigil in the shape of a sun, with points jutting out in eight directions—the mark of Dia. It was thought that this design served as a sort of creator’s signature.

According to testimony from Silver Sword, Silha and the twin dark gods had each borne this mark on their faces. That made sense to her—since the dark gods were “living relics” created by the ancients.

Similarly, if the god cores had been made by the ancients, shouldn’t they also have marks of Dia carved into them? Why had the ancients chosen not to add a mark of Dia to these cores alone?

“Hmm, maybe the stone is so black, I just can’t see it.”

Shelley carelessly cocked her head as she stared at the jet-black rock. Darkness itself seemed to be held within. It appeared to suck in light and not simply due to its color.

If she looked closely, Shelley could see a great mass of *somethings* writhing within the god core. And those somethings had been extremely condensed, turning the god core pure black.

The things crowded within the stone, like tens of thousands of tiny insect wings, were Dia skills' magic sigils.

It was a creepy sight, but no matter how closely Shelley examined the stone, she couldn't find a mark of Dia.

Was it even possible, Shelley wondered, for the ancients to create something so close to a human? Dark gods appeared to be fundamentally the same as humans—they had feelings and self-awareness. The dark gods' incredible powers and brutal natures aside, Silver Sword had gotten the impression that they weren't all that different from humans.

When she considered that the dark gods had destroyed the ancients, their own creators, it became clear that they possessed independent egos and the ability to think for themselves. In other words, even their own parents hadn't been able to control them.

Simply put, they were closer to people than to relics.

*But what would compel the ancients to create relics that so closely resembled humans...?*

The ancients had sought power. So far in her investigations, Shelley had come to the conclusion that as a group, they were incredibly power hungry.

“And in that pursuit, they created a relic as humanlike as possible, only to create egos beyond their control, which ultimately destroyed them. That was a bit silly of them, wasn't it...?”

*You'd think they would have anticipated that sort of risk. Of course, they probably did and still failed. But it still seems way too sloppy.*

At times like these, Shelley considered what she would have done in their place. If she simply wanted power, she would have made loyal puppets with less sentience, reason, and emotion.

In fact, if she wanted to make something close to a human, she wouldn't start

from scratch. There was a faster way to go about it.

“It would be much more efficient to...turn a human into a relic.”

They would have succeeded in giving the subject power but would have failed to control it. Shelley suspected that this idea was a lot more plausible.

If you assumed that the god core had no power in and of itself, but that instead, whoever it was implanted into became a relic of incredible power, it made sense that the mark of Dia appeared on the person’s body and not on the core.

“Hmm. If that’s true, maybe I shouldn’t be touching this thing so much.” Arriving at this possibility rather late, Shelley smiled wryly. “Oh dear,” she said.

That was when it happened.

“Hey, how are things going?”

Suddenly, she heard a voice from behind. Thinking that a superior had come to check on her progress, Shelley casually turned around—and immediately fell silent.

The man behind her was neither a guild researcher nor a member of the staff.

He stood there silently, covered head to toe in a jet-black robe.

“Wh—...?”

Shelley’s breath caught in her throat, and for a second, her thoughts froze. But she quickly rose from her chair, picking up the god core she’d left on the table.

The robed figure said nothing and simply loomed over her. His presence, ghostlike and eerie, made Shelley’s heart pound in her chest.

*It can’t be—the man in black...?!*

A man in a black robe appearing suddenly without warning—everything matched up, and Shelley panicked. The sole exit was behind him. She could leap out the window, but this was the third floor. If she was unlucky, she could die.

How had he gotten into guild headquarters in such a conspicuous outfit anyway? Wouldn’t someone have seen him?

“...”

Shelley swiftly looked around the room, desperately searching for a way out of this crisis.

She was just a researcher, not a fighter like Jade and the others. All she could do was cry out for help.

“Som—”

She tried to yell, “someone,” but all that came out was a short puff of air.

The next thing she knew, the man in black was right in front of her, his fist slamming mercilessly into her stomach.

A beat later came a dull pain and a suffocating feeling. And then stars flew across her vision as her body lurched, and she collapsed face down on the ground. The black god core fell from her slack hand and rolled across the ground.

Through her fading vision, she saw the man scoop up the god core. Shelley desperately stretched out her arm, but she couldn’t reach him. Then everything went dark.

\*\*\*\*

“...They’re all fools who take peace for granted,” the man in black spat as he gazed at the woman lying at his feet.

His gaze shifted to the god core in his hand. Just then, he pressed it to his left hand.

“It’s almost time...,” he muttered, a twinge of sadness in his voice.

The next instant, he clenched his teeth and shoved the god core into his left hand with all his might.

“...Listen, if you want me to help with your training, that’s one thing.” Lowe’s exasperated voice echoed in the training hall’s entrance later that evening. “But *why* do we have to stay overnight in this cruddy old building...?” Gazing sharply around the moldy training hall, Lowe furrowed his brow.

“Hey, don’t say that.” Jade smiled wryly as he headed to the room he’d arranged for them to sleep in that night.

Straight down the hallway from the entrance was an area full of guest rooms that Jade had been given permission to use freely. The receptionists were all staying on the second floor.

“Th-the training building...sure is atmospheric...,” said Lululee, following behind them, gulping.

“Lululee,” said Jade. “I told you if you’re scared, you don’t have to force yourself.”

“No way. At this rate...it’d be scarier to stay alone in our lodgings in Iffole...!”

“Well, I suppose ghosts usually attack those that stray from the group,” Lowe said to Lululee with a teasing smirk. Lululee’s rod quietly jabbed him in the side, shutting him up with an “*oof*. ”

A fine, exclusive lodging house had been built in the richest area of Iffole to house the guild elite, including Silver Sword. Jade and his party were normally based there, but that day, Jade had asked Lowe and Lululee to stay at the training hall with him.

Of course, they were prepared for the possibility that the rumored reaper was in fact the man in black.

“But...wouldn’t that be a little too convenient?” Lowe frowned dubiously.

Jade explained to him about what had been bothering him lately. “During the Centennial Festival, the man in black got Heitz and his party into the

underground prison and the book storage, right? And using official procedures, too. Odds are high that he's someone inside the guild. And if that's true, he might be frequenting guild headquarters."

"Well, I did consider that," said Lowe. "But if you're talking about those two locations, that really limits the suspects. I mean, maybe it's the guildmaster. Ha-ha." He cackled, half joking.

But when Jade fell silent and didn't contradict him, Lowe's smile froze. "... Wait, leader. Do you actually think the guildmaster is the man in black?"

"I can't reject the possibility. If the guildmaster...if Glen Garia is the culprit, then everything would make sense."

"Come on. That's impossible, right?"

"Y-yeah, there's no way!" Lululee cut in, pale-faced. "I mean, the guildmaster has been desperately working to help us defeat the dark gods. And if he was trying to revive them, why wouldn't he do something to stop Alina, the only one who can defeat them? It just doesn't add up!"

"..."

Lululee had a point. If Glen were the man in black, he would have never let Alina get involved in the fight. That was the reason Jade couldn't fully doubt Glen. Plus, he felt in his heart that it couldn't possibly be true.

Seeing Jade fall silent with a grim expression, Lowe followed up cautiously. "I agree with Lululee. But I'm sure you already noticed that contradiction. If you still suspect the guildmaster despite that...then maybe you're on to something."

"B-both of you are too cruel!" Lululee was now openly angry, her eyebrows forming a V. "Way back when, it was the guildmaster who believed in us until the very end, right...?! Have you forgotten?! There's no way someone like that could be the man in black!"

Way back when.

Jade knew what Lululee was trying to say.

Despite her phrasing, it was only a few years ago—she was talking about when Jade had been installed as leader and when the new Silver Sword had

been assembled.

These days, everyone acknowledged them as a first-class party, but it wasn't like that from the start. There had been a time when they weren't able to produce the results they expected.

Silver Sword had to produce results, or they'd be disbanded.

If they couldn't manage the kind of achievements that even paper pushers with no knowledge of the field could understand, guild headquarters would reexamine their status and consider replacing every one of them. In other words, all their jobs were on the line.

And every time they'd had one of those stomachache-inducing meetings, Glen had said, *"Let's wait a little longer. No one is perfect from the start. It would be foolish not to give them a chance and fire them prematurely. We've got to consider the long term."*

Glen had backed them up, but the higher-ups at the time had shot him down.

*"You're being too soft on them, Guildmaster. They were chosen because we believed they were first-class adventurers who could produce immediate results. If they aren't up to snuff, then our choice was inappropriate, and we should quickly put together a new party that can measure up."*

*"We have no small sum of money invested in Silver Sword. As this organization's leader, you must make proper use of its funds. With all due respect, don't you think you're indulging them because of your own past as a member of Silver Sword?"*

*"The chief of finance is right. Though I hesitate to say this in front of the representative from Silver Sword... Isn't the quality of this year's party rather poor compared to previous generations?"*

The speaker glanced at Jade with cold, discerning eyes. A lot of people at guild headquarters back then had eyes like that.

*"I believe I am making proper use of our funds."*

Jade still remembered Glen's emphatic declaration, delivered amid so much harsh criticism.



*“‘First-class’ doesn’t refer to those who are strong from the start or to those who never fail. A first-class adventurer can adapt to whatever situation they find themselves in, and they can do it on the fly. And in that regard, the current members of Silver Sword are indeed first-class.”*

*“...”*

*“Plenty of guys out there are strong. None of you are wrong...but I think it’s arrogant to assume there will always be fully developed fighters ready to recruit. We must be prepared to cultivate them ourselves.”*

Glen had always believed in Silver Sword. That much was certain.

Jade lowered his gaze and fell silent for a while.

More than anyone else, he wanted to deny the possibility that Glen could be the man in black. If not for him—if someone else had been guildmaster—their party would have been disbanded, and they’d never have come this far.

But Fili’s expression that afternoon had only strengthened the flicker of unease he’d felt the day of the Centennial Festival.

“Well, it’s still just baseless speculation,” Jade spat. “If we can catch the man in black, we’ll know everything.” At that, Lululee and Lowe shut their mouths.

This felt awful.

Unusually for Jade, he was unable to rein in his feelings. The three of them, at least, thought of Glen as a friend. Just as Glen had believed in Silver Sword back then, the members of Silver Sword wanted to believe in him, but...

The awful feeling swirling in his chest just wouldn’t go away.

“Why...why do we have to do overtime, even at the seminar...?!” Alina choked out, her voice low.

They were in their assigned quarters in the training hall. The old stone room had multiple beds and must have once been used as a dormitory. The only other pieces of furniture were a plain desk with a few chairs and a small wardrobe—the bare minimum to get by for a few days.

Yes, this was a room for sleeping. Any other use was unthinkable. Besides, they were in the middle of a seminar right now, and they had to go to bed early and restore their energy for the next day’s lectures.

And yet lying before them, as if to keep them from sleeping for a few more hours, were hulking stacks of unprocessed quest forms.

Taking in this all-too-familiar sight, Alina bared her teeth like a beast, her eyes blazing with murderous drive. “Dammit... Damn you, Counter Chiiiiiiief...!!”

“A-Alina...! Your aura of resentment is even scarier than a ghost’s! Please stop...!” Laila, who was sitting opposite her across the stack of papers, trembled in fear.

Heedless, Alina grabbed some nearby documents and howled to the heavens. “I’ve never heard of overtime during a seminaaaaar!!”

Her bout of yelling finished, Alina fell face down on the desk and broke into sobs.

“Wasn’t our safety supposed to be guaranteed if we went to the seminar...?” she wailed. “I was supposed to leave work on time... I was supposed to—...!”

“Alina...” Seeing Alina in such a state, Laila lowered her eyebrows apologetically. “But—but we have to deal with these, or things will only get worse...”

“...I know.”

Dragging her head up from the desk, Alina steeled herself.

The new, super-large dungeon had only been discovered that day, and the office had already been inundated with requests beyond their capacity. That meant that by the time Alina and Laila finished their seminar and returned to Iffole Counter, even more adventurers would have heard the news and come rushing in, creating a total hellscape. They had no choice but to process these forms now to mitigate the situation as much as possible.

“Crying won’t make these unprocessed documents go away...! Let’s do this, Laila!” Alina readied her feather pen and boldly faced the desk.



Across from her towered a mountain of piled forms—enemy soldiers that had been mercilessly sent to her from Iffole Counter.

“Okay, Alina...!”

Laila straightened her back solemnly, as if she were a knight going into battle.

“Once the seminar is over and we get back to Iffole Counter, carnage awaits us... So we need to defeat these unprocessed quest forms right here, right now!! Let’s do this!!”

“Roger, Alina!” Laila cried. “Please don’t go to bed before I do!” And with that, she pulled out a set of small dishes.

“Uh, what are those?”

“Dishes to put salt in. I brought them with me!”

“Huh?”

As soon as she’d finished speaking, Laila began placing the dishes—one at each corner of the desk—and eagerly filling them with salt she’d gotten from who knows where.

“Didn’t you know, Alina? Salt protects you from evil spirits. That’s just common sense!”

“Uh, that’s not what I wanted to ask... And hold on, don’t you normally place the salt at the four corners of the room? Why is it on the desk...? It’s in the way.”

“Please don’t say that! I’m placing it close by so that I can reach it quickly on the off chance that a ghost attacks!”

“...”

Alina got the feeling that Laila didn’t quite know what she was talking about, but she decided to let her do whatever made her feel better. Giving up, Alina turned back to the quest forms.

\*\*\*\*

“So that’s what happened at the Centennial Festival. It was a really wonderful

experience, and— Wait, Alina?”

Laila, who had been babbling on to distract herself from her fear, suddenly realized that she wasn’t getting a response from Alina.

The other girl had been replying until just a moment ago, albeit with monotone remarks like “uh-huh” and “ohhh,” which meant she was 120 percent not listening. Puzzled at the sudden silence, Laila lifted her head to see that Alina was, quite unusually, lying face down on the desk, sleeping.

Laila instantly blanched. “H-h-h-hey, I thought I asked you not to fall asleep fiiiiirrrsst!”

She gave up on the quest form she was processing, wailed, and shook Alina’s shoulders. But Alina must have been quite tired, because she continued sleeping peacefully without any sign that she would wake.

“W-waaah! Why today, of all days...?! Usually, I’m the one who runs out of strength first—” Midsentence, Laila realized something with a gasp. “Oh right. It’s because I slept all afternoon...”

During the lectures, and especially when she’d been full right after lunch, Laila had been unable to bear the boring content and had slept pretty hard. Because of that, she wasn’t sleepy at all, despite how late it was.

“I never thought an afternoon nap would backfire on me like this... No, no, that’s not the problem— Alina, come on, Alina...”

The room hadn’t bothered her while Alina was awake, but now it terrified her. All she had to light the dim room was an unreliable lantern, and her surroundings were engulfed in darkness. There were shadows under the bed and inside the cupboard, which had been left open just a crack...

“A-Alina, Alina...!”

Practically in tears now, Laila smacked at her senior’s shoulders, but Alina was sleeping like the dead.

That was when it happened. Laila heard something.

*Tup.*

It was clearly a footstep. And it sounded strange, like someone walking

barefoot across a cold stone hallway.

“...!”

Laila’s breath caught in her throat. Goose bumps formed all over her body.

*Tup, tup.*

The footsteps were slowing, coming closer. Laila stopped breathing. Her instincts were ringing alarm bells, telling her that she must not let whatever was making those footsteps notice her. She kept her hands still and held her breath, praying for whoever it was to pass by.

But...

*Tup.*

The footsteps came to a stop—right in front of their room.

“...Ah...”

She softly cried out, unable to stop herself. She didn’t want to look, but her gaze was drawn to the door. The doorknob slowly turned.

“Ah...!”

*Gachak.*

The door, which she thought had been locked, opened on its own. This couldn’t be real. Laila’s gaze locked on the spot. She was unable to avert her eyes or close them.

*Kreee...*

Eventually, on the other side of the open door, she saw—no one.

“Huh?”

Fresh goose bumps erupted across her skin. And then—

“I hate you.”

She heard a low voice by her ear.

“*Ngk!*”

“I hate you. I hate you. I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate you I hate—”

“Nghaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Her terror finally reaching its limit, Laila shrieked. Her eyes spinning in panic, she desperately grabbed for something...and snatched a pile of salt from one of the dishes on the desk. Without looking at her target, she flung it behind her.

“Begone evil spirit! Begone evil spirit! Begone evil spirit!!!”

“...What a racket...”

Something rustled in the corner of Laila’s vision. Alina had finally woken up and was lifting her head. “Urk. Dammit, I fell asleep...? Wait, what the heck is so salty? ...Is this salt?”

Noticing the stuff on her head, Alina furrowed her brow. At the same time, Laila saw the *thing* behind her and screamed.

“Alina... B-behi—behind you...!”

“Behind me?” Alina turned around and saw the *thing* at last.

It was the ghost of a man, standing eerily still.

“An intruder...?”

Laila was paralyzed with fear, but force of habit allowed her to deliver a full-strength comeback: “Uh, that’s clearly a ghost!!!”

At some point, the quest forms piled up all around them lifted into the air, and nasty crackles like popping air rang out through the room.

Amid all the chaos, Alina stared at the man in a daze, and he looked back at her. Eventually, her lips curled into a wicked grin. “I see. So it’s not just adventurers and dark gods keeping me from finishing my work. Now it’s ghosts, too...”

Alina immediately clenched her fists and assumed a crouching stance.

“A-Alina? Hey, are you still half-asleep?”

“If I were scared of ghosts...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa—”

“...how could I ever do so much overtime, so late at niight—?!!!”



With that, Alina plunged her fist into the ghost man's stomach. The figure instantly bent in the middle and slammed into the wall behind him. A white shadow flew out from the scruff of the figure's neck and dispersed like mist. The floating quest forms dropped out of the air, and the loud crackling noises stopped flat.

"No way!!" Laila widened her eyes.

Had Alina managed to exorcise the ghost? And with a corporeal attack at that?

As Laila stared, confused about all sorts of things, Alina spat out hatefully, "You're getting in the way of my overtime..." Grumbling incoherently, she sat politely back down in her chair, dropped her face onto the desk, and fell asleep again.

"...N-no way... A punch took it out? Was it really a ghost...?"

Laila sank down onto the floor and stayed there awhile, listening in a stupor to the sounds of her coworker sleeping. After witnessing Alina exorcise the ghost with her fist, Laila had begun to doubt that whatever they'd seen was a ghost at all.

Laila remained stunned for a while until she snapped out of it with a start. "...! Alina, please wake up!" She shook Alina's shoulder in a panic as her coworker dozed.

"Hnah?" Finally opening her eyes, Alina lifted her head in confusion. The moment her unsteady vision moved from Laila to the documents by her hand, she leaped up as if struck by lightning. "Oh no, I fell asleep! The overtime!"

"Now isn't the time for that! Look!" Laila pointed to the man who Alina had taken out in one hit.

Alina looked where Laila was pointing and furrowed her brow in puzzlement. "Who's that?"

"Someone...who might be a ghost."

Laila offered a vague explanation she barely understood herself, then she hugged Alina's arm to her chest and forced her to get up.

“A ghost? It just looks like a regular person. Though I guess it’s weird for someone to be passed out right there.”

“At any rate, let’s call Master Jade. I’ll explain what happened on the way,” Laila said, dragging Alina after her. As they left the room, Laila glanced back at the man passed out inside. He had legs, and his body wasn’t transparent. He looked just like a regular person—but he’d been acting so strange when he entered their room.

“Laila, it’s kind of hard to move.”

Alina scowled as they made their way down the nighttime hallway. Laila was glued to her torso and refused to let go, which meant she couldn’t walk very fast.

But when Alina tried to peel her off, Laila resisted, desperately clinging to her. “No way! I don’t wanna let gooooo!”

“The ghost is gone, right? There’s nothing here—everything’s fine.”

After shaking her awake, Laila had explained what happened. Apparently, Alina had punched a ghost while still half asleep. *That’s ridiculous*, she thought. But upon seeing things scattered about the room, salt sprinkled here and there, and an unknown man passed out on the floor, she decided she could believe at least half of what Laila was saying.

“It’s not fine at all! It’s just like I told you! There are ghosts here!”

“Are you sure it wasn’t just an intruder? Though I think that’s a bigger problem, personally.”

Though if the man were an intruder, it was strange that he’d take a punch straight to the face without resisting. As long as Alina didn’t activate her skill, she was only about as strong as an ordinary girl.

*Oh, crap! I didn’t activate my skill by mistake, did I...?!*

It was a terrifying possibility, and Alina didn’t have the courage to confirm it. Though judging by how rattled Laila was, it seemed she wouldn’t have to worry too much about it.

“Why did you have to drift off right at the worst time?! Geez!”

“Th-that’s why I’m taking you to see Jade, isn’t it?”

For now, Alina and Laila had decided to head to Jade’s room. Whether the

man in their room was a ghost or an intruder, they couldn't very well sleep in there with him.

"At times like these, there's safety in numbers," said Laila. "Especially when there are a lot of capable people! In a group like that, people who do nothing but freak out have a good chance of survival."

"Capable people, huh? ...Is that a compliment?"

"Anyway, the best thing to do now is to report this to Master Jade."

Alina glared at her, but Laila ignored her and held up an index finger. "Master Jade is so devoted to you, he would gladly stay up all night keeping watch for us. And he's a tank, so if the time comes, he can shield us, and he doesn't seem like the type to die... Most of all, while he's handsome and powerful, he's also the protagonist type who won't brag about his skills, so he's unlikely to be cursed to death! Isn't that pretty reassuring, when you're up against ghosts? Let's have the strongest tank in the guild protect us."

"Laila, you just admitted your whole dirty plan out loud."

As they were talking, they reached Jade's room on the first floor and knocked on the door.

But after waiting a few minutes, there was still no response.

"Is he sleeping...?" Alina wondered.

"D-do you think a ghost got him...?!" Laila's lips were trembling and pale as she imagined the worst.

"He's not so weak that he'd get done in by a gho—"

As Alina spoke, she noticed a light flashing in the corner of her eye. Curious, she turned around and looked through the window. Every once in a while, the night sky in the distance would glow red.

"Isn't that the direction of the training grounds?"

Noticing Alina's gaze, Laila looked out the window, too. It dawned on Alina then that Jade had said he would be practicing his skills at the training grounds that night.

“He might be over there,” Alina said.

“Huh? This late at night?”

“It’s so far... It’s too much trouble to go all the wa—”

“Let’s move!!”

Laila took off toward the training grounds, dragging a worn-out Alina behind her.

*“Ngh...”*

After activating his composite skill for the second time, Jade fell to his knees.

The light the skill had released into the training grounds immediately vanished, and the area was blanketed once again in silence and darkness. Some illumination was provided by magic lights, but it was hardly enough to fill the massive training grounds, designed to look like a coliseum. It was little wonder—no one had anticipated the place would be used in the middle of the night.

Jade’s body was covered in sweat, and his shoulders were heaving. By now, he was used to the sensation of skill exhaustion—the deep feeling of cold from within his body, despite how hot he was on the outside.

Composite skills were techniques that combined multiple Sigurth skills to activate powerful skill effects. Depending on the situation, they could even rival Dia skills.

Ever since learning how to activate composite skills, Jade had been practicing them just about every day. He wanted to get his body used to the resulting skill exhaustion.

Though powerful, composite skills were hard on the body. Since they required using multiple skills at once, they were like a double-edged sword, quickly pushing the user into severe skill exhaustion. This made them somewhat unreliable in real combat.

*“One more time...”*

But as he tried to stand, his vision wavered.

By the time he wondered if he’d gone too far, he’d already collapsed onto the cold floor of the arena.

The starry sky seemed to spin above him. His balance was shot, and he couldn’t get up. He felt strange, like he was floating in the air, even though he

was sprawled out on the ground. Jade squeezed his eyes tight and tried to shut off all information feeding into his brain.

He wanted to use his composite skills to fight against the dark gods.

That was what he'd wished for on the day of the Centennial Festival. Despite being excited for it, Alina had given up on the event to face off against the dark gods alongside Jade's party. Ever since he saw her face that day, he'd been sure of his goal.

*...I don't want Alina to be the only trump card in our battle against the dark gods...*

For that, he had to get stronger. Because she was fighting the dark gods for their sake.

*"...Don't die, okay, Jade?"*

The words Alina muttered on the day of the Centennial Festival still lingered in his mind.

At the soul's rest ceremony to mourn the souls of adventurers, Alina had sent off a dead man called Shroud. Though Alina hated adventurers, she still remembered him fondly. He had to be someone she'd cared about. It was clear that his death had affected her deeply.

Don't *you* die, okay, Jade? Don't die, like Shroud did.

That's how Alina's words had sounded to Jade, at least. Neither a wish nor a prayer—but a scream. Despite her tremendous power, that was her one fear. She was afraid of someone dying.

*"..."*

Jade balled his hands into fists and clenched his teeth. He didn't have time to be out here passing out. He had to become strong enough to ease her worries. Jade closed his eyes even tighter to get through the intense waves of dizziness, when—

"Hey. Why the heck are you napping out here?"

—a cool voice interrupted his thoughts, and Jade opened his eyes with a start.

At some point, the night sky had stopped spinning, and a girl's face had appeared in front of it, peering down at him. She had glossy black hair even darker than the night and jade-green eyes that shone like noble gems. Her lips were pressed into a sullen line.

"A-Alina?!" Jade cried out and leaped to his feet. "Why are you here...?"

"Master Jade!" Laila flew past Alina's side and rushed toward him, her face pale as she peered up into his eyes. "There was a ghost! A ghost showed up in our room!!"

"A ghost?" Jade asked skeptically, and Laila began to explain.



Alina and Laila took Jade back to their room, where they proceeded to mount a proper investigation. Jade had just tied up the unconscious man with some nearby rope when he noticed something about him. “Wait... Isn’t this guy a staff member from guild headquarters?”

“A staff member?” Alina replied. “That doesn’t look like their uniform, though.”

“I’ve seen his face before. He works in the office.”

“So then it wasn’t a ghost after all—just an intruder.” Alina sighed. “What a hassle.”

But then Jade said something unexpected. “No... This is the work of a low-tier monster.”

“A monster?” Alina frowned at Jade’s analysis.

“Laila, when Alina hit him, something like a white shadow flew out and dispersed, right?”

“Y-yes! I definitely saw it!”

“That only happens when a monster is destroyed. It must be a phantom type, which possesses creatures and items.” Jade still looked concerned, however. “They’re typically low-level monsters that flee when their host is threatened. A single blow to the host is all it takes to destroy them. They’re not very dangerous monsters, but...” Jade folded his arms. “That’s not the real problem here.”

Understanding what Jade was trying to say, Alina scowled. “But why are there monsters showing up inside guild headquarters? Even if it used to be a dungeon, the Fortress of Ash was cleared, wasn’t it?”

When the floor bosses of all layers were defeated, the monsters in a dungeon left. That was what it meant to clear a dungeon. It had already been fifteen

years since the Fortress of Ash was cleared, and it was absurd to think that any monsters were still left, wandering around.

“Yeah,” Jade agreed. “And what’s more, phantoms are so weak, they can’t even defend their own territory. Monsters like that usually aren’t found in dungeons. They tend to lurk in deserted areas and hardly ever come near humans...”

And yet one had appeared in the training hall. *That* was what worried Jade.

“Well, now that we know the monster’s identity, everything’s settled, right?” Alina sighed and started to clean up the things strewn all over the room. “Good grief.”

Laila was helping out, a worried look on her face. “But—but even if it was just a phantom, for something like that to be in guild headquar—”

As Laila tried to smooth out the curtains, she suddenly glanced out the window and froze. After a few seconds, her neck stiffly creaked around like that of a broken doll, and she turned to face Alina. “...Did you just see that?”

“See what?”

“Why do strong people never see important stufffff?! Look outsiiiiide!!”

“Uh, okay, but...was something out there?”

“A b-b-black shadow...! Th-the reaper!” Laila cried. Jade reacted immediately.

“The reaper...! Is it the man in black?!” Jade instantly rushed to the window Laila was pointing to and activated his skill. Ghost or no, he showed no hesitation.

“Skill Activate: *Sigurth Beast!*”

Laila startled at the light of his skill and backed away. Using his skill-enhanced senses, Jade peered into the darkness outside. “...You’re right—there *is* someone running around out there. Looks like they’re alone.”

“I-is it the reaper?!”

“I don’t know. I’m going to go look.”

“Whaaaat?!”

“Alina, can you wake up Lululee and Lowe? They’re on the first floor. Laila, you call for backup and ask the man over there what happened to him.”

As soon as he was finished speaking, Jade leaped out the window.

“Hey, this is the second floor!” Laila shouted.

Ignoring her warning, Jade deftly bounded off a protrusion in the stone wall and landed on the ground. He had to be pretty concerned about the reaper, if he was choosing to skip the stairs. Jade’s silver hair, bright under the moonlight, bobbed in his pursuit of the reaper and vanished.

“H-he’s gone...,” said Laila.

“Yeah.”

Alina shrugged and went to wake up Lululee and Lowe, just as Jade had asked. Frankly, she didn’t care about this ghost nonsense and would have preferred to get through the rest of the unprocessed quest forms that had been foisted upon them.

“P-please don’t leave me alone, Alina...!” Laila wailed, clinging to her once again.

Relying on the information he'd gained from *Sigurth Beast*, Jade chased after the reaper.

"Ngk, wait!"

At last, he was able to see his target with his own eyes. The reaper was fleeing, jet-black robe fluttering and melting into the night. Perhaps because of the loose fabric, the figure looked rather large.

*Dammit, I can't catch up...!*

The figure in black was abnormally fast. Jade, who was carrying a super-heavy greatshield on his back, simply couldn't go any faster. But he didn't want to let his quarry escape.

It didn't matter to Jade if the fleeing shape before him was the infamous reaper or some ghostly creature not of this world. All Jade was thinking about was the possibility that the figure clad in a jet-black robe might in fact be the man in black.

To do what he'd done—orchestrate a jailbreak in the underground prison and sneak the enemy into the book storage—he needed to have considerable authority within the guild. There must have been a connection between them. Could it be that the black-robed reaper long seen at headquarters was in fact the very same man?

*He's getting away...!*

The reaper was a talented runner, visibly gaining ground despite Jade's efforts and getting away from him. Eventually, they vanished into the darkness.

"...Crap."

Jade came to a momentary stop. The reaper had outrun him, but Jade was still tracing his position with *Sigurth Beast*. Focusing on the information his senses picked up, he mentally followed his target.

“...! He’s—!” Startled by his discovery, Jade raced off.

The reaper was trying to go right back to the training hall where Alina and the others were staying.

“Hmm...a reaper, you say...?”

Lululee came out from her room, sleepily rubbing her eyes as she listened to Laila. Watching them, Alina yawned.

Lululee was wearing a set of baggy pajamas and hugging a big pillow as tall as she was. It appeared she still had one foot in dreamland. She had been sleeping in the room next to Jade's, and Lowe was in another room nearby. Of course, Silver Sword's exclusive lodgings were in Iffole, not the training hall. If they were spending the night here along with Jade, it must mean that they planned to deal with the reaper as Silver Sword.

Alina briefly wondered why they were so concerned about the reaper, but she stopped caring again almost instantly.

*Haah... We're not anywhere near done with those quest forms. I'm tired, and I wanna go back to my room right now...*

Just as she slumped wearily, she caught a glimpse of something moving in the darkness.

“?” Just in case, she tried shining the narrow beam of her lantern on it, but nothing was there.

She did, however, hear the light *tap, tap, tap* of footsteps farther down the hall.

“...? Lowe?”

Alina cocked her head. Lululee was busy doing her best to listen to Laila's meandering explanation, despite her sleepiness. So Alina assumed the footsteps belonged to Lowe. He always wore black clothing, so maybe she hadn't been able to see him in the dark.

“Hey...”

Alina followed the footsteps, winding up at the building's entrance hall with

its high ceiling and tasteless monster statue. Lighting up the surrounding space with her lantern, Alina casually searched the hall, but she couldn't find Lowe anywhere. Then, just as she was about to return—

“Alina?”

—she heard a voice. But it wasn't Lowe's—it was Jade's.

The tank rushed into the building. He must have been running around quite a lot, because sweat was gushing from his forehead, and his shoulders were heaving.

“Oh, Jade, you came back? I just woke up Lululee—”

“Did you notice the reaper come through here?”

“Huh? I didn't...see anything—,” Alina began but then stopped. In the corner of her eye, she saw something black.

A figure in sable garments had stopped beside the monster statue.

“...!”

Jade widened his eyes and froze for a moment, then hastily moved in front of Alina. Just a moment earlier, when she'd searched the entrance hall, no one had been there. Alina felt a chill run down her spine—she was finally scared. The reaper slowly turned to face Jade, not making a sound.

The black-robed figure fixed Jade with a piercing gaze. The reaper had no weapons or armor. It was just standing there, yet its mere presence made Jade and Alina feel so tense that it was like their hearts were caught in a vise.

“...Who are you?” Jade asked sharply, straining under the indescribable weight of the reaper's presence.

But the reaper didn't respond to Jade's question, instead laying a hand on the monster statue.

Quietly, a flat male voice said, “...I am the ‘man in black.’”

The next moment, a sharp light raced across the stone floor of the entrance hall, and then a giant magic sigil flared.

“Oh n—!” Jade wasn't able to finish his sentence. As Alina heard him, she was

assaulted by a strange, floaty feeling.

The floor of the entrance hall had vanished.

“!”

Jade and Alina helplessly plummeted straight down.



“Ow...” Alina rubbed her bottom as she sat up. “Where are we...?”

Looking around, she and Jade saw that it was dark and that they were in the middle of an old stone hallway.

The hallway was long, wide, and straight, with a high ceiling. Alina’s voice was swallowed up into the darkness. The air was wet and damp, and it felt just like the inside of a dungeon... The next moment, she heard a groan from beneath her.

“Urk... Alina, are you all right...?”

“Wagh?!” She reflexively yelped and leaped away. At that point, she realized that she’d been sitting on top of Jade. “Oh, sorry. Hey, are you okay?”

He must have protected her from the impact when they fell. She tried poking Jade in the stomach, where he lay on his back. Maybe she’d crushed him with her butt and he was gravely injured... She panicked for a moment, but then Jade slowly sat up.

Seeing Alina’s relief, Jade shook his head. “Ngh...! I think I would have liked to stay there underneath you for a little longer...,” he whispered, sounding disappointed. He balled his fists with deep and sincere regret.

“Never mind. Lie there forever, for all I care,” Alina replied, curtly brushing him aside.

“Just a joke.”

Alina stood and looked up at the ceiling. “We must have fallen down...but it looks like the hole we came through is blocked.”

The ceiling was dark, and they couldn’t see very far. Not even the moonlight, which had been particularly strong that night, was getting through.

“A classic trap. That creepy statue must have been the activation device... I was careless.”

“Come on, even if this used to be a dungeon, it’s weird for there to still be working traps left inside guild headquarters... Are there no safety inspections at this facility?”

The trap was activated in a building serving as lodgings for seminar participants. If it had gone off at the wrong time, dozens of receptionists could have been affected.

“It’s conceivable that they left a pitfall trap there deliberately as a security feature... But maybe it’s more natural to assume that it simply went unnoticed until now...”

“That reaper definitely activated it deliberately.”

“...The man in black...” Jade pondered silently for a few seconds but quickly shook his head and gave up. “Thinking about it right now won’t help anything. First, we need to get out of here.”

He had a point. Alina took a look at their new surroundings once more. “This is underground...isn’t it? This is the first I’m hearing about an area beneath guild headquarters.”

“Same here. Guild headquarters— No, even back when it was the Fortress of Ash, no one ever mentioned an underground level.”

“So then what is this place?”

“...It’s clear that we’re underground. But seeing as no one’s ever talked about it...” Jade trailed off and touched a finger to his chin before continuing. “...This might be a hidden floor within the Fortress of Ash.”

“A h-hidden floor?!” Jade’s words left Alina in shock.

Dungeon layers were generally connected by stairs, but very rarely, there were underground levels with cleverly hidden entrances. Generally, the ether was thicker belowground, drawing even stronger monsters and bumping up the difficulty level.

But that wasn’t the issue here.

“Hold on a minute. If this is a hidden layer no one’s ever noticed before, does that mean it hasn’t been cleared yet? That it’s totally new?!”

“...Yeah. I figure they’ll retract the Fortress of Ash’s cleared status and treat it like an incomplete dungeon.”

“Wh-whoawhoawhoawhoa, that’s no laughing matter! Cut it out already!” Alina dropped her shoulders dramatically and forced her lips into a smile. “I mean, everyone’s already going crazy over that other new dungeon. I haven’t got time to deal with some dungeon everyone carelessly forgot to finish a long time ago.”

“ ... ”

Jade turned away wordlessly, a grave expression on his face.

“Hey... Come on, don’t give me that look...! Th-this has got to be, like, an emergency escape route the guild built in secret or something, right? You know, the sort of thing bigwigs use to sneak out!”

“If you’re talking about a secret guild escape route, then I know of one—and it’s not a hallway. It’s a crystal gate.”

“ ... ”

“Alina. If you’re struggling with overtime, I’ll help out as much as you want.”

“But why does it always, always end up like this...?!” Alina wailed, falling to her knees. “Are you telling me that after this seminar, I’ll be returning to not just one hell but two? A new dungeon *and* an unfinished one...? Nononono, I don’t want to go back ...!”

Desperately stifling the waver in her voice, Alina held her knees and sobbed. “My hopes of eliminating my overtime were shattered by a terminal workaholic, then I had to do extra overtime only to be harassed by a ghost, and now two new dungeons have been discovered in a single day... No more. I’m done!”

As Alina fell to pieces, Jade said something that took her by surprise. “No—this place might have already been cleared.”

“Huh?”

“I can hardly smell any ether. But if we’re underground, it should be pretty thick.”

“...You mean someone has already beaten the floor boss?”

“That’s quite possible. Though it means we have yet another mystery on our hands.” Jade groaned, looking conflicted. “If someone defeated the floor boss, then why has nobody heard about this layer...?”

As Jade cocked his head dubiously, a quiet footstep sounded in the stone hallway.

“!” Alina stiffened up. Jade signaled her with his eyes and put a finger to his lips. The footsteps were coming closer, and it wasn’t just one set.

“...I hear two sets of footsteps...,” Jade informed her in a whisper.

Had more people found their way into the hidden layer, or were these two-legged monsters, like goblins?

The footsteps were traveling slowly down the straight stone hallway. Jade raised his greatshield and soundlessly drew his sword. As the footfalls grew closer, they saw a wavering light. It was an orange magic flame, steadily drawing nearer, until—

“Oh, it’s you, leader.”

—a familiar voice rang out, and Alina blinked in amazement. Out of the darkness appeared a redheaded young man in black robes, a magic light at the tip of his rod. It was the black mage Lowe.

“Jade, Alina! You’re safe!” Then Lululee appeared from behind him in her white mage kit.

Jade looked bewildered. He must have been just as surprised to see them as Alina was.

“Did you two get caught in the trap, too?” he asked.

“Yeah, basically. Though it’d be more accurate to say that we were lured in by the reaper,” Lowe replied. His back hunched, and looking exhausted, he continued. “That receptionist girl was going on about a reaper and you and Alina disappearing. Lululee shook me awake, and when we rushed off to look for you, we saw this fishy guy dressed in black.”

“That was no fishy guy, it was a reaper!” Lululee cried.

“Yeah, sure, sure, a reaper. So then we chased him right into a classic trap and fell down here.”

“Same as us,” said Alina. “...I swear, adventurers are all alike...”

“Can you blame us? Nobody would expect to find a trap in guild headquarters!”

“And, like, more importantly! Isn’t anyone wondering about that reaper?!” Lululee, who looked more terrified than anyone else, had been clenching the corner of Lowe’s robe the whole time, trembling like a small dog. “Th-that’s a r-r-r-reaper! They take adventurers to the other side!!”

“If we have to fight a reaper, I’d rather it use something a little more crazy and supernatural, not some cheap trick like luring us into a trap.”

“It must be a more down-to-earth type of reaper!”

“What the heck is a ‘down-to-earth type of reaper’...?”

Lululee’s adorable little eyes teared up, and she clenched Lowe’s robe even tighter, her voice trembling. “Maybe...we’re already on the other side!”

“No, we’re not,” said Jade. “In fact, now we know that the rumors about the reaper were fake all along.”

“Huh?” Lululee blinked in confusion.

Smiling wryly, Jade continued. “The stories about adventurers suddenly disappearing in the Fortress of Ash and never coming back...were probably caused by people getting caught in the trap and forced underground, just like us.”

“Oh... I see.”

“The monsters in hidden layers are higher level than those aboveground, so it’s less likely that an adventurer separated from their group would be able to make it back alive. Especially with an S-class dungeon. That’s why the people who disappeared never came back, and their bodies were never found in the dungeon above.”

“S-so then who was it that trapped us down here?!” Lululee pressed.

Jade's expression suddenly grew severe. "The man in black."

Lululee's breath caught in her throat, and Lowe widened his eyes. The tension in their faces made it clear that the man in black was more than just a suspicious individual.

"Wasn't the man in black the one behind the rumor incident a while back?" asked Alina. "...The one who knew about the dark gods."

"Yeah. He gave Heitz and his buddies information about the dark gods and started those rumors. And that's not all—he was probably the one putting stuff into Rufus's head in the White Tower, too. It's clear that he's working behind the scenes, using adventurers to try to revive the dark gods."

"...Why would someone like that want to trap us underground...?" Alina said. But then she got a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach and scowled. "No way. Don't tell me there's a dark god down here."

"Well... Dark gods are supposed to show up in hidden dungeons that appear on hidden quests. It's hard to imagine they'd be lying dormant in some place like this, but..." Glancing over at Lowe and Lululee, he continued. "If even you two were lured in here, as well, then the man in black is clearly trying to make us do something."

"Makes sense," Alina said, sighing inwardly.

The seminar was supposed to be a simple event—guaranteed to finish on schedule without overtime. Freed from the hassle of extra work, all she had to do was sit and listen to the lectures. But somehow, she'd gotten dragged into yet another mess.

*Why does this always, always happen...?*

Cursing her bad luck, Alina took another look around.

They were right in the middle of a nondescript hallway. The space was pretty wide, as if it had been designed for a giant, and it stretched out in a straight line without any branching paths.

"Anyway, let's get out of here," Alina said. "Did you see anything around the spot where you guys fell, Lowe?"

“Nah. We came from a dead end.”

It seemed that entrance hall wasn't the only place that still had a working pitfall trap.

That meant there was only one way to go. Jade took the lead, activating *Sigurth Beast* just in case, and they headed in the opposite direction from where Lowe and Lululee had landed.

“I can't sense any monsters.” Jade furrowed his brow as he walked down the stone path. Even with *Sigurth Beast* activated, he wasn't picking up anything. “There's hardly any scent of ether, either... Maybe we were right, and this floor *was* cleared already.”

“Correct. This place has already been cleared,” came a low murmur in answer to Jade's remark. It was a man's voice—neither Lululee's nor Lowe's.

“...!”

Alina's breath caught in her throat. The voice had come from behind, echoing along where they'd just stood. She quickly stopped in her tracks and turned.

“...Wha...?” Jade's shocked voice rang out in the silent hallway. There, behind them, stood a man clad in black robes.

“Th-the man in black?!”

He appeared without a sound, like a ghost, leaving Jade speechless.

He was right where they’d been walking a few seconds earlier. Jade had activated *Sigurth Beast*. No matter how dark it was, there was no way the man could have passed by him without his noticing.

“How...?” Jade trailed off, hastily raising his greatshield.

Gazing at the man who had appeared so abruptly, Jade felt the pieces jumbled up in his head suddenly fall into place.

He recalled what he’d learned from questioning Aiden, a member of Heitz’s party, who had been involved with the man in black during the Centennial Festival. He’d said the man in black appeared soundlessly, like a phantom, and would vanish right in front of them once he was done with his business.

Jade hadn’t paid it any attention at the time, figuring Aiden was just using a dramatic turn of phrase to emphasize how creepy the man was. But there was only one way a person could do that.

*They would have to stop time.*

If the man stopped time, nobody would perceive what happened in the interval before time started moving again. He could move as he pleased while time was stopped, and from the perspective of those around him, it would appear as if he’d teleported.

Jade knew one man who could pull that off—who had used it to rise up the ranks and become the strongest adventurer in the land.

*No... It can’t be!*

Jade clenched his teeth. He’d been agonizing over the possibility this whole time, but now that it seemed certain, he was in denial. Jade could see the man’s friendly smile in his mind’s eye. He remembered the man’s reassuring presence



as he supported them during hostile guild meetings, when they'd had no other allies.

He wouldn't do something like this.

More importantly, his skill was a Sigurth skill. It shouldn't affect Alina, who possessed a Dia skill. No matter how dark this underground hallway was, he doubted she would fail to notice such an alien presence.

"Just what is your goal, man in black...?!" Reining in his agitation, Jade demanded an explanation. "Tell us your name!"

*Please.* The word rippled through him like a prayer.

The man in black, of course, stayed silent. His eyes were fixed on Jade from beneath the black hood pulled low over his face. A chill ran up Jade's spine. He felt no hostility or murderous intent from the man—only eerie silence.

The man was so strange, so mysterious. But that was the only thing holding Jade together—because the man he knew wasn't like that at all.

After a lengthy silence, the man in black finally muttered, "...My name, hmmm?"

Jade's breath caught in his throat.

With *Sigurth Beast*, Jade perceived the man's voice with an expanded sense of hearing. And the moment he heard it, that low, slightly husky yet familiar voice...

...Jade felt something slice into his heart. His last ray of hope had gone out.

"There's no need to introduce myself. You all know me already," the man said before slowly removing his hood.

The face that appeared was that of a man in his prime. He had tanned skin and deep wrinkles, close-cropped hair, sharp eyes, and a rugged face.

"...G...Guild.....master...?"

Any one of them could have said it.

The man before them was undoubtedly the leader of the Adventurers Guild, Glen Garia.

“...I-it can’t be,” Alina said hoarsely. “Stop joking around. This isn’t funny...”

“Li’l miss.”

Glen’s voice was quiet. But the familiar words sounded just as they always had.

Yet his calm demeanor despite the situation, his refusal to explain, his defiance—it all felt wrong.

It was like he’d already made his peace with what he was doing.

“Sorry for everything,” he said. “This will be the last time. I’m counting on you.”

“I said to stop joking around...!” Alina squared her shoulders and tried to step forward, but a hand shot out from the side to stop her—it was Jade’s.

He was gazing straight at Glen. His dark gray eyes wavered with conflicting emotions. Alina couldn’t tell what was going through his mind just then.

“...So it was you after all, Guildmaster...,” Jade said bitterly.

A sad smile crossed Glen’s face. “I suppose I should have expected you to figure it out. That was what you wanted to ask me this afternoon by the statues, wasn’t it?”

“...Yeah.”

“I avoided it on reflex by bringing up my daughter. I’m sorry. You may not believe me, but it hurts to lie to you kids. I was relieved when you backed off. You really are a nice guy. Ha-ha!” Glen opened his mouth wide and laughed amiably. It was so normal that it felt out of place.

Once he was done laughing, however, his expression quickly grew sharp. “... But you’re too naive.”

“...!”

“As soon as doubt crept into your mind, you should have interrogated me or taken a thorough look into my background. I might be the guildmaster, and you might trust me completely, but you can’t let that blind you. You have a tendency toward wishful thinking. You know from personal experience just how dangerous the man in black is.”

Glen pointed a finger at Jade, who was at a loss for words, and whispered darkly, “That naïveté will eventually get your comrades killed. I’m sure of it.”

“ ... ”

After a long silence, Jade managed to squeeze out a few words. “...Explain yourself...” He stopped and bit his lip. “Explain yourself!!” he spat, his voice strained. “Explain everything you’ve done...so that we can understand!”

His hands, clenched into fists, were trembling.

It was the first time Alina had ever heard Jade yell like he was ready to cry.

“I get it, okay?” he said. “Even I know it was stupid of me not to do what needed to be done when I started suspecting you... But I wanted to believe in you...”

“ ... ”

“Because...you believed in us, right up until the end...! Was that a lie, too? Were you just using us as pawns, just like Rufus and Heitz? Is that it...?! ”

Jade’s pained question echoed coldly through the stone hallway.

He had probably suspected that Glen was the man in black for some time now. He must have prepared for the worst. But now that the truth had been thrust into his face, he was unable to suppress his emotions.

“ ... ”

Glen fell silent again as he stared at Jade. For just an instant, his sharp gaze was lit with a kind and tranquil light. But a beat later, he vanished.

“...! Where—?! ”

“Follow me. There’s something I want to show you.”

They heard a voice from behind. By the time they turned around, Glen was

already walking farther down the hallway.

*“Tch. Wait!”*

Jade chased after him on reflex. But after a few steps, he came to a stop. He wasn't so foolish as to lose his cool and run headlong into danger. The truth Glen had just revealed, however, had rattled him to the core.

Ignoring the others' shouts of dismay, Glen strode off without another word.

*“...Dammit!!”* Jade's rough voice was absorbed into the darkness, and a heavy silence fell over the hallway once more.

Alina—no, all of them—were left standing, unable to decide their next move. They needed some time to come to grips with reality.

By the time Alina glanced down the hallway again, Glen had already vanished into the darkness.

*“...So...you were right, leader...,”* Lowe muttered, breaking the silence. His voice was unusually low for a guy who was always cracking jokes. “What the hell is that old man thinking?” His flat, emotionless tone made it clear how angry he was.

*“Th-this can't be true...!”* Lululee hung her head. She was clenching her rod so tightly that her hands went white. Alina couldn't see her expression, but her voice shook as she desperately strung her words together. “I won't believe it...! There must be some mistake...! This has to be a misunderstanding... Right, Jade?!” Tears welled up in her eyes as she clung to her party leader, who was also hanging his head.

Jade looked away, his lips barely moving. “There's no mistake. You saw it, too.”

*“But—”*

“No matter what anyone says, this is reality...!” he spat, and Lululee was unable to reply.

*“No way...”* Alina couldn't think of anything to say, either.

She had no words to comfort them.

Their relationships with Glen must have been much deeper than hers. Shock, anger, and sadness over his betrayal had to be clawing at their hearts—along with the foolish hope that even now, it might yet turn out to be nothing but a bad dream.

In the end, all Alina could do was ask, “...Jade, you knew that the guildmaster was the man in black?”

After a moment of thought, Jade explained, his voice heavy. “...During the Centennial Festival, Heitz was allowed into not just the underground prison but the underground book storage. The only person with the authority to access both of those is Glen, the guildmaster...”

“...I see.”

That meant that ever since the Centennial Festival, Jade had been keeping this awful possibility in his heart, dealing with the stress of suspecting a friend and fighting all alone. It frustrated Alina that she hadn’t been able to see it. He had seemed completely normal to her.

“What are we gonna do, leader?” Lowe asked. His gaze flicked down the hall in the direction Glen had vanished. “There’s no use standing here and speculating, right?” he said, entrusting the decision to Jade.

Jade, too, was glaring into the darkness of the hallway. It wouldn’t be difficult to follow Glen’s presence, here in the quiet underground passage. He was somewhere ahead of them, farther down the path. “...There’s a chance this is a trap, but...”

Even using the word *trap* made Jade scowl in disgust. He’d shared a friendly conversation with the man only the day before—no, just a few hours ago. It was no wonder he felt like this.

“...Let’s go.”

Jade’s eyes seemed to say, *We don’t have any other choice*. Alina felt the same way. They had to find out why Glen was doing this—why he *had been* doing this all along.

Jade made his way along the dark hallway. The path continued without branching off, eventually leading to an iron door that opened just a crack. After going through it, they reached a wide-open space with nothing in it.

“The boss room...?” Alina muttered dubiously.

Lowe turned up his rod’s magic light, making it slightly brighter. Meanwhile, Jade came to a stop and took a quick look around with *Sigurth Beast*.

The room was like a giant, square, undecorated prison, with spots of damage here and there. It looked like a fierce battle had left parts of the stone walls crumbling and pushed up flagstones to expose raw earth underneath.

“Originally, this was the boss room, yes.” A voice came back to them from the silence.

It was Glen.

He was standing in the center of the room with his back to them, in a spot where the candlelight just barely reached him.

“And it’s also the place where the Silver Sword of two generations ago... where my party died,” he said, turning slowly to face them.

The spot where he stood was the most intensely damaged area in the room. It must have been the center of the fight; the flagstones all around it were completely destroyed. The area was charred black, and some of the broken stones had melted in places. Not a single blade of grass was growing in the exposed earth—something had turned it barren.

And behind Glen, they could see a small grave.

There wasn’t much to it at all—just a little mound of earth piled in a spot where the flagstones were missing, with three old weapons stuck in the ground like grave markers.

There was a sword, its blade broken, a rod with a shattered gem, and a

melted healer's staff that could no longer maintain its original shape. All were sooty and battered, speaking vividly of what sort of fight had once transpired in this room.

It seemed far too sorrowful a resting place for three celebrated heroes.

"Sorry for making you wait so long and with nothing but these crude graves." Glen let out a dry laugh. "The rest of you can relax. There's no boss here anymore. We defeated it. This layer has been cleared."

"...What's the meaning of this?" Jade asked, frowning. He still couldn't believe that the man in front of him was Glen. But nevertheless, he felt in his bones that the man possessed the intimidating aura of a seasoned adventurer. "I thought Silver Sword died on the top floor of the Fortress of Ash... Are you saying they reached this hidden layer?"

"Hey, slow down there, Jade. I was always going to tell you kids everything, once the time came."

"..."

"I lied when I said that Silver Sword died on the top floor. After we cleared the uppermost layer, we found this hidden area, and then we died there, in battle."

The room went dead silent.

Jade couldn't believe that this lonely room that no one had noticed was where the members of Silver Sword had valiantly met their end.

"We were a single blow away from defeating the boss... It happened in an instant. In the space of a heartbeat, everyone was burnt to a crisp. I'm just thankful they were able to die without suffering."

"...So it self-destructed."

Jade looked at the floor. Sometimes, monsters would choose to self-destruct when they realized they weren't long for this world, using up their remaining life force for a huge, final attack in hopes of taking the enemy with them in death. However, it was very rare for a monster with the potential to become a boss—one that was both powerful and possessed some intellect—to attempt such a move.

“As luck would have it, I escaped the attack. And that’s when I learned something.”

“What?”

“A way to revive people.”

“Revive people...?!”

A dark flame lit in Glen’s eyes. Jade caught a glimpse of the man’s cold determination and swallowed.

Glen ignored the implicit question, continuing flatly. “When I returned from the Fortress of Ash, I hid the existence of this underground layer and made the former dungeon into guild headquarters. All of it was to protect this place. I had to prevent this layer from changing as much as I could.”

“Keep it...from changing...?” Alina furrowed her brow quizzically.

Glen laughed at her. “Did you know, li’l miss? The more a place changes, the more power you need to turn back time there.”

Suddenly, he had brought up the seemingly unrelated subject of time.

“For example, think of cities or the houses people live in... When a place is constantly in a state of flux, its ‘time’ accumulates a greater amount of information. Conversely, wastelands, fields, and empty ruins—such locations accumulate very little information. You don’t need as much power for places like those. You can go back even further.”

“...You’re trying to turn back time here, in this boss room?”

Jade had finally realized what Glen was after.

He had preserved this underground layer exactly as it was, without telling anyone. He had deliberately used the Fortress of Ash as the guild’s headquarters, sealing the entrance to the underground level to avoid anyone going inside, even by chance. All of it had been to turn back the clock in this underground layer even further.

“You’re very sharp. That’s exactly right.”

“But with your powers, even if you succeed, all you can do is observe. What’s



the point of—?”

“It’s true that with a Sigurth skill, the most you can do is observe. But going further and modifying the past isn’t just a flight of fancy. And it is the *only* way to revive people.”

Glen spoke in a low voice filled with certainty. “It’s simple. I just have to turn back time in this room to before my party died and do things differently. With the power of a god core, it will be possible.”

“A god core...?”

“I became the guildmaster in order to awaken the dark gods and retrieve their cores. The leader of the Adventurers Guild manages every quest and every dungeon—it was the perfect position from which to find the hidden quests that would lead me to the dark gods.”

“...”

“And yet despite searching for over ten years, never mind the god cores, I couldn’t even find one adventurer capable of uncovering a hidden quest, much less of fighting the dark gods. That’s why when I stumbled upon you, li’l miss, I thanked the gods for the first time in my life.”

Glen shifted his gaze to Alina, and a smile crossed his face as he reminisced. “When I first fought you, you broke through my Sigurth skill, *Sigurth Chronos*. Though I had to keep the dark gods secret, I couldn’t help blurting out...that you could beat a devil. I was certain that you would be a match for even the dark gods.”

Suddenly, Jade realized something.

“When you first fought Alina... So you approached her with the intention of using her, right from the start...?” As he spoke, for the first time, Jade felt something black and nasty swirling around deep in his chest. It was like his heart was being battered. In a flash, his brain ran cold, his thoughts jumbled, and his voice began to shake. “You were planning on making Alina fight the dark gods right from the very start?” His rage was clear and intense.

Glen must have picked up on his fury, but his expression didn’t change.

“...Hey, Jade?” Alina sounded uneasy as she called his name—she must have realized something was off.

But Jade’s head was blanking out, and even her voice couldn’t reach him.

Glen’s voice remained flat. “That’s right. And it wasn’t just her. Even if they were bad people, I made use of human lives for the sake of my goal. I zeroed in on Rufus and Heitz...the kind of people whose death wouldn’t cause much of a fuss. I knew they wanted Dia skills.”

“That’s not what I’m asking!”

Glen’s answer only added to Jade’s irritation.

In the White Tower and during the Centennial Festival, Alina had been forced to fight the dark gods. She had been driven into a corner and given no choice. And she had fought, even if it meant abandoning the things she was looking forward to, the things she wanted to keep secret, the peaceful life she prized above all else.

The smile Alina had shown him during the Centennial Festival flitted through his mind. She was always working so hard to achieve the peaceful life she dreamed of. Though she complained and cursed, she worked harder and more seriously than anyone else—and Jade knew that best of all.

He understood what a painful decision it had been for her to give up on that.

If all of it had been instigated by Glen—

“...Well, I suppose there was one thing I didn’t account for. I never expected that the powerful fighter I’d find would be a receptionist. Things would’ve gone a lot faster if she’d been an adventurer. I really struggled to drag this li’l miss out to where I needed her to battle the dark gods.” Ignoring Jade’s anger, Glen continued. “That’s why I had you fight them instead, Jade. I figured she wouldn’t be able to abandon you when you were about to be killed. She’s so kind, I was sure she’d take pity on you and fight on your behalf—”

The moment Jade heard those words, rage finally wiped his mind clean. “How dare you!” Without a thought in his head, he leaped at Glen, grabbed him by the lapels, and punched him as hard as he could in the side of the face.

“H-hey! Leader!”

Lowe hastily cut in to stop him, but Jade still couldn't cool down. When Glen didn't resist and silently took the punch, Jade yanked him up again by his lapels and bared his teeth.

“You, you bastard...! Do you understand how Alina felt as she fought...?!” He was no longer thinking about how the man in front of him had been trying to revive the dark gods. Jade clenched his fist, giving himself over to rage.

“You think she fought out of pity?! Just try and say that again!”

Alina had fought the dark gods because she'd grown attached to the members of Silver Sword and hadn't been able to abandon them. That was certainly part of it. But Alina carried a deeper sorrow, too.

*“Don't die, okay, Jade?”*

She'd murmured those words to him. Her greatest fear was losing the people close to her. She never wanted to experience the pain of losing someone she cared about ever again.

And Glen had exploited her pain for his own purposes.

“Go ahead, hit me as much as you want. I abandoned my humanity long ago.”

His cold declaration only made Jade angrier. “What'd you—?” He raised his fist, but someone grabbed his arm from behind, and he snapped out of it.

“Jade. That's enough.”

It was Alina. With her jade-green eyes fixed on him, his rage rapidly cooled. Alina pulled Jade back, putting some distance between him and Glen.

“That was where I was supposed to get mad,” she said.

“...Sorry...” As he weakly apologized, Jade finally managed to calm down.

Alina glared at Glen in Jade's place and said flatly, “In other words, me getting caught in one mess after another was all part of your plan.”

“...Yes, that's right. I do feel bad about it. You found me the hidden quests, defeated the dark gods, and brought me back a god core—I'll be in your debt for the rest of my life.”

“If that’s how you feel, then I’d like you to give this all a rest.”

“Sorry...but I can’t do that.” Glen’s gaze dropped back to the grave markers. “I made up my mind that I would do this. No matter what I had to sacrifice.”

Head now cool, Jade began to think again.

Glen had to be saying all this to get Jade worked up. No—maybe he meant to rile up not only Jade but Alina as well.

He was acting cold toward them deliberately—because in his mind, he’d already steeled himself.

He intended to fight them.

“...Glen. If you were after a god core, then why didn’t you end things as soon as we got the first one from Silha?” Jade asked the question that was on his mind. “Why did you need to revive another?”

If acquiring a god core was Glen’s goal, then it should have been complete the moment they defeated Silha. And yet Glen had once again become the man in black and made contact with Heitz, spurring the adventurers to search for the next hidden quest. Jade couldn’t figure it out.

“...”

Glen instantly shut his mouth and averted his gaze. Then, after a few seconds of silence, he said quietly, “It was because *they* finally allowed me to use one of the god cores.”

“...They?”

Jade frowned at the unexpected reply.

Heedless, Glen continued. “The one who taught me about the dark gods—and who showed me a way to revive people. *They* gave me a reason to live when I was lost in despair. My determination to redo the past is the only thing that’s kept me alive all this time...,” he said, a lonely ring to his voice.

The lone survivor, left behind by his party, laid a loving hand on the grave markers of his friends. “I’ve accepted their death, in my own way. They gave their lives for victory and are toasting each other in heaven. At the time, the Fortress of Ash was called the most difficult dungeon of them all, and I’m sure

that's the kind of place they'd have wanted to die in... But my daughter's death... Lynn's death was the one thing I couldn't accept," Glen said quietly, wringing each word from between clenched teeth.

"To obtain the power of a dark god and revive my daughter—that's what I'm after. That's why I've been going around as the man in black."

"..."

Glen's eyes blazed quietly. Fixed with that look, Jade couldn't say a word. Deep in those flames, he caught a glimpse of the man's wild obsession.

Glen's Silver Sword had died fifteen years ago. Since then, Glen had played the role of the friendly guildmaster to a tee, without anyone the wiser. Immediately after losing his cherished daughter, he had tucked away his sadness and hurt, sealed away the hidden layer, and made the Fortress of Ash, a monument to his painful memories, into guild headquarters. And all the while, he'd been coldly implementing his schemes and using human lives like tools as the man in black. Everything had been for this day, when he would revive his daughter.

He was obsessed—there was no other way to put it. He'd repressed his emotions and resorted to wild, aberrant behavior. Or perhaps clinging to that twisted desire had been the only thing keeping him mentally balanced.

In his confusion, Jade suddenly recalled what Fili had almost said to him earlier that day.

If it was for the sake of his daughter, he might be willing to do something foolish.

Jade didn't know how much of Glen's behavior Fili had noticed, but perhaps she had sensed something was wrong with him, in her own way.

*"I'm proud of her."*

The words Glen had said to him that afternoon in front of the statues and the smile of his Jade had never seen before—neither that of an adventurer nor a guildmaster—had they come from the heart? Or had even that been an act for the sake of carrying out his goal...?

“...Still, what good would a god core do if you had one...?” Jade felt crushed under Glen’s terrifying force of will, but he continued to desperately move his lips. “It’s nothing more than a dark god’s heart, made by the ancients!”

“Jade, you misunderstand something. A god core is not the heart of a dark god—it’s what makes them. *By burying a god core in someone’s body, you turn a human into a dark god.*”

At that, Glen rolled up the sleeve of his robe.

Beneath it was the muscular arm of an adventurer. He had a number of deep scars, an impressive battle history carved into him.

And there, buried in the back of his left hand was a black rock that had no place on a human body. Its slick sheen contained a large crack, but white light occasionally ran through it, as if to say there was no problem. The strange little rock had an outsized effect on the room.

The air around Alina and the others seemed to freeze.

“A...a god core...,” Jade muttered, trailing off hoarsely.

Why—*how* did a god core get here? Why was it in Glen’s left hand? Jade was so confused that he couldn’t accept what he was seeing.

A god core granted a dark god its power.

Each core contained an incredible number of Dia skills and fed off human souls. It could bestow a number of Dia skills equal to the number of souls the dark god had eaten. It was beyond anything known or imagined in the modern era.

*“You turn a human into a dark god.”*

Glen’s words slammed hard into Jade’s brain.

The cruel-natured dark gods they’d fought up until now, with their twisted flesh—they had been “living relics” that only closely resembled people. That was why they had been so difficult to defeat.



*But it can't be... It can't—*

“The dark gods...were humans...?!”

“That’s right. You’ve been fighting *people* who abandoned their humanity and implanted a god core into their bodies. Just like I have now...!”

Glen clenched his left wrist and took a slow breath. Then, with the firm light of determination in his eyes, he said, “After I lost my party and my daughter, a certain individual told me of the god cores—of the black relics that can turn a person into a god, giving you incredible power in exchange for your own soul...!”

Glen’s voice gradually grew more forceful and acquired a kind of seething rage. “It’s been over ten years now since I came here myself. When I made these crude graves, I arrived at a decision—that the next time I visited them would be when I fulfilled my goal. I will get back my daughter, Lynn. No matter what sacrifices have to be made—”

“The dead don’t come back!” Alina cut him off forcefully, as if she couldn’t take any more. “I know you understand that, right?”

“...Alina.”

She looked straight at Glen with her jade-green eyes. Hearing her words, quiet and without anger or anything else, Jade felt his chest constrict.

Alina had once lost an adventurer she knew named Shroud. She must have understood Glen’s feelings—his willingness to abandon his humanity and become a dark god to revive his beloved child—better than anyone here.

Jade had heard pain in her voice.

“...There’s something I have to tell her,” Glen said in answer to her question. But his eyes were not on Alina as he gave his reply. They were gently narrowed, as if he were gazing at a dear memory.

“I used to be an unforgiving man. Because of my stupid pride, there are things I never managed to say to her. Even if that’s all I can do, I have to tell her...,” Glen muttered weakly.

Hanging his head, he started to speak in murmured tones about the past.



Seven years had passed since his teacher Genon, the Swordmaster, had thrust Lynn on him practically by force.

“Daaad! Didn’t I tell you to stop with the scary scowls?”

Though Lynn had been a quiet child at first, by the time she was fifteen, she’d become quite outspoken. Though of course, she’d always been an endlessly cheery and talkative girl—the type Glen disliked most.

“How many years have I been telling you to stop calling me ‘Dad’?” he shot back. “Is it ever going to sink in?”

“We’re at home. Nobody’s listening.” She quibbled with him and stuck out her tongue, to which Glen responded with a merciless punch.

“Ow! I can’t believe you’d hit a girl in the head!”

“Stop babbling and listen, Lynn. The job this time is a big dungeon. I probably won’t be back for two weeks. If I don’t come back by then, there’s some money in the back of the drawer. Make that last for the time being and contact my master—”

“Come on! Every time you head into a dungeon, you act like you’re reading me your last will and testament. Cut it out already. So long as you come back safe and sound, that’s enough for me.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think. This is training. More importantly, don’t slack on your drills while I’m gone. You need to train every day to be able to put food on the table as an adventurer. Hurry up and learn to support yourself so you can live on your own.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. In the future, I’ll join Silver Sword, too, and support you...”

“Listen here...”

“...because I love you, Dad!”

Lynn wasn't listening to a word Glen said, and it was pissing him off, but that little addition at the end startled him so much, he forgot all his irritation.

"What the heck is that supposed to mean?"

"You're always saying an adventurer never knows when their time will come, right? So I was thinking—I've gotta say I love you whenever I can."

"...You shouldn't tease grown-ups."

"When you love someone, you've got to say so, or they won't know! What about you? Come on, say it—*I love you too, Lynn.*"

He didn't know where she'd gotten such nonsense, but her smile as she said it was as warm and bright as the sun. For Glen, however, phrases like "I love you" set his teeth on edge, and as far back as he could remember, he'd never said such a thing in his life. Scowling, he shoved Lynn aside.

"Why won't you resent me?" he blurted out.

Lynn widened her eyes and blinked in astonishment at the unexpected question. The way she looked at him, without a sliver of doubt in her eyes, rubbed him the wrong way, and he launched into a rather immature rant, especially considering he was talking to a fifteen-year-old child.

"People tend to run out of patience with me fast, and everyone who's ever been involved with me has left in a hurry. I thought it would be the same with you, but then seven years passed in the blink of an eye. Listen up, okay? The only reason I took you in was because my master managed to foist you off on me by calling it 'training' or whatever. It wasn't because I was worried about your safety or because I sympathized with your circumstances. So when are you gonna start resenting me and get the hell out of my house?"

At Glen's cold, merciless words, Lynn fell silent for a while. But not once did she look sad. In fact, a warm smile crossed her face as she said, "I know what truly scary people are like, you know."

"What?"

"When I was on the streets, none of the adults would look at me. Even though it was cold, and I was hungry, and I asked for help, saying I was gonna die—they

all pretended they couldn't see and passed me by like I was a ghost."

"..."

"You complain and insist you're only doing this as 'training,' but you've stayed with me. And you paid attention to me and talked with me, too. That made me really happy. And that's why...I love you." Lynn smiled shyly.

Glen couldn't bear to look at her—a face like that could easily silence any aggressive remark he might make.

It unsettled him, so he put on a big scowl and turned away from her. "I'll be back," he said.

Ever since taking Lynn in, he'd started to feel less and less like himself. She made him feel emotions he'd never experienced before.

No matter how coldly he treated her, it never affected her—instead, she'd meet his rebuffs with a smile. Glen was desperate to put distance between the two of them. He was scared—scared of someone who refused to reject him.

Lynn became an adventurer, taking on the role of a healer. Glen hadn't expected much out of an orphan without a decent education, but she was a surprisingly quick learner. In only a few years, she mastered everything Glen had to teach her: how to fight monsters, how to work with a party, how to travel through a dungeon. Eventually, she was fortunate enough to manifest a Sigurth skill useful for a healer, and after that, she made a decent name for herself.

For the first time in his life, Glen felt pride.

He'd won titles for himself, but even they had never made him feel like this.

After he took in Lynn, the other members of Silver Sword started saying things like, "Have you loosened up lately, Glen?"

"...I suppose I have been stretching."

"Tee-hee. You never would have said that before. You'd have said, 'Don't ask questions unrelated to work,' and ended the conversation. The Lynn effect is amazing."

"She's got nothing to do with it."

His party had never teased him before. Was this proof of him loosening up, like she said?

“...Hey,” Glen muttered to his amused comrade. “...I, uh, trust you guys, you know. Thanks for always supporting me.”

The others looked shocked. “S-seriously, what’s gotten into you, Glen?”

“There are some things you have to say out loud.” Glen snorted, flushing a little as he turned away.

Saying things like that was embarrassing, but once the words were out of his mouth, he felt surprisingly good. Suddenly, thoughts he’d had not too long ago, like that it was pointless to talk more than necessary with his party, felt childish.

*Oh. Was I just afraid of other people...?*

Abruptly, he found it all made sense.

Until then, Glen hadn’t seen much difference between humans and monsters. People were like monsters that rejected and attacked him, and he’d been fighting those monsters all this time. Life had been like a constant battlefield where he had to cut down other people to win a place for himself to belong.

But was the world really like that? Hadn’t he been the one frightened of those monsters and constantly fleeing from them? All he had to do was pluck up his courage, put down his weapon, and walk toward them. If he did that, the people would cease to be monsters. In fact, they’d never been monsters in the first place.

*Is this...something Lynn taught me, too?*

At this point, he was forced to acknowledge her influence.

It was all thanks to Lynn, who would declare that she loved him on a whim and who had stayed by his side and refused to leave him. If not for her, Glen would have continued fighting invisible monsters his whole life.

*I’m going to apologize to Lynn—and then I’ll thank her for everything,* he thought, growing restless.

But because of how close she was—closer than anyone else—even thinking about telling her made him incredibly anxious. But whenever they weren’t

working, they were always together at home, so there would be plenty of opportunities to tell her—or so Glen foolishly believed at the time. Reassured, he decided to put off relaying this most important message.

“Oh yeah, they’ve decided on a new healer,” his party member said, and they summoned the adventurer in question into the room. When he saw who walked in, Glen was struck speechless. He was so shocked, he thought his eyeballs would pop out.

Standing there was a girl who had only just turned fifteen—it was Lynn.

“Eh-heh! How do you like that?!”

Seeing Glen’s bewildered expression, Lynn smirked as if to say, *I got you!*

She couldn’t have known that in just a few short months, she would be gone from this world.

“Lynn came off the street,” Glen murmured. To Alina, the small smile on his lips looked like that of a father talking about his darling daughter. “We weren’t connected by blood or anything else, but she was my child. Everyone raised a fuss when she joined Silver Sword, but she got in on her own merit. Of course she did. I raised her myself as an adventurer. Naturally, she was great at it.” There was pride in his voice but also endless pain.

“Sorry, li’l miss—for dragging you into this mess. I know you only wanted to be a receptionist,” Glen said suddenly. “I underestimated you at first. I thought you were an idiot for doing all that overtime when, with a Dia skill, you could have made plenty of money as an adventurer. I thought you were a foolish girl who couldn’t see beyond short-term stability, who couldn’t think for herself. I figured that would make you easy to use—”

“...”

“But after seeing you defeat two dark gods—I realized you weren’t foolish. No, you’re a warrior with an exceptionally strong spirit. You must have chosen to become a receptionist out of an unshakable conviction you refuse to abandon.”

“...”

“But in spite of that, I dragged you into trouble again and again. And for that, I’m sorry. It’s just as Jade said—I used your determination; I trampled all over it.”

Alina couldn’t say a thing.

Jade took a step forward in her place. “...Glen. Do you mean to kill us to gain Dia skills?”

“No. I never planned to devour you guys. I don’t need any new Dia skills. Once I become a dark god, my original skill will mutate into a Dia skill.”

“...Mutate?” Alina muttered unconsciously. That word reminded her of something.

Alina’s Dia skill, *Dia Break*, had mysteriously transformed a number of times in the past. The silver war hammer had sparkled gold, scattering particles of the same color as it surpassed the dark gods’ Dia skills.

“Li’l miss, this is the end... I know it’s bold of me to ask this, but will you hear out my final request?”

“Request...?”

“I will now offer up my soul to activate the god core. Eventually, it will consume even my will, and I’ll be nothing but a dark god—no longer human. When that happens...make sure to kill me.”

Alina swallowed, but by then Glen had already raised his left hand into the air.

“Chant: *Dia Chronos*!”

In response to the invocation, there was a flash of powerful light. A white magic sigil deployed under Glen’s feet. White light ran around his god core, and right before their eyes, it grew more powerful and surged out toward them in a great wave.

“A Dia skill—?!” Jade cried out in confusion.

That hadn’t been Glen’s Sigurth skill, *Sigurth Chronos*—it had taken the prefix *Dia* to make *Dia Chronos*.

“*Ngh, ahh, gwahhh...!*”

But unlike the dark gods they’d seen previously, Glen clenched his left arm as his face twisted amid the intense pain coursing through his body.

His left arm, which held the core, seemed to be ignoring his will and thrashing about. This had to be the price for such all-consuming power. Glen desperately tried to rein in his arm as it flailed around like it was possessed by a monster. But he never tried to stop the skill.

Eventually, the cold stone room was enveloped in white, and everything disappeared from view.

The light had blinded Alina, and by the time her vision recovered, everyone else had vanished.

“...Huh? Jade? Guys...?”

She was definitely in the same boss room from a moment ago. But Jade and the others were gone, and instead, the space was filled with a nasty charred smell.

“...Lynn...”

With a start, Alina noticed a man in front of her, on his knees and crying.

His hair was cropped short, and his back was enormous. He was wounded and covered in blood, and abandoned at his side was a battered and chipped greatsword.

It was Glen.

He was younger than the Glen Alina knew, still a young man. And in front of him was a big lump of ash, the source of the intense smell. Lying around him were other similarly blackened bits of ash.

Glen was hunched over, scraping together the black stuff as if he were possessed.

“Lynn...Lynn...!” He broke down, weeping madly as he frantically gathered up the ashen remains. It was as if he were collecting mud to form a doll. “Why, why did you have to die...?!”

It was all too easy for Alina to guess what the ash was, with its awful smell of burnt flesh.

“I still haven’t...told you anything... I never...told you...!”

As Glen devotedly gathered up the ashen remnants, a few crumbled under his fingers the moment he touched them. But Glen picked up every single one of the pieces and clutched them to his chest, wetting them with his tears.

“Lynn...Lynn...ah...ah... *Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!*”

The wail of a father who had just lost his daughter echoed through the cold



dungeon.

“ ... ”

Alina bit her lip and reflexively turned away from the painful sight. She couldn't stand to listen to his pitiful cries.

“Ahhh, poor Glen.”

Suddenly, she heard another person's voice.

Alina turned back with a start to find that while she wasn't looking, a man had come to rub Glen's back. The man crouched and murmured into Glen's ear as he cried and wailed.

“I'll let you in on a secret—a way to rid yourself of this sadness...”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!”

A man’s powerful scream rattled her eardrums, and Alina woke with a start.

She was still in that same cold stone space. But the nasty burnt smell was gone.

Before her eyes was Glen in his older, more familiar form.

“Why, why can’t I go further...?!” Glen glared hatefully at his left hand, his face twisted in agony. The black god core shone with a slick light, emitting an aura even more intense than before.

“...”

Alina took a swift look around. Jade, Lululee, and Lowe were there, too.

What she had just seen was definitely a scene from this room’s past, likely the effect of Glen’s Dia skill, *Dia Chronos*.

“Just a little more...! If I can just reach the time when Lynn was still alive... I’m almost there...”

Panting heavily, Glen slumped to his knees. Even so, his eyes still blazed hot and bright. He clenched his teeth and lifted his face.

“What was that? What happened...?!” Alina could hear Jade’s cry of confusion.

Time had started again for Lululee and Lowe as well. It seemed like the rest of them hadn’t seen everything Alina had.

“...! Glen!” Shaking off her doubts, Alina kicked off the ground.

“Skill Activate: *Dia Break*!”

Clasping her war hammer as it appeared, she leaped toward Glen, aiming for his left hand. If she could just do something about that god core—

She simply couldn't bear to see any more of this pitiful sight.

"Glen! You better not get mad at me, even if I crush that left hand of yours...!" Alina swung her war hammer down toward Glen's arm.

But with a great *boom*, the room-shaking strike smashed only the stone beneath him. Glen had vanished instantly.

"He's gone...?!"

"...I'll try one more time." She could hear Glen's mournful voice from the distance.

She looked over in a panic to see that he had moved to the corner of the room without her realizing it. She hadn't been able to follow his movements at all. Before the shock could set in, she launched herself at Glen once more.

"Even if you manage to change the past and bring your daughter back... If you have to die in exchange, it won't make her happy...!" Alina yelled as loudly as she could, then bit her lip in frustration. "You should understand better than anyone the pain of losing someone you love!"

The truth was, no matter how much you wished it, they were never coming back. Once the intense emotions blew through you like a gale, all that remained was your empty heart. You came to hate the things you'd loved. You gave up on your dreams.

Did he want her to suffer that same pain?

Alina swung down the war hammer on Glen's left arm, but again her blow failed to connect, merely smashing into the stone floor.

"Ngh...!"

"You kids wouldn't understand," Glen murmured, once again far away from her. Alina panicked and spun around. Glen was now sitting beside the graves of his allies.

"A parent can die for their children." Glen clenched his teeth and dug his nails into the ground. The blood vessels of his left hand—the one with the core—stood out, inflamed. Blood pulsed through them so hard it looked painful.

"No matter how much blood stains these hands...even if I have to renounce

my humanity...and become a monster...! If my death and defilement is all it takes to bring her back..." Awful determination blazed on Glen's pallid face as he rose to his feet. "If Lynn and her smile will live on, I'll give my life gladly!"

Glen's expression, more intense than any she'd seen before, struck Alina speechless.

He was serious.

She would never be able to stop him.

"Chant...*Dia Chronos!*"

Glen activated his skill once again. Instantly, a powerful white light filled the room, and the brightness of it forced Alina to close her eyes.

But the glow didn't last very long.

When Alina pried open her eyes, it wasn't a scene from the past she saw. In fact, the light rapidly withered until it vanished altogether.

"...?"

"...Ha...haa.....ha, ha-ha..."

She could hear Glen's hoarse laugh.

Seeming to come to some realization, he curved his lips upward. He'd slumped to his knees, out of strength. A self-deprecating laugh bubbled up from his mouth, and his feeble eyes, their light extinguished, gazed into thin air.

Tears dribbled from his eyes.

"I abandoned my humanity... I even used people's lives and their pain like tools...and this is all I have to show for it?"

Alina saw that, at some point, a lump of blackened remains had appeared in Glen's arms, and he embraced it, trembling weakly.

It was no longer even in the shape of a person.

"...!"

It was the same thing Alina had seen in that vision of the past. Most likely, if Glen had been able to turn back time just a little further, to just a moment

earlier, the lump might still have retained its shape.

Glen embraced the remains, as if they were the dearest thing in the world. They were more fragile than even a clay doll, crumbling so easily, falling from Glen's fingers and vanishing into nothing.

"...I'm sorry, Lynn...", he murmured, gazing at the now-empty space in his arms.

This Glen retained none of his former dignity. His back, hunched and small, was not that of the adventurer once called the strongest in the land, nor was it that of the guildmaster—it was only the fragile back of a stricken father.

Slowly, Glen stood, keeping his back to them.

Alina was too distressed to speak, but Jade stepped out in front of her, cutting in between her and Glen.

"Alina... Here it comes." He already had his greatshield at the ready and pointed at Glen.

As Alina and the others tensed up, Glen continued to stand there in a daze, facing away from them, until he eventually murmured, "Why did I ever raise her to be an adventurer?"

The words were filled with regret.

"Why was I happy...when it was decided that she would join Silver Sword? When my daughter turned to ash in front of me, I felt regret for the first time in my life. I finally realized just how much of a stupid fool I had been..."

His voice was trembling.

Alina couldn't see his face from where she was and didn't know what sort of expression he was making. But the voice that reached them was the weakest she'd ever heard him make.

"Lynn...Lynn... What should I do? What must I do to see you again...?" He sounded broken. Then, out of the blue, he turned around.

Alina's breath caught.

A black armlike limb was stretching out from the god core implanted in Glen's

left hand. It squirmed like a great swarm of winged insects, its shape in constant flux as it gradually covered Glen's face in black.

*"I'm such a foolish...foolish man..."* Glen muttered as his head was swallowed up by the shadowy arm. Though Glen's lips were clearly moving, his voice sounded strange, as though it had combined with that of someone else.

*"...!"*

Alina widened her eyes and stiffened her face at the hideous sight. The shadowy arm like a swarm of insects eventually compressed into a single mark at Glen's forehead. It was a mark of great significance: a magic sigil with points facing in eight directions—the mark of Dia, in the shape of the sun.

The ancients carved this mark into their creations as proof of their authorship—including into the living relics known as dark gods.

*"The mark of Dia..."* Jade cried out in shock.

After a few seconds of silence, Glen turned a vacant gaze to meet Alina's eyes. His tearstained face twisted in pleasure, and he smiled.

*"Oh, that's right. If I eat humans...I'll be granted power,"* he said, sounding exactly like a dark god. Then he thrust out his left hand, its veins so swollen, they seemed about to burst. The god core embedded within glowed with an eerie black luster.

*"Chant: Dia Chronos!"*

Along with a powerful, bright light, the floor of the room was once again swallowed by a white magic sigil. Instantly, Glen vanished into thin air.

It was only for a split second that Alina lost sight of Glen's giant frame.

In the blink of an eye, he appeared in front of Lululee.

"Lululee!" Lowe reacted first.

Glen's eyes were fixed on Lululee, filled with pure hostility, and she hesitated, frozen. Lowe shoved Lululee aside with his shoulder, just as—

*"Gah...!"*

—Glen's merciless kick smashed into Lowe's flank.

They could hear the nasty *crrk* of bones breaking as Lowe was flung aside. His body rolled across the ground, then lay still.

"Lowe!" Lululee blanched and tried to run to him. But Glen appeared in front of her, blocking her way. "?!" Lululee was unable to dodge as Glen grabbed her shoulder. He raised a big fist overhead, his thick, well-trained arm bulging.

"Sto—!" Alina yelled, just as Glen plunged his fist into Lululee's solar plexus.

*"Koff..."*

With a wheeze, Lululee crumpled, fell softly to the ground, and was silent.

"...!" Alina swallowed. It had all happened in seconds. The relentless onslaught playing out in front of her had the blood rapidly draining from her face.

*"Hmm...I need a little more practice,"* said Glen, his expression unchanged as he glanced at the fallen Lululee and Lowe.

Though he looked like Glen, he spoke as if they were all mere test subjects used to measure his strength. The words he spoke in that strange voice were nothing like what Glen would say.

His eyes held no guilt or struggle as he looked down at them—they were cold enough to send shivers down your spine.

“...Don’t worry, Alina. They aren’t dead,” Jade said quietly, sensing her fear. “I can hear their heartbeats. They’re just passed out.”

Jade had already activated *Sigurth Beast*. But his gaze as he eyed Glen was tense, his expression severe. “Even with *Sigurth Beast*, I can’t follow his movements at all. I can’t anticipate where he’s going to go.”

Alina was the same.

With Glen’s *Sigurth* skill, *Sigurth Chronos*, it was impossible to alter the space in which time was stopped, but he could move around within and freely observe it. From the perspective of those frozen in time, Glen was essentially teleporting. Back in his adventurer days, Glen had made use of this power to become the strongest in the land.

However, since Alina had a *Dia* skill, his power had been completely ineffective on her. She hadn’t realized until now how such a skill could dominate a fight so thoroughly. If *Dia Chronos* was an upgraded version of *Sigurth Chronos*, then even Alina would now be unable to escape from his time manipulation. In other words, any of them could be hit at any moment with an unavoidable attack.

“...It seems that a god core grants more than just power.” Jade was staring at the mark of *Dia* on Glen’s forehead. “It even remakes someone’s personality... No, to use Glen’s words, the god core is ‘devouring’ his will... That’s why the dark gods are able to use such absolute power, despite having once been human.”

Jade was trying to say that a person with any lingering guilt or conscience wouldn’t be able to kill for power. He was right, and if the ancients had taken that into account when they made the god cores... Just thinking about what they had done sent a chill down her spine.

“But,” Jade said, his voice faintly hopeful, “Lululee and Lowe aren’t dead, even though he could have killed them. Glen’s will might still be in there. He wanted us to kill him.”

“ ... ”

“If we destroy that god core, then Glen might somehow...go back to normal...”



*Maybe. Then again, he might not.*

No—Alina knew what fate awaited dark gods whose god cores were damaged. They turned to dust, vanishing without leaving so much as their bones behind. Only the cores remained.

“...But that’s...the only way...,” Alina spat, trying to convince herself.

They had to do something while Glen’s will still remained, or Alina and Jade would both die. They didn’t have even a second to waste.

“...Glen will target me next,” said Jade.

“Huh?”

“As an adventurer, Glen always liked to take the safe route in a fight. He always goes after the weakest enemy first.”

It was true—Glen hadn’t gone after Alina or Jade, who’d been right in front of him—he’d headed straight for Lululee, who wasn’t a fighter. The other dark gods had seemed to think that all humans were the same, and there had been no patterns to the way they fought.

“He has yet to master his Dia skill,” Jade continued. “If he could wield *Dia Chronos* to its full potential, it would have been easy for him to kill all of us while time was still stopped.”

“...”

“If we know that he’s coming after me...then I’ll be the bait. Alina, I know I’m asking a lot of you, but can you find an opening in his attacks while I distract him?”

Alina fell silent at this proposal. If Glen was indeed targeting them in order of strength, then Jade, who had only Sigurth skills, would be next.

She didn’t like the idea of him acting as a decoy. She didn’t like it at all, but there was no other way.

As Alina wordlessly pursed her lips, Jade murmured, “Alina, do you trust me?”

“...Huh?”

“Do you trust me enough to believe that, no matter what happens, I won’t die

and to wait for a chance to strike back?”

“ ...”

Alina never trusted anyone not to die.

She knew the unwavering truth—that no matter how much you cared for someone, they could die in an instant.

But when it came to Jade, she wasn’t so sure. He was like a zombie. It seemed that no matter how many times he was on the brink of death, he always survived.

Eventually, Alina gave a tiny nod. “...I can wait.”

Jade smiled a little proudly. “All right. Then—”

A nasty cracking sound burst through the air right in front of Alina’s eyes.

Instantly, Jade disappeared from her field of view. No—he’d been flung to the side.

Glen was standing a little behind where he had been only moments before.

“...Jade!!”

Glen tossed Jade into the air like a toy, only for the tank to fall back to the ground, roll two or three times across the hard flagstones, and come to rest far in the distance. A beat later, Alina understood what had just happened. Glen had appeared behind Jade and landed a kick to his right shoulder.

Glen didn’t spare Jade so much as a glance, quietly looking down at Alina instead.

“ ...”

His presence was so intimidating that Alina froze in terror.

Glen looked enormous. He looked like a giant.

For just an instant, Alina prepared herself for death.

“Hngh...”

But a small groan rang out, and Glen’s gaze moved away from her.

Jade was holding his right shoulder as he pulled himself to his feet. The arm

below his wounded shoulder hung weakly at his side. The power of the dark god's incredible kick might have shattered the bone.

*"...Hmph. Still able to take a ridiculous beating, I see,"* Glen muttered.

Alina snapped back to reality with a start and quickly moved away from Glen—though because he could move around instantaneously, there was no such thing as a safe distance.

*He said "still"... He remembers that Jade is as tenacious as a cockroach. Glen's memories are still there, after all.*

But—

Alina clasped the handle of her war hammer to push back her unease.

—that attack had made things clear. Even knowing that Glen would target Jade, they had no chance of striking back. If he stopped time, she couldn't even see him wind up for an attack. She wouldn't even have time to dodge on reflex.

The moment Glen targeted someone, they were doomed to become his plaything.

"...Skill Activate—" Jade had to know that, too. But even as his face twisted in pain, he thrust out his left arm. "*—Sigurth Beast.*" Red light gushed out around him, then converged on his eyes.

Glen chuckled. *"What can you see with something like that?"*

Indeed, it was a pointless struggle. No matter how Jade heightened his senses, if time was stopped, he would have no time to pick up anything meaningful.

But Jade didn't drop his skill. Glen snorted like he was bored.

Just then, Glen passed by Jade's side.

A beat later, Alina heard a strange *gerf* sound. A fist had slammed into Jade's gut, and he went flying like a rag doll.

"Agh...!"

Jade slammed against a wall and crumpled to the floor, unable to do a thing.

Face down on the cold floor, Jade still clung to consciousness.

At times like this, he had to thank his sturdy constitution. But even so, his whole body felt numb, and he couldn't move a finger. As he lay there, unable to get up, Glen approached him slowly. Jade had known Glen wasn't the type to let someone go just because they could no longer put up a fight, but...

Glen put Jade's head in a vise grip. He raised his arm, lifting Jade off the ground.

"Ngh...ah...!" A nasty straining sound was coming from his skull. The feeling now back in his left arm, Jade clawed at Glen with his nails, but the man's arm was as thick and hard as a log and didn't so much as twitch.

*"Now, then," Glen said in a low voice. "Since I have the opportunity—I'll ask you something before I crush your skull. Do you know why I didn't kill those first two measly humans?"*

His lips curled in a cruel smile. There was no longer even a trace of the real Glen in his callous expression.

*"Because it would make you two believe you might not be killed, making you drop your guard and open yourselves up."*

"...!"

*"Once you corner your foe, you calmly chip away at their powers of judgment. You keep them from noticing their own sense of confusion, so that when you dangle a cheap ray of hope in front of them, they leap. It's a riot."*

"..."

*So that's how it is.*

Jade had figured it out. The man before them was indeed a dark god, but it was also Glen Garia.

Someone once said that what made Glen the strongest frontline attacker was not the Sigurth skill he had been blessed with, but the thorough and efficient way he fought—his cunning. He was never arrogant and never underestimated his opponents. Every move he made was meaningful and had a cold, machinelike precision.

It was just as Jade had heard. Glen was indeed a seasoned adventurer, the strongest frontline attacker of them all.

But...

“...Yeah, that’s right.” Jade smirked.

The dark god had yet to realize which of them had been played.

“I understand.” The possibility that Glen had deliberately spared Lowe and Lululee was no possibility. Jade was certain that Glen had done it on purpose to make Jade lower his guard. “It’s just like you told me.”

*“You have a tendency toward wishful thinking.”*

When Glen had left Jade with those words, it wasn’t simply to criticize his shortcomings.

Glen had wanted to say, *“If it were me, I would target that weakness.”*

The god core might be consuming his consciousness, but after years of battle, his way of fighting had become a part of his body itself. Glen had shown Jade how to defeat him.

*He wanted to make sure we would kill him.*

“Skill Activate: *Sigurth Beast!*”

Jade activated his skill a second time.

“...?!” Glen narrowed his eyes warily.

Red light gathered around Jade’s eyes again, amplifying the amount of information he received from his senses by ten or twenty times.

“Agh...!”

An incredible heat burned Jade’s eyes, ears, and nose. Activating *Sigurth Beast* even once put an immense strain on his body, and now he was

maintaining two instances of the skill at once. There was no way he would get through this unscathed.

The slightest sound, smell, and light were like powerful weapons ready to destroy his senses. His brain cried out. He was burning up.

“Combine.”

Somewhere beyond sound, Jade put his faith in Alina and said, “Composite Skill Activate.”

“Composite Skill Activate.”

Another voice chanted along with him—not just his own.

Glen widened his eyes slightly and turned around. His gaze fell on Lululee, who was still on the ground but with her face raised and her rod pointed ahead.

“Wha...?”

““Futore!””

Lululee’s powerful healing skill, *Sigurth Revive*, struck Jade. It combined with the double-layered *Siguth Beast*, becoming a composite skill and condensing into a deep, dark red light.

Instantly, Jade’s senses, which had been bursting, returned to him. His eyes, ears, nose, and brain, which had been at their limit from the overload of information, healed rapidly. The heat he’d felt began to cool.

“A skill fusion with another person...?!”

Taking advantage of Glen’s momentary confusion, Jade slammed a kick into his neck.

“Guh!”

Caught by surprise, Glen staggered. Jade, now freed, got to his feet and moved away. He stood unguarded, taking neither an offensive nor a defensive stance.

“...It’s useless, no matter what you do.”

No sooner had Glen spoken than he was behind Jade. In his hand, he clasped his favorite greatsword, which had appeared from nowhere. There was no

longer any need to deliberately keep Jade alive. Glen had already swung the blade upward with a clear intent to kill, his aim fixed on Jade's neck—

—but the blade, which should have lopped off Jade's head, cut through empty air. Jade had ducked.

“...*He dodged?!*” Wariness flashed across Glen's face.

But he immediately readjusted his grip on his greatsword and aimed for the top of Jade's skull. A moment later, the massive blade cut through space, headed for its target.

But Jade smoothly dodged to the side this time, too. He was moving at just about the same moment as the greatsword began to fall—no, slightly before it.

Just as if Jade were predicting Glen's moves.

Now that two of his attacks using stopped time had been dodged, Glen blanched. “*What is this...?!*”

Jade was not moving on mere hunch, of course.

This was the effect of the composite skill, *Futore*—made of two layers of *Sigurth Beast* and one *Sigurth Revive* combined.

Right now, Jade's vision was all white—he couldn't see anything.

And yet he *could* see. He could tell.

With the double-layered *Sigurth Beast* pushing his senses to the limit, his internal clock extended each second, each moment to tens of times its original length. From the incredible amount of information flowing into him, Jade had a grasp on everything around them.

Glen's movements when he stopped time were not the same as true teleportation and picking them up was not completely impossible.

Even when time was stopped, his movements were still continuous.

The information generated by Glen's movement—the flutter of wind, the reverberations of sound, the flight of dust—every bit of it reached Jade. A normal person would perceive none of it, but the double-layered *Sigurth Beast* caught everything.

And his brain, ready to burn away from the incredible amount of information, was maintained by Lululee's *Sigurth Revive*. His thoughts never stopped. Every time the information increased, they only sped up. And from this immense analysis, occurring countless times each second, Jade was able to see one moment into the future.

*On the right.*

Jade hopped a few steps to the left, and Glen's greatsword, moving through stopped time, sliced through air.

"...!"

It was no coincidence. By the time that Glen realized what was going on, it was too late.

Something of incredible mass was looming toward him. Before he knew it, the war hammer was right in front of his nose.

"Gah?!"

Alina slammed Glen clean in the face. As his giant frame slid across the ground, Alina dashed after him.

Alina had believed in Jade and waited for her chance to strike back, and now it was time to begin her assault.



Alina fixed her eyes on Glen alone as she raised her war hammer.

This was her only chance. She couldn't wait for him to finish sliding. She brought down her war hammer and sent him flying even farther, flinging his massive body into the air.

"Guhhh...!"

Glen flew off in a straight line through the air, but seconds before he slammed into the wall, he recovered. Kicking off the wall instead, he launched himself at Alina with enough force that the stone crumbled beneath his feat.

She could see him raising his greatsword. She could see it. He hadn't stopped time. Was he so disconcerted that he'd forgotten? As the strike came at her from the side, Alina slammed it away with her war hammer.

The attack was repelled with the nasty *gshing* of metal clashing with metal, and the force bent Glen's upper body backward.

"...Why?!" Tumbling to the ground, Glen slowed his momentum and placed a hand on the ground, crying out in shock, "*Why are you moving?!*"

"Huh?"

In that moment, Alina finally realized something.

Jade and Lululee were both frozen in place like stone statues. Just as if time had stopped—no, time *had* stopped. Alina had seen this strange spectacle before. They were inside Glen's skill, where only he was able to move.

But the last time Alina had seen this was when Glen activated *Sigurth Chronos*. It hadn't worked on Alina then because she had a Dia skill. *Dia Chronos* was effective against Alina as well, so this kind of phenomenon shouldn't be possible...

With a gasp, Alina turned to look at the war hammer in her hands.

As expected, golden particles had covered it when she wasn't looking—the same mysterious sight she'd encountered so many times before.

“...Mutation...,” she murmured.

Yes. Alina had been able to shatter the dark gods' Dia skills only when her silver war hammer sparkled gold.

That time with Silha—they had been completely equal in strength, and yet she had bested him and destroyed his strong body, which repelled even Dia skills.

Or that time with the twin dark gods, when she had shattered the arrow from a Dia skill, twisted it into something even more powerful.

The war hammer created by *Dia Break* always responded to Alina's feelings to bring her victory.

“...What is that power...? It can't be—something beyond even a Dia skill...?” Seeing her golden war hammer, Glen widened his eyes in shock.

It was just as he said. If she could nullify *Dia Chronos*, a Dia skill, that basically proved that right now, Alina possessed an even higher level of power.

“*Ridiculous...*” Glen took a step back, trembling in fear and breathing hard.

Alina fixed him with a sharp glare. She could think about all that later. “Dark god, go back to being Glen... And if you can't, I will destroy your core, body and all.”

“Wait.” As Alina steeled herself, Glen tossed away his sword and thrust his right hand out in front of him. His next words were not what she'd expected. “*Don't you have someone you want to see one more time?*”

Alina was about to take a step forward when she stopped cold.

“*I'll bring them back. If I devour the souls of the people here, I can turn back time as much as I want.*”

Seeing Alina freeze, Glen spread his arms invitingly. “*I can see it—your past. It's sad to lose someone you care about, isn't it?*”

“...”

Alina lowered her war hammer.

*“That’s right! Seek power...”*

“Can you not insult me?” Alina muttered, cutting Glen off.

*“Wha—?”*

“The dead can’t be brought back.” Alina wrung out the words through clenched teeth. “That’s why adventurers and receptionists are so stupidly desperate to live, even in such stupidly painful work environments...!”

How wonderful it would be if tragic pasts could be fixed.

A few months ago, before Alina met Jade, she would have jumped at such an offer. But now she had found people she cared about outside of that past.

“Besides, I’m not that lonely,” she declared.

She wasn’t lonely. She’d realized that on the day of the Centennial Festival.

Alina’s loneliness had already passed, surprising even her. Shroud the adventurer had once been so dear to her. But the pain of losing him had abated somewhat.

It was many years ago now that she’d lost him. Perhaps time had dulled her pain. She was so busy now, too. What with work and the dark gods, problems seemed to fall into her lap one after another, and she didn’t have the time to be sad—but that was fine, she thought.

Alina had come to like her current life, with all its annoyances.

*“Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha! Isn’t that pretty selfish? After going on about how lonely you were in the past, you’re just going to move on now that you have friends and you’re having a good time? You would forget those who have passed? You dishonor their memory!”*

“You can call me cold or dishonorable or whatever you like. I’ve never once thought of myself as pure, righteous, or kind. I’m just trying as hard as I can now, in my own way, because I don’t want to experience that pain again. You have no business lecturing me about it.”

*“...”*

“And what about you, *Glen*?” Alina spat, claspng her war hammer once again and fixing her glare on the dark god.

“I get wanting to see someone again after they’ve died. I understand the regret. But—what good will bringing Lynn back do?”

“...*What did you say?*” His eyebrows dipped angrily—she couldn’t tell if that was Glen or the dark god.

Heedless, Alina went on. “All you’re thinking about is bringing her back. Aren’t the memories of your time together just as important?”

“...*Spare me the platitudes.*” Glen’s expression turned bitter. “*A worthless argument! What good are memories?!*”

“They give the survivors the strength to live on,” Alina declared flatly.

“!” Glen couldn’t say a word.

“It hurts, but it gives me the strength to finish my overtime—to push myself and get up when I want to stay in bed in the mornings, to make it to work when I don’t want to go. It gives me the strength to work just a little harder the next day...”

“*Wha...?*”

“She taught you lots of important things, didn’t she? The things she gave you are still there, in your heart. You are who you are now because of her!” Alina said, reflecting on each word before drawing her lips tightly together.

One wrong step, and it might have been Alina holding on to the same twisted desire as Glen.

But that hadn’t happened. Because Alina had the life of a receptionist, which Shroud had left her.

Even if it was a cursed lifestyle brought on by Shroud’s death, to Alina, it was a way of remembering someone she cared about. Even this curse was a dear, dear memory.

“What more can you want? Before you think about something stupid, like sacrificing your life to try to revive her...spend some more time treasuring your memories of the life you had with her...!”

“...”

Glen didn't try to argue anymore. He stood there speechless, his eyes wide.

“And...above all else, the thing I want to say most is...!” Alina's eyes popped open, and she kicked off the flagstones, shattering them and launching herself at Glen, war hammer at the ready.

“...How dare you completely forget your promise to get rid of my overiiiiiiiiime!!!!”

With a roar, Alina slammed her war hammer into Glen's left arm. There was a nasty *crrk* as it penetrated flesh and shattered bone, sending everything below his shoulder flying.

“*Gahhh!*” Missing his left arm, Glen fell to his knees and landed on his face. The mark of Dia vanished from his forehead.

“*Agh, a—ahh, Lynn...!*” Had the usurper's personality vanished? Crying his daughter's name, Glen reached out his hand, refusing to give up.

He was after his left arm with the god core in it, which had been blown off and was now flying through the air. The god core pulsed conspicuously, and Glen's severed arm flailed. But eventually the arm settled down, and then, as if it had run out of strength, it began to disintegrate.

When the god core fell to the flagstones with a *clunk*, the arm had already vanished without a trace.

“*Ah...*,” Glen muttered in a daze, the sound echoing in the silence.

The god core—which had filled his unbearable sadness with a twisted hope—had already lost its light and gone silent.

“...*Ah—ah...ahhhhhhhhhh!!!!*”

Glen howled like a beast, then lost consciousness. Was it a cry of sadness or a cry of regret?

Glen was drifting in and out of consciousness.

*Sorry... I'm sorry...Lynn...*

Even in this state, Glen continued to apologize to Lynn.

The brief memories of their time together flickered through his mind.

Had she been happy? Glen couldn't be sure. He had no memory of playing with her, and he'd spent considerably more time away from the house working. He'd never once taken her someplace fun. All he'd given her was food, clothing, and a bed to sleep in. The one thing that he had managed to do for her—teach her how to be an adventurer—had led to her death.

He was not at all confident that he'd managed to make her fifteen years of life happy.

She should have lived longer. Why had he alone survived, while a girl so young, who'd had so much ahead of her, died?

Why hadn't he been able to protect her?

Her life, her future, her smile—they had been dearer than anything.

*Why wasn't I able to protect her when she needed it?*

The intense regret that swirled deep in his heart, burning his soul, had never gone away, no matter how many decades had passed.

If he'd known she would die so young, he would have told her properly.

If he'd known he was never going to see her again, then—

—he should have made sure to say *I love you*.

\*\*\*\*

Glen opened his eyes a crack, and a blurry whiteness filled his vision.

He didn't know where he was, but he could make out the hazy outline of someone close by.

"Lynn...?" he asked deliriously, and the person in front of him faltered slightly.

"Whoa, he's still talking."

"Don't get too close to him, Alina. You cut away the god core...but we don't know what will happen."

Nothing good—Glen knew that. All he had was this hazy consciousness. His body wouldn't so much as twitch. It was as if it belonged to someone else.

"Is that Lynn...?" Glen questioned his hazy white vision once more.

"I'm not Lynn," came the instant reply. It was the cold voice of a woman—nothing like Lynn's.

"He's really obsessed, huh...? At times like this, isn't some ghostly presence supposed to show up and conveniently resolve everything...?"

"Things don't work like that in real life, Alina."

The girl heaved a beleaguered sigh and turned slightly toward Glen. "When people die, it happens suddenly. Adventurers are a prime example," she spat, sounding irritated. Lynn would definitely never say that. So the girl in front of him was not Lynn. He knew as much, but he couldn't help feeling it was her.

"Of course you're going to have a mountain of regrets. But...it's precisely because I never want to experience those regrets or pain again that I do what I can." She sounded so bitter—just what sort of regrets did she have?

"You've got no choice but to swallow all the regret and pain. And then fight so that you don't have to experience it again," she said. "At least, that's how it is for me."

*Oh, I see.*

Glen understood. This was why he saw Lynn in this girl.

Because her words, despite their brusqueness, were just as kind as his daughter's.

“See you again!”

Her unkempt hair swaying, Alina forced a smile as she saw the adventurer off.

By the time she was finished, she had tossed the filled-out quest form into the “unprocessed basket” and pulled out the next one with an elegant gesture, ready for the next adventurer in line.

“Thank you for waiting! Next!”

Thanks to the new dungeon discovered during the training seminar, Iffole Counter was in total chaos. Alina had been tossed straight into a busy period the moment she was done with the seminar, and as her work piled up, she would occasionally shoot death glares at the endless waves of adventurers, a business smile pasted onto her face.

“Sup.”

A familiar, tall young man appeared at the counter in front of Alina. He was a first-class adventurer with silver hair and gray eyes and a relic arma greatshield on his back—Jade.

“I’m a litttle busy here, okay?!” Without asking his business, Alina crushed the quest form she had prepared. This man had never once come to her counter just to have a quest processed. There was a 100 percent chance he had brought some kind of trouble with him.

“I—I—I—I know. I know, okay? That’s why I made sure to line up like I’m supposed to. I didn’t charge in on your break, right?” Alina’s murderous rage was instantaneous. Jade panicked and started spouting nonsense excuses.

Glaring at him, Alina scowled as hard as she could. “What is it? What are you here for? You can see how busy things are, can’t you? Did you come to take a quest?”

“No. I’m here because Glen woke up.”



“What? At a busy time like this, who would—?” Alina started to say on reflex, then stopped midsentence. After a few seconds’ consideration, she pouted and started over. “I’ll go once my window is closed... In exchange, help me out with my overtime today, okay?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Alina went with Jade to the Iffole Treatment Center.

In the end, the incident in the underground layer during the seminar wasn't made public.

The ghost stories about the training hall only got more intense, and Glen's crimes were never made known.

That was partially because it was connected to the dark gods and whatnot, and there was no helping that—but Alina had no idea how Jade and his party saw Glen now. Jade wasn't talking about it, either.

Lowe and Lululee were already waiting at the entrance of the treatment center. After meeting up with the pair and while heading to Glen's sickroom, Alina suddenly voiced a question that had been on her mind.

"Oh yeah. Were you okay, Lowe?" Alina's face crinkled up as she remembered seeing dark god Glen mercilessly kick him. Lululee had gotten up during the fight, but Lowe had stayed face down until the end.

"Totally. Oh, it still hurts, of course," Lowe said as casually as he always did, rubbing the side of his body that had been kicked.

"Lowe's injury was a teensy bit severe. I did what I could with a heal spell, but the broken bone was, like, stabbed pretty deep into his organs..." Lululee's fingers trembled. She must have been remembering it. "My wounds were mild enough that a heal spell could cure them, but it was impressive that Lowe remained quiet with such severe injuries. I could understand if he were someone like Jade, who's used to pain, but..."

"Uh, it hurts me every time, too," Jade muttered back, but everyone ignored him.

Lululee touched a finger to her chin as she tilted her head seriously. "Have you been training to resist torture, Lowe...?"

“Hey, I’m not a freak, okay? I’m just a boy who knows how to suck it up!” Lowe scowled at her, and Lululee laughed, saying she’d only been joking.

Alina was relieved to see Silver Sword bantering like always. Surely they had been the most shocked to learn that Glen had been using them.

“That reminds me,” said Alina. “Jade was doing weird fusion moves again...”

““They’re not weird fusion moves.””

Jade and Lululee shot back as one.

“We actually practiced quite a lot!” Lululee puffed out her chest proudly and chuckled.

“Now that we know you can use composite skills with someone else, our range of skills can expand even further—” Jade came to a sudden stop.

Past the big shared room where regular patients were treated, there was another door that had clearly been installed for a special purpose.

That was the door that led into Glen’s sickroom.

They had been distracting themselves with light conversation, but now they all shut their mouths. As they grew hesitant, the door opened, and a woman appeared from inside.

It was Glen’s private secretary, Fili.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I will ensure that nobody disturbs you.” Fili acknowledged Jade’s party with her usual flat look, saying only what she had to in her usual businesslike manner before striding briskly off.

But after a few steps, she suddenly came to a stop and turned back to them. “Alina Clover and the members of Silver Sword...,” she said, eyes lowered. “Thank you very much for saving the guildmaster.”

And with that, she vanished down the hallway.

A private, spacious sickroom had been prepared for Glen—nothing like what the other patients got. The place truly was fit for a guildmaster—it was so fancy, it hardly looked like a sickroom at all.

There was a large bed by the window, and Glen was there, sitting up in it. The left sleeve of his thin patient's gown was empty, and he seemed to lack his former vigor, too. The large man was like an empty shell, quietly hanging his head.

"...Why didn't you kill me?" Glen muttered, without looking at them. "You should have been able to, li'l miss."

"..."

Jade stood in front of Alina, keeping his distance just in case. "Glen... Do you still have lingering regrets?"

"Of course I do. But I've played all my cards. *Dia Chronos* failed," Glen said flatly. "The god core I used wasn't fully activated. That was why *Dia Chronos* failed, why it didn't completely consume my soul, and why I survived as a human—probably. The *Dia* skill within me has been lost, and I can't use it anymore."

Glen was clenching his remaining right hand so hard it trembled. "But still, why did you let me live...?!"

He lifted his head, his face haggard and eyes bloodshot as his voice grew rougher. "You heard what I said, didn't you? I've been using my position as guildmaster as well as the lives of adventurers... If I had died instead, I could have redeemed myself! This is just like when my party died. I'm the lone survivor once again, a disgrace. What would you have me live for...?!" Glen was furious. He looked ready to raise his fist at any moment.

Jade tried to urge Alina farther back, but she took a step closer to Glen instead—to tell him this:

“You talk too much,” she said dismissively.

“Ngh...?!”

Alina fixed the surprised guildmaster with a glare and exhaled. A beat later, her eyes flared open, and her arms shot out. She grabbed Glen by the collar and shook him. “Don’t act like such a baby, you stupid-ass guildmaster...”

“Baby...?”

“Listen, you made a promise more important than your life. I’ll say it as many times as it takes—I won’t let you forget your promise to me to get rid of my overtime...!”

“Wha—?” Glen blinked in shock.

Seeing his expression, Alina grabbed this pathetic, injured, spiritless man who’d lost everything and started choking him with his own collar, dismissing his complaints. “Don’t give me that ‘wha—?’ crap. And what’s with that *You’re saying that now?* look on your face? There’s no more important reason for me to keep you alive, is there?!”

“Uh, Alina, I really think that’s going too—”

“If you think you can walk out on your debt by dying, you’ve got another thing coming...! Even if what you did is a capital offense! I’m not gonna let you die until my overtime is gone!! Stop whimpering to yourself, you big lug of a man—you’ve got things to do in this world, don’t you?! Get rid of my extra work already!!!!”

The room went completely silent.

The mournful air from earlier had evaporated completely.

In the blink of an eye, Alina’s yelling had turned Glen from a pitiful, sad, wounded man to a pathetic adult getting scolded by a girl, and the mood, which had been more befitting of a graveyard than a sickroom, had turned completely around.

Silver Sword, who were still unsure how to feel about Glen’s fifteen-year-long scheme to revive his daughter, were left stunned.

The one to eventually break the silence was Jade, who seemed unable to stop

himself. "...Will the day ever come when you don't have any more overtime, Alina...?" He was frowning seriously.

"It will. Don't jinx it." Silencing him with a glare, she turned back to Glen.

Glen was speechless, his eyes wide. "...So you're saying I'm not allowed to die...?"

"Now you get it. That's exactly right."

"But then how should I atone...? Should I admit everything publicly, get down on my knees in apology, and resign from my position? Will I be forgiven then?"

The man in charge of the Adventurers Guild had sacrificed adventurers for his own desires—and not only that, but he had also been reviving dangerous beings that could destroy the land itself. If his misdeeds were made public, trust in him would plummet, and adventurers would come to despise him.

That would be the greatest possible punishment for someone living in society.

Glen hung his head. But Alina heaved a great sigh and shot down that foolish idea. "You don't actually think that abandoning your responsibility and suffering alone counts as atonement, do you?" She glared at Glen, and he fell silent, like he didn't know what to say.

"For example, if I abandon a fat stack of documents and go straight home, will the work go away? If I quit my job, will that resolve the overtime situation at Iffole Counter? Will it, huh? Huh?" With her eyebrows turned down in a V, her eyes wide and her cheeks stiff, Alina leaned in closer and closer to Glen. Finally, she lifted him by the collar of his hospital gown again and pressed him for an answer. "Have you even thought for a minute about the feelings of those left behind with nothing but a mountain of problems...?"

"N—no..."

"Listen, the overtime is still there, and so long as you don't face it, whether you cry or wail or quit, it will never end...! This dark god stuff is just the same."

"Alina... Overtime and dark gods...are kind of on a different scale..."

"Shut up, Jade," she spat, silencing him. Then she glowered at Glen once more.

“Once you’ve accepted a job, you take responsibility and see it through to the end, even if it means being a living disgrace. That’s how you atone as an adult in society. You should continue in your position as guildmaster and work yourself like a dog to make the Adventurers Guild a nonexploitative workplace... And if you reeeeeeeally feel bad about what you’ve done, you know what to do during the next personnel shuffle, don’t you...?”

Alina threatened Glen in a voice so low, it might have been from the depths of hell itself and pasted on a smile without a shred of joy in it.

“I—I understand...” Overwhelmed by Alina’s intensity—she seemed ready to devour him at any moment—Glen nodded without thinking, as cold sweat dripped down his skin.

Seeing that, Alina snorted and let Glen go.

“I’m basically in agreement with Alina’s opinion.” Jade nodded. Then, after thinking a bit, he glanced over at Lululee and Lowe and said to Glen, “Frankly, I can’t easily forgive you for using us and Alina...but I don’t want to see you dead or disgraced, either.”

“...”

“More importantly, there’s one favor we’d like to ask of you as Silver Sword—to eliminate Alina’s overtime. Right?” He turned back to the others.

Lululee’s dark expression immediately brightened. “That’s right!”

“I’ve got no objections.”

Lululee and Lowe both nodded. It seemed that their answers had been settled from the beginning, too.

“We still haven’t resolved anything regarding the mystery of the dark gods and the threat they pose. And Alina’s got her overtime. All of us are going to keep on fighting in our own way. What about you, Glen?”

“...!” Glen opened his eyes as wide as they could go, looking in turn at Alina and the members of Silver Sword. Unable to answer Jade’s question, he scowled and hung his head. He finally understood how small-minded he’d been. “...I see. Yes, the issue of the dark gods is completely unresolved...,” he

murmured. “You’re right—li’l miss, Jade. My crime cannot be atoned for with my life alone...” Glen’s voice shook, and he clenched his fist in frustration. Unable to see his face, Alina couldn’t tell what sort of expression he was making.

“...Glen. There’s something I have to ask you.” Jade narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice. “Who told you about dark gods and their god cores...? Who is the *they* you mentioned? Tell us everything you know.”

“...”

Jade’s question made Glen fall silent for a while. After a long moment, he said quietly, “...Of course, I don’t mean to hide it. But if you hear this name, it won’t make you feel any better...”

“What do you mean?”

“Yes. *They* is—” Glen started to speak, but he wasn’t able to finish.

“Ngh...?!” Suddenly, he pressed his hand to his forehead and groaned. “Ugh, gah...?!”

He writhed around, holding his head as if he were in great pain. An anguished look came over his face, and his eyes bugged out as he bent over.

Seeing this, Jade went pale. “Glen?! ”

A strange ripping sound rang out from inside him. Glen widened his eyes even further, in incredible pain. But even then, he never cried out. He merely clenched his teeth hard and toughed it out.

Rattled to see Glen in such a state, Lululee quickly waved her rod. “S-skill Activate: *Sigurth Revive!*” With a blast of red light from her Sigurth skill, she fired a powerful healing skill at Glen.

But as soon as the red light touched him, they heard a nasty crackling sound, and the skill was dispelled in the blink of an eye.

“A Sigurth skill was repelled...?! ”

The sight shocked Jade. The only thing that could counteract a Sigurth skill was a higher-ranked power—a Dia skill. Glen had said that his mutated Dia skill had already lost its power. It should have been useless.



As Jade fretted, unsure of what to do, Glen's pain seemed to finally subside, and he slumped over in silence. But his profile was still hard and stiff—his shoulders heaving, his wide eyes fixed on some arbitrary point.

"A-are you all right?" Jade asked timidly.

Still hanging his head, Glen muttered vacantly, "...My memory..."

"Huh?"

"...I can't remember...what they...look like..." Glen murmured before bending at the waist and flopping over.

"Glen!" Jade immediately reached out his arm, supporting the man's shoulder. "Glen? Hey!" he called out again, but there was no response from Glen.

He was already unconscious, his whole body soaked with sweat, and his face pale like the dead.

"I-I'm going to go call a healer!" Lululee dashed out the door. Within seconds, a number of healers rushed in. They surrounded the unconscious guildmaster, and the sickroom burst into a flurry of activity.

Alina and Silver Sword could only watch on in a daze, before they were soon chased out of the sickroom.

The party had left the sickroom and were walking down the main street.

According to the healers who had raced in, Glen wasn't badly wounded, and if there was any concern, it was just that he was still recovering and would have less energy.

He hadn't been wounded internally or externally, and the healers were just as puzzled as Alina and company were. In the end, they put Glen to sleep without finding out the source of his intense pain.

"...What happened...?"

As they walked down the street at dusk, Jade agonized over what had happened in the sickroom. It had happened right in front of them with no warning: a pain that even the healers couldn't figure out, a power strong enough to repel a Sigurth skill, and the words Glen had muttered right before falling unconscious—the more Jade thought about it, the less sense it made.

"...They were shutting him up," Lowe muttered. "It's a forbidden technique that old hands in the underworld sometimes use. A conditional spell cast directly on the brain that causes memory damage. But if it repelled Lululee's skill, then it's not magic."

"...It's a Dia skill," Jade answered, putting a finger to his chin. "If what happened to Glen just now was *them* keeping him from talking...then they can use Dia skills..."

"And he said it wouldn't make us feel any better to know who *they* are. That means it's someone we know, doesn't it?"

Listening to the pair's exchange, Lululee slumped her shoulders. "...Are we... being manipulated by someone again...?"

"..."

Silver Sword's somber mood contrasted sharply with the lively bustle of the

main street. In the end, they hadn't found out anything about the individual who'd told Glen about the dark gods—and not only that, but they also now knew there were even more major mysteries unfolding behind the scenes. It felt awful, like they were drowning in someone else's schemes.

A heavy silence settled over them, but Alina blew it all away with a sigh.

"Well, that was a little surprising, but as long as Glen isn't too badly harmed, then we're good, right?"

The others' chins all jerked up at once.

Lululee, whose expression had been dark until then, nodded vigorously, like she'd been reminded of something important. "Th—that's right! We managed to get him back after his body was taken over by a dark god. It would be too sad for him to die now—"

"Glen has to get rid of my overtime for me. I can't have him dying," Alina said bluntly.

"..."

Lululee's cheeks twitched, while to the side, Lowe heaved a big sigh.

As exhaustion washed over him, he looked up at the red sunset. "Alina's right. Thinking about it now won't get us anywhere. In the end, this means that it wasn't just the man in black using dark gods to do stuff, right? Ugh. I can't believe there's so many people coming up with these dangerous schemes..."

"We're not all as laid-back as you, Lowe."

"You think I'm laid-back, Lululee?"

"...Yeah, we don't have enough information," Jade said as he glanced over at Alina. "There's no point thinking about it now."

There was no guarantee "they" wouldn't use Alina's power, just as the man in black—just as Glen—had. And they didn't know how many dark gods were slumbering out there, or what other tricks "they" might pull next. Jade grimaced, a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

*I have to get stronger and fast...*

To keep the shadow of anxiety off Alina's face. So that she could live the peaceful life she truly desired.

"What?" Alina noticed Jade's gaze and immediately shot him a look.

"Oh—" Jade was relieved to see how genuine she looked.

Alina was very open about her feelings with Jade. Seeing how mannerly she'd been during the seminar, he thought maybe he should be honored.

"—It's nothing," Jade said. "More importantly, how many unprocessed documents have piled up today?"

"It's not just today—it's from the last few days. You'll be shocked."

"...You're prepared to be out till midnight, huh?"

"It's all because they keep finding those super-large dungeons...! And hey, if you're all doing fine, then get out and clear that place already...!" Alina's expression immediately turned demonic.

"O-oh, we're working on it. Just, when it's a big one over seven layers, you need a certain amount of time to prepare..."

While Jade made excuses to Alina, behind him, Lululee and Lowe let their gazes wander around awkwardly.

\*\*\*\*

Lululee and Lowe were going to guild headquarters, so Alina parted ways with them and went with Jade to Iffole Counter, with its great quantity of remaining work.

Alina had only meant to pop out of the workplace for a moment, but her outing had run long, and the red sky was dimming. Thinking about the overtime ahead of her, the streets of Iffole—busy with people headed home—suddenly disgusted her.

"Agh... Now that the seminar is over, I'm drowning in overtime because of that huge dungeon, and in the end, I never did get my birthday leave..." Alina muttered, remembering her failure as she made her way down the street.

The business betterment plan, with birthday leave as the reward...

Alina had been counting on advice from the legendary receptionist Rosetta Rhuberry, but after that had backfired, Alina had nevertheless thrown together some nonsense and submitted it. But instead, the office chief had accepted the plan submitted by the most senior receptionist at Iffole Counter.

"I submitted something, too, but I guess that was a no go?" Jade, who was with her as an assistant overtime worker, tilted his head to her side.

"We got destroyed... Listen, that plan you submitted? You can't get by with pretty words, super-perfect arguments, and idealism. It's just not realistic..."

"Urk!" Jade choked. She'd hit the nail on the head. "W-well, that's true... While I have done some office work as well, I haven't experienced how things are at the office during the day." No matter how adept he was, he couldn't match a senior receptionist with years of office experience who knew what their boss wanted. "But on the other hand, Alina, your plans, like 'limit entry at the reception office' or 'increase number of guild elites and clear dungeons quickly,' were a little *too* realistic. It read like a brutal attack."

"Sh-shut up. That's reality!" she snapped back.

But even if it irritated her, she could tell what Jade was trying to say. Guild headquarters wanted a plan that wouldn't take any time or money, could be immediately implemented on an individual level, and seemed like it'd somehow have an effect.

"And the senior receptionist's plan they accepted was perfect, capturing just the sort of thing the office chief wanted..., " said Alina.

"What sort of plan was it?"

"Simply put, it's a stereotypical 'let's be nice' plan, telling those people who deal with large amounts of overtime not to take it on all alone and to seek help, and encouraging people with free time to help them out."

"..."

Jade opened his mouth for a moment like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he fell silent.

Oh, Alina could understand the feeling—a plan like that wouldn't last three days.

In the first place, no one was free during the busy periods when overtime was at its peak, so this plan was functionally impossible. Most likely, the senior receptionist knew all of that, and she had submitted this useless token proposal in a bid to get the birthday leave. Alina's downfall was that she hadn't been prepared to play to what her boss wanted.

"...Well, cheer up, Alina. Eh?" Jade said, though it was hardly a consolation. Then he pulled something from the pouch at his waist, as if he'd suddenly remembered it. "Oh yeah, there's something I want to give to you, Alina. I can't give you birthday leave, but—here. Take this." He handed her a little necklace with a small pale green crystal on a thin chain.

"...Is this the guiding crystal shard?" It had been a while since she'd seen it. It caught Alina by surprise.

The guiding crystal shard was a special crystal made especially for Silver Sword, based on a relic. There were four in all, and if the bearer of any of them were on the verge of death, the other crystals would glow and guide them to their comrade in danger.

For Silver Sword, who were always facing difficult dungeons as elites, it was a vital item. Alina had also been wearing this crystal shard a little while ago, but since a Silver Sword-exclusive item would expose her identity in an instant, the moment it had served its purpose, she'd handed it straight back.

"I've told you before, I'm not going to join Silver Sword—"

As she spoke, she noticed that the necklace Jade was giving her was a little different from the guiding crystal shard she knew. The crystal was originally a little bigger, with the crest of Silver Sword carved into the silver decoration part, but this guiding crystal shard not only had no crest, but it was also missing the silver decoration. It was just a simple piece of crystal.

"It *is* a guiding crystal shard, but this one's been damaged," said Jade. "It doesn't glow."

"Then what's the point?"

“There doesn’t need to be a point. The guiding crystal shard shines when an ally is on the verge of death, so it’s best if it never shines.”

“...True.”

“A guiding crystal shard that never shines is like a wish for nobody to die.”

Hearing Jade’s explanation, Alina raised her eyebrows. “...A wish for nobody to die, huh...?”

If an item that shone when someone was on the verge of death never glowed, then nobody would die. It was such a simplistic sort of wish—if there really were an item that would keep anyone from dying just by wearing it, then she would like it, Alina thought vaguely.

“It’s pretty, like a gem, isn’t it? I had it made into a necklace.”

Alina looked closely at the shard he’d handed her. He’d said it was a dud, but the crystal sparkled in the light of the setting sun, and it looked like a gem of some value.

“...What’s this? Why are you suddenly giving me a necklace? You haven’t put in some kind of tracker or listening device, right...?”

“I wouldn’t do anything illegal.”

“Oh-ho. Then what’s this about?” she pressed him, clasping the crystal shard in her hand.

Suddenly, Jade started to hem and haw nervously. “...Well, uh...since during the seminar...I upset you...”

“Trying to buy my forgiveness? How convenient.”

“Urk!”

Jade fell silent for a moment, then desperately continued, “B-but it’s not just that!”

As soon as the words were out of Jade’s mouth, his gaze turned serious. And after a slight pause, he declared quietly, “...Because I’m not going to die, Alina.”

“What?”

“I won’t let Lululee or Lowe die, either. I’ll get stronger, so that eventually we

won't have to make you fight the dark gods. Because I want you to smile—well, though you've always got a nasty scowl on your face because of overtime—but the necklace is like a prayer for all of that. Will you accept it?"

Jade's gray eyes were indeed filled with the strong light of determination.

"..."

Alina was already well aware that with his superhuman vitality, he wouldn't go down easily, even without relying on prayers, and that he would do everything in his power to protect his allies—but she found herself looking away before Jade's piercing gaze.

"...W-well, it *is* pretty. I'll take it. Thanks," Alina said coldly before eagerly putting the necklace around her neck. The sparkle of the crystal shard was hidden by her uniform and couldn't be seen, but Alina never dressed up, so it would be weird for her to suddenly start wearing a necklace—this was perfect.

Seeing the crystal shard at Alina's neck, Jade grinned in satisfaction. "I'll give you something even better for your birthday, Alina! Like a big house."

"I already have a house. I'm fine."

"Actually, what do you want, Alina? I can't think of anything."

"I want to go home on time."





“That’s what I thought you’d say, but isn’t there something, like, a little more...?”

“Nope!” Alina said, heading down the street.

Ahead of them lay Iffole Counter, where her overtime awaited.

“Wahhhhhh. Where did you go, Alina...?! Come back soon, please...!”

In the now-empty office of Iffole Counter, Laila lay defeated by a mountain of documents, face down on her desk.

Once business hours ended, Alina had immediately gone off somewhere. She'd said she would come back right away, but she still hadn't returned. There was nothing Laila hated more than doing overtime all alone. She hoped Alina would hurry and come back soon.

“Wah, wah, I'm tired... Executioner...”

In the place of honor on top of her desk was the Executioner doll she had made for the Centennial Festival. Its hooded cloak completely covered its head, and it had a silver war hammer on its back. She'd gotten really detailed with it, and it looked rather good, if she did say so herself.

“Executioner... My hero...”

Then Laila softly removed the hood of the Executioner doll.

Even the face of the doll underneath the hood had been sewn in exquisite detail. It was exactly what she imagined the Executioner looked like— —a girl with long black hair, pretty jade-green eyes, and a bright smile.

Yes, the doll had the face of Laila's senior coworker, Alina Clover.

“Alina, come back soon... Let's do overtime together...”

As she complained, a stabbing pain shot up her right arm, making her grimace. Under her receptionist uniform, her right arm was throbbing and hot.

“...”

Checking to make sure that there was nobody around, Laila rolled up the sleeve of her uniform. Carved in black on her white arm was a characteristic magic sigil with points in eight directions. The source of the pain was beside

that mark. Implanted in her arm was a little rock with a black sheen—a god core.

*Proof that Laila was a dark god.*

“Silha...Fiena...Viena...”

Laila murmured their names, so familiar to her.

What sort of ends had they met? This was Alina, so surely she had beaten them down without a shred of mercy.

And how much had they managed to injure Alina and Jade? How many humans had they “devoured”?

Laila didn’t want to imagine the people she’d loved doing such things. But there was nothing she could do about it. If Alina hadn’t done what she’d done, they would never have been able to stop.

They would have remained as those monsters forever...

“...”

Laila frowned and clenched her teeth, smothering the intense regret that ached in her chest.

Not yet—not yet. She couldn’t let it end yet. She would fulfill her promise to them.

In the end, surely she would join them.

“Please, rest in peace...,” Laila muttered softly, and then her head popped up.

She now wore the look of an incompetent newbie receptionist.

“Ugh, okay. Let’s get through this overtime!”





Cheerfully sliding her uniform sleeve back down, Laila pulled the hood of her Executioner doll back over its head and faced the mountain of documents before her.

*The End*

## Afterword

Have all of you been happily doing your overtime? Hello, this is Mato Kousaka.

*Guild Receptionist*, the overtime evasion *isekai* fantasy, where receptionist Alina fights powerful enemies and looming overtime, has somehow reached Volume 3.

This one is the “middle-aged man book,” with the focus on Glen, the guildmaster of the Adventurers Guild. I’m calling it a middle-aged man book, but it was also something of a tragedy.

A middle-aged man with a bunch of years under his belt who has tasted the bittersweetness of life just has more baggage, you know? This guy deals with all of that and carries it with him as he continues to smile another day. I love that sort of older male character.

And, and, in the end, we had a twist! That one girl is actually— We also finished up the story about the man in black sneaking around behind the scenes in this volume, ending a kind of arc in the story.

And yet still nothing has been resolved, especially when it comes to Alina’s overtime... Will the day ever come when she’s finally done with it?! No! That day will never— Hmm? I can hear the sound of a hammer swinging in the distance...

A-anyway, exactly a year before the day this third volume goes on sale, they announced the winner of the twenty-seventh Dengeki Novel Prize. That day was, to me, a little special in a lot of ways. Before that, I did nothing but work, including overtime and weekend work, without any kind of goal. I was just trying to make it through the days and collect my paycheck—I was Kousaka, the boring corporate drone warrior, working with eyes like those of a dead fish. By

working hard for myself in the world of light novels that I loved instead, I was able to regain my life, just a little, that day.

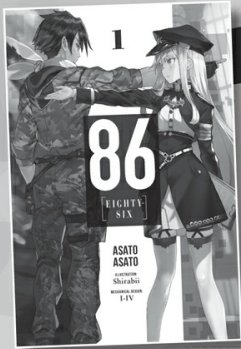
Once you become an adult in society, it's so easy to forget about *working hard for yourself*, which is very important. And before you know it, you're neglecting yourself. You've all got to take care of yourselves, so that such a thing doesn't happen to you!

And now, thank you to my editors Yoshioka and Yamaguchi, who helped me a lot with this book. (Which reminds me, during the production of Volume 1, I got my editors' names wrong in every e-mail, only to have it gently pointed out to me by the editors themselves. What a cardinal sin for a working adult... I'm really sorry!) To Gaou, who has drawn god-tier illustrations for Volume 3 as well, and to everyone from the editorial department who was involved in publication and advertisement, and to you, for reading Volume 3 of *Guild Receptionist*, I offer my sincere thanks.

Well then, I'll see you again in Volume 4!



# HAVE YOU BEEN TURNED ON TO LIGHT NOVELS YET?



## 86—EIGHTY-SIX, VOL. 1-12

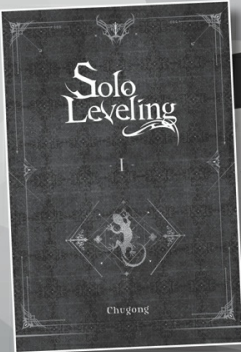
In truth, there is no such thing as a bloodless war. Beyond the fortified walls protecting the eighty-five Republic Sectors lies the "nonexistent" Eighty-Sixth Sector. The young men and women of this forsaken land are branded the Eighty-Six and, stripped of their humanity, pilot "unmanned" weapons into battle...

Manga adaptation available now!

## WOLF & PARCHMENT, VOL. 1-8

The young man Col dreams of one day joining the holy clergy and departs on a journey from the bathhouse, Spice and Wolf. Winfiel Kingdom's prince has invited him to help correct the sins of the Church. But as his travels begin, Col discovers in his luggage a young girl with a wolf's ears and tail named Myuri, who stowed away for the ride!

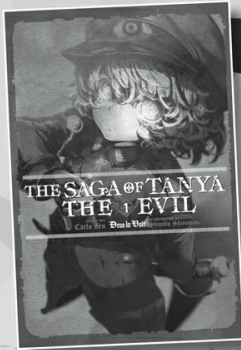
Manga adaptation available now!



## SOLO LEVELING, VOL. 1-8

E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung has no money, no talent, and no prospects to speak of—and apparently, no luck, either! When he enters a hidden double dungeon one fateful day, he's abandoned by his party and left to die at the hands of some of the most horrific monsters he's ever encountered.

Comic adaptation available now!



## THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL, VOL. 1-12

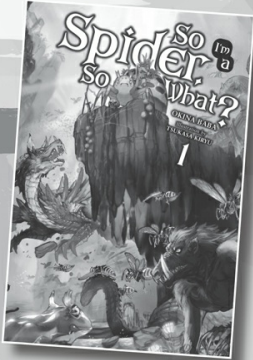
Reborn as a destitute orphaned girl with nothing to her name but memories of a previous life, Tanya will do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means living life behind the barrel of a gun!

Manga adaptation available now!

## SO I'M A SPIDER, SO WHAT?, VOL. 1-16

I used to be a normal high school girl, but in the blink of an eye, I woke up in a place I've never seen before and—and I was reborn as a spider?!

Manga adaptation available now!



## OVERLORD, VOL. 1-16

When Momonga logs in one last time just to be there when the servers go dark, something happens—and suddenly, fantasy is reality. A rogues' gallery of fanatically devoted NPCs is ready to obey his every order, but the world Momonga now inhabits is not the one he remembers.

Manga adaptation available now!

VISIT [YENPRESS.COM](http://YENPRESS.COM) TO CHECK OUT ALL OUR TITLES AND...

# GET YOUR YEN ON!



**Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.**

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at [www.yenpress.com/booklink](http://www.yenpress.com/booklink)