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STORY BY
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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!



“The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette can be interpreted as his tragedy.”

—Director of Shuya Marionette

Prologue: A Mysterious Power

“Shuya, why are you afraid of some mere zombies?! Look at you! Remember the person you’ve set your sights on, and how much more powerful they are!”

It’s hot... It’s like I’m in boiling water...

When I breathe, this gross smell fills my mouth and nose. I feel like I’m going to be sick...

The heck is this? Ugh, I’m so dizzy. I might throw up at any moment...

Plus, there’re also those guys over there. Why are their bodies so warm even though they’re zombies...?

“Shuya, zombies do not die just because their heads have been blown off! Hey, are you even listening to me?!”

I gasped.

For a moment there, I had lost sight of who I was. *That was close. Come on, get a grip!*

Here, even one slipup would spell my doom. *You know that very well now after all those battles, don’t you?* I thought to myself. *Now, brace yourself, and focus!*

Right now, I wasn’t in my peaceful homeland. Nor was I at Kirsch Mage Institute, or even in the town of Yoram.

I was on a battlefield, and I was facing fearsome monsters. To be more precise, misshapen zombies made from bodies and materials from normal monsters.

“Shuya. Though this view before you may be of the battlefields you dreamed of joining when you were a child—”

I clenched my teeth. “I know, okay?! You’re so annoying, Eldred!”

When was it again? Way back when, there had been a time when I had a grand but vague dream of accomplishing something great on some battlefield. Back then, I'd loved learning about the wonderful achievements of adventurers or records of heroes who had forged and razed their own ways in the great wars of long ago.

A voice rang out. "There are some awfully agile zombies here! They're evolved specimens! Be careful!"

Another voice quickly followed. "The Netherworld Scarlet Zylush adventurer party has arrived! Let's make our comeback now! Don't let any of them approach the city!"

"Get away from here at once, Shuya! The others are getting closer! If someone hears you, they would be suspicious!"

I had loved the old tales of normal, everyday people mustering their courage and defeating gale dragnas and man-eating apes all by themselves. I had drunk in the story of how a human, murdered in war, was revived into a suit of armor and eliminated a monster that had prowled around the continent for a long time.

That was why I had once shared my dream with my dad, Baron Newkern. I had told him proudly that when I grew up, I would do something great in a war and receive a medal from Daryth's royal family. I had thought that he'd praise me and call me a remarkable boy, but a clenched fist had flown in my direction instead. *Oh yeah. He shouted at me angrily that members of House Newkern wouldn't become soldiers like those of ducal houses, didn't he?* My dad had wanted me to focus on studying and becoming a praiseworthy feudal lord instead, managing our own lands.

But...I had never, ever forgotten my dream from back then. That was why I had zero intention of running away from this battle.

"The condition for success for this city defense quest is that absolutely no zombies get inside!"

"Good news! I hear that Zylush is joining our ranks! Let's make a great comeback!"

The stage was outside of the Dungeon City, Zenelaus. An army of zombies from the devastated wilderness, where no greenery could take root, was closing in on the city.

“Filth like these are slightly too insignificant to be worthwhile foes, but they might be just the right targets for our first blood!”

I paused, digesting those words. “You’re right, Eldred. It’s our first battle!”

At first, I had only fought the zombies that someone else’s barrage had missed. Acting like the novice adventurer I was, I had made sure that my actions wouldn’t get in the way of my more experienced elders. However, an endless stream of zombies relentlessly came and attacked Zenelaus every single day.

Thus, I had decided to switch gears. I had wanted to fight with all my might as an adventurer in my own right, as one of those accomplished adventurers on the special city defense quest from the Adventurers’ Guild.

In terms of numbers, we would be easily overwhelmed. However, just like Eldred had said, the power of each individual zombie wasn’t anything to brag about.

On the first day, I had carried myself with caution. On the second, there had been a newfound certainty to my hunt, and I had become bold and determined on the third.

And just like I had expected, being in Zenelaus had completely turned my life around.

“Have you realized it yet, Shuya? The shortcut to strength you so craved is right here!”

“You’re right! *This* is what I had been yearning for! And more importantly, Eldred! What’s going on in the place I was at just a moment ago? Show me!” I yelled.

“Dismiss the vision quickly. If you don’t, you will deplete your stamina like before and worry that little girl again,” the voice warned.

“I know! But I’m concerned since that place had the most zombies, so please! Show me!”

Just as I finished saying that request, I heard a sigh of exasperation inside my head. In the next moment, a chaotic torrent of information blasted into my mind, and the scenery of *that place* materialized before me. This vision depicted a certain scene happening somewhere else, a short distance away.

Zombies pressed forward with weapons in their hands, and humans faced them off with weapons of their own.

There were many adventurers, and there were also people who hadn't been there earlier. A certain man caught my attention. He was awfully gaudy and looked as if he had come here as one of the fresh reinforcements from Zenelaus. His long, chestnut-colored hair was tied behind his head.

"Hey, Zylush's Zodd! Do me a favor and use that thing your leader has to take out these guys in one swoop! Since it's your leader, I'm sure he's capable enough."

"Shut it with your nonsense!" the man shouted back with irritation. "Our leader just left for the west because of a request for aid there! And you're trying to demand that he use Flamberge in a place like this?! Too many people would be caught up in the aftermath and there would be steep losses! How many adventurers do you think are here? That thing's made for fighting against armies!"

I was able to see this through a mysterious power that allowed me a glimpse of a place I couldn't see with my own eyes. This series of events was going on somewhere fairly close to where I stood.

It seemed that they had been able to fight on steady footing up until now, but slightly stronger zombies were starting to appear, and our side was losing ground. *It's a disaster in the making. The guild staff said that today, there were fewer adventurers than usual taking on the city defense quest, so...*

A girl exclaimed, "Whoa, Zodd! Careful, the zombie behind you is still alive! Wait, look at your arm! You've been bitten! You should make a trip back to town and splash yourself with holy water right now."

"Me? Dying from a zombie bite? Nalita, I'm not that weak!" the man hissed.

"Well, if you say so! But don't forget that overestimating yourself can only

lead to ruin!” she yelled back.

“Oh, stuff it! I’m a very experienced adventurer, thank you very much!” the man retorted.

Using this power to see this happen somewhere else was almost like hijacking someone else’s vision.

Compared to before, I no longer felt any discomfort when I used this. However, there was one thing that was kinda terrible about it. *To be frank, this tires me out like crazy, so I can’t spam it... And, in the end, I’m not on the other side of this vision so I can’t do anything about anything I see. In times like this, though...*

I hesitated for a moment. “Please,” I said.

“Just as always, you are far too soft. Shuya, these humans are stronger than you are yourself, you know that?”

I thought back to the crude, probably sharp-tongued man in the vision Eldred had shown me. Though I had never spoken to him myself, I knew very well that he was an adventurer of a higher level than me.

If I remember right, that man is a member of Zylush. That party is led by the Archflare, the high-ranking adventurer that I admire.

That fact wasn’t my only reason, but there was no way I could leave things be. Just now, a zombie with its head half-ripped off had looked for a chance to bite his neck. The woman who had warned him earlier was also absorbed in her own fight, and she didn’t seem like she would realize it in time. Everyone already had their hands full with the monsters closing in on them.

“Eldred, please,” I repeated my request.

The voice echoing in my head sounded somewhat peeved. **“It’s not like you know him personally. Why care if that man gets injured?”**

However, an orb of fire suddenly appeared in my hand and slowly floated into the air. As it flew away, I knew this fire orb would travel to defeat the zombie that had been trying to grab the man.

The surrounding zombies probably thought I was giving them an opening and

they gathered in my direction...but that spell wasn't actually *my* work. Thus, I was still plenty able to focus on my own fight with them.

"Who was that?! Whose spell was it?! I didn't ask anyone to help me!" he yelled.

"It's a remote spell! Looks like some babe in the woods out there saved your bacon, Zodd!" the woman teased.

"Looks like there's a cheeky brat out there somewhere. I suppose they want to curry favor with Zylush, huh?"

"Well, there's also the chance that they want to join our party!"

With my intervention, the danger on the other side had passed. The members of Zylush made a fuss because they didn't know what had happened, but they probably wouldn't ever find out who had saved the man. I was all the way over here, after all.

Phew. Okay, now I need to concentrate on my own battle.

"Eldred, please dismiss the vision. I'll focus on my own fight now."

"I practically carried you through," Eldred grumbled.

I paused. "Is that a bad thing?"

Eldred seemed to huff in fond exasperation. **"You only rely on me when things aren't going your way, Shuya."**

"Well, yeah. After all, you're my teacher, aren't you? I'm counting on you, Eldred."

There was a certain crystal ball embedded in the glove on my left hand. This fellow, who apparently lived inside of it, had once announced that his name was Eldred. He didn't have a shred of interest in playing the savior.

In the northern half of the continent, the colossal Dustour Empire went through wars one after another without pause. They had finally managed to unite the entire northern half and were now watching the southern half like a hawk, scheming to invade us too. Even children knew of the terrifying rumors

nowadays.

In response to that, many of the major countries of the south quickly got friendly with each other and formed an alliance to prepare for Dustour's invasion.

And now, rumors spread like wildfire that there would be a war between the south and the empire that had now conquered the north.

Knowing that war might be on the horizon...I had decided that I would join the army after I graduated from Kirsch, and I would protect my country.

However, in my current state, I hadn't thought that I would be able to perform well against the thoroughly disciplined imperial troops. I had decided that in order to prepare, I would train myself from the ground up in Zenelaus.

"Eldred!" I yelled. "Where to next? What should I do?!"

On that night when monsters attacked us at Kirsch Mage Institute, I had realized a startling truth. Up until then, I had thought that I was a rather talented mage, but all of that had been a fantasy. I had always been under someone else's protection, and I hadn't actually done anything myself.

This thought was only amplified after Huzak, now that I could put a face to the faction I called the enemy.

"A large swarm is advancing from the left! Hit them with everything you have!"

"Got it!"

I had been inferior to that man in every single aspect: experience, power, talent, and conviction. If I'd had more power back then, I could have interrogated him about his goals. It could have been an opportunity to probe into the plans of the empire, but I had wasted that once-in-a-lifetime chance.

And after all of that, when I had awoken from my state...I had found myself in a horse-drawn carriage. Alicia had been crying next to me. According to her, I had slept for several days. She had said that she thought I might never wake up again.

I gritted my teeth. I had been powerless. Every single day, I had yearned for

greater strength. One of those days was precisely when a male voice calling himself “Eldred” had echoed in my head. The voice had been the familiar one from my crystal ball that had always guided me onto the right path.

The mysterious voice had asked me whether I wanted to become stronger, and I had nodded on instinct.

And an opportunity to demonstrate this gifted power had immediately come to pass.

“There’s no time for you to catch your breath, Shuya! You wish to protect the city behind you, do you not? Or are you simply going to return?!”

“There’s no way I’d go back now!” I screamed. “Alicia, and everyone else, is in that city!”

“You value others above yourself, I see... I’ve been watching over you for a long time, but who would have thought it was to this extent? Like I thought, Shuya, you really are a silly man!”

An incident had happened a few days after I had arrived in Zenelaus. The renowned guild master had announced that the dungeon on the Easton Rock Mountain Range had been occupied by monsters from another region, headed by a lich.

Not only that, but he had followed up that declaration with an announcement that a horde of monsters led by the lich would soon attack Zenelaus. To fight back, the Adventurers’ Guild had recruited adventurers to participate in city defense.

At first, everyone had laughed the news off as ridiculous. However, the advancing swarm of the undead spoke for itself. Those who could fight jumped into the fray with weapons in hand, and the city witnessed the approach of an overwhelming mass of zombies.

The words of that guild master, Eye of the Crimson Lotus, had come true. In other words, Zenelaus was under attack.

“What is the guild master doing?! S-class adventurers exist for times like this, don’t they?!” someone shouted.

“I heard that the Eye of the Crimson Lotus was wounded during a fight with the lich a few days ago!”

The whole situation might seem similar to Kirsch’s horde invasion, but in reality, these were two completely different things. Whenever night fell, the zombies controlled by the lich would return to the Easton Rock Mountain Range in the wilderness. They were being actively managed by the lich in charge.

“Eldred, I thought we went over this. I need to fight by myself so I can grow, and it’s your job to stop others from approaching, right? So why are there so many people around me now? I didn’t even notice!”

“A change of plans. You overdo it when you’re by yourself. It is much safer for there to be someone else around.”

Eldred, the voice echoing in my head, had given me a few new abilities. My expansion of vision from earlier was one of them.

The first time I had used it, I had nearly jumped out of my skin. *Of course I would’ve been shocked. I was able to see another battlefield in my mind, after all!*

However, Eldred had given me mysterious advice from inside the crystal for a long time. In those moments, he had sometimes mentioned what someone was doing elsewhere at the same time, and, well...

I had felt like smacking myself in the forehead for never once thinking that that fact was odd up until now.

“Hey, Eldred! Can’t I talk to you directly in my mind like you do? I can hear your voice in my head, but isn’t it silly that you can’t hear me unless I talk out loud?”

“Now then, no further conversation is allowed. Shuya, be discreet.”

“Yeah, whatever. *Sorry* for asking you the same thing so many times!” I said sarcastically.

As for the reason why this guy lent me his real powers... Apparently, it was because I desperately wished to become more powerful.

However, it was best that people didn't spot me conversing with Eldred. To talk with him, I needed to speak out loud. *Alicia often calls it creepy too. It's obviously a strange sight to see someone muttering nonsense to themselves as they fight...*

"Kid, get out of here!" a man shouted to me. "The Archflare's gonna fire off his sword! Don't get caught in it!"

"Um!" I perked up. "Wait, are you possibly talking about Flamberge?!"

There was appalled silence on Eldred's end.

"Exactly! The power of the famous Archflare!" the man said proudly. "But if you don't want to become collateral damage, go back to the city! The sun has already set, so the Archflare's going to bid the zombies farewell with a big attack!"

There were many notable adventurers in Zenelaus. The guild master, the S-class adventurer Eye of the Crimson Lotus, was a cut above the rest, but the Archflare also had much fame to his name.

Huh, so even that great adventurer is participating in the city defense effort now. If that man takes it seriously, he can probably take out weak pickings like zombies in one swoop.

That's right, I thought. To become as strong as him, I need experience on battlefields.

Alicia had proposed we evacuate from Zenelaus before we got hurt, and she had a very good point, but opportunities like these were very rare. If I returned to my homeland, to Daryth, and back to Kirsch Mage Institute...I would return to being a mere student, living a life where adults protected me.

That was why I was now truly glad, from the bottom of my heart, that I had come to Zenelaus. After all, I was able to participate in the city defense every day, and I could feel myself getting stronger as time passed.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed as my knee suddenly buckled and I nearly lost my balance.

A zombie clung to my waist from behind me. I attempted to twist and shake it off, but before I could do any more, a floating fireball struck the zombie. It let out an anguished scream as it burned away into nothing.

This was Eldred's power. Besides the ability to show me visions of locations nearby, he also had his unique ways of attacking.

“Why are you just standing there?! Considering your abilities right now, you can't leisurely get lost in your thoughts in a place like this!”

I gasped, snapping back into focus.

Eldred had mentioned that teaching me was his top priority at the moment, so he only gave bare minimum aid when it was needed.

Apparently, it was all for my own sake and for my future. I had complained inwardly that he should have just revealed his identity earlier if that had been the case, but he had claimed he hadn't done that because I hadn't truly craved power from the bottom of my heart.

Whenever a topic having to do with fighting came up, Eldred was like a nagging old grandpa, but as long as I obeyed him, I would definitely become stronger. I was sure of it.

Just as I thought that, a scorching wind brushed by my cheeks.

The zombies were engulfed in flames.

My spells could only burn down one zombie at a time, at best. However, the sudden inferno had incinerated a few hundred of them at once.

I took a moment to drink it all in. “Wow. So *that's* the power of Flamberge.”

In the lower levels of a high-difficulty dungeon, it wasn't too rare for there to be treasures that could fetch a price so high that one could live off the money without ever having to worry about it again. High-ranking adventurers could choose to either sell those artifacts or keep them for their own use. The magical artifact that brought forth this inferno was Flamberge, and the high-class adventurer Archflare had chosen to keep that sword for himself.

I hesitated. “I suppose that signals the end of the fighting for today, huh?”

That inferno was a sign that the battle had indeed concluded that day.

Whenever the sun set, the zombies immediately lost their fighting spirit, and they would return to the Easton Rock Mountain Range.

This seemed to prove that the zombies were puppets under the control of the lich. *What in the world is that lich thing thinking, anyway? I heard it's very intelligent, but to suddenly occupy a dungeon... The rumors say that it has its eyes set on the priceless treasures stashed away in Zenelaus's guild headquarters, but who knows for sure?*

"Huh?" I muttered.

"What's wrong, Shuya?"

"Uh, there's a monster over there that *isn't* a zombie..."

The monster stuck out like a sore thumb in the crowd of zombies. *It looks like...a dullahan.* They say that those monsters are hollow inside their armor and that they won't die even after their heads have been cut off. Apparently, it was important to make it admit defeat in order for it to die. It was a monster that required a strange strategy.

This was the first time I had seen one in the flesh, and...for some reason, I froze, as if I had been paralyzed. Even though it was supposed to be empty under the armor, something felt off, as if somebody were actually inside...

"Shuya," Eldred said after a long stretch of silence. **"If you want to stay alive, do not get involved with that thing at all costs."**

I had never, *ever* heard Eldred so on edge before.

Chapter 1: The Dungeon City, Zenelaus

“We’ve finally arrived, oink...” I groaned.

“Though it might not have been the most comfortable ride, no matter what kind of monster stands in our way, we shall escort our customers to their destinations safe and sound. That is our role, the role of this large-scale adventurer party, the Armed Convoy! Now, our wonderful customers, you may exit the vehicle! Behold, the imposing city standing in the wilderness is our long-awaited destination, the Dungeon City, Zenelaus!”

Now that I thought back on it, I had never traveled for pleasure. Since I was born into House Denning, it was all but certain that I would take command of the army one day, so my strict education was all towards that end.

Even when I left the country for the purpose of inspections, someone had always waited by my side without fail. I’d been hailed as one of the prodigies that would lead the country or something grand like that, and my schedule had always been filled to the brim. There was no way I had any free time.

“Our dear customers! When you feel like returning to Galland City, please don’t hesitate to call for the Armed Convoy! We have our regular service twice a day, but we also accept escort requests with a minimum of four people! If you hired shoddy adventurers as your guards just because they’re cheap, you would perish! This place is overflowing with zombies at the moment, and inexperienced adventurers are utterly useless. For those of you with deeper coffers, we even have a hellish course in which we rush through the wilderness in one night, so please, make sure to consider your options wisely!”

Things had only worsened after I had become the blackhearted Piggy Duke. When I had been living in the Denning lands back then, I had always been a hermit in my room and spent my time eating and sleeping the day away. Since I had been deemed the failure of House Denning, members of my family had been very against letting me outside.

Thus, my trip to Zenelaus could count as my first ever trip for pleasure.

“Wow, I’m in Zenelaus again! This brings back so many memories!” an adventurer gushed. “Back when we just started out as adventurers, we used to venture around here safely all the time, didn’t we?! How many years has it been since I last came back? Wait, I don’t remember this many monsters wandering around out in the wilderness, though...”

“It’s full of zombies,” a man remarked. “I haven’t heard of any new dungeons spawning, though...”

“Oink...” I snorted pathetically after a long pause.

But life never goes the way you want it to... I thought miserably. My stay in Huzak had been harsh, and I had prioritized haste above all else in my trip from Daryth to Zenelaus. I didn’t have any time to properly tour around places on the way.

I probably caused a lot of stress for my traveling companion too. I’m really sorry about this. I really am, I swear!

I felt a pair of glaring eyes drilling into my back.

I hesitated. “Um, Miss Charlotte?” I said carefully.

Of course, this pair of eyes belonged to a girl whom I knew very well. She was glaring at me because we had come here despite all of her objections.

“Charlotte,” I said weakly. “We’ve arrived in Zenelaus, you know?”

“Adventurers!” a voice boomed. “Work your hardest on our special quest to defend this city! The Adventurers’ Guild promises that we will support those who fight for this city as much as we can!”

The Freedom Union was located in the southeastern corner of the continent, while Daryth was located to the northwest in the middle of the continent. It was known as a country where merchants could sell their souls for money and flourish.

Huzak was between Daryth and the Freedom Union, and it was impossible to travel through it now. Thus, the journey from Daryth to the Freedom Union was a long one, taking nearly two weeks.

On top of that, if someone wanted to go to Zenelaus, the capital city of adventurers and the pride of the Freedom Union, the only option they had was to make use of the regular carriage services that departed from Galland City. Galland City was an industrial metropolis where smoke could be seen churning on in the sky endlessly every day.

However, the trip from Galland City to Zenelaus was a very brutal one. *You never know what kind of monster you might bump into in the wilderness, so you need expert guides who know the wilds like the back of their hand.*

“Only adventures of D-class and above are allowed to participate in the city defenses! Anyone below that can join in as support!”

“Zenelaus may be recruiting all kinds of adventurers, but we’re also recruiting guild staff at all times!”

Zenelaus was a smaller, isolated city that stood as a firm presence against the barren wilderness surrounding it, and was partially encircled by a desolate mountain range. The city itself was located in a barren area where it was impossible to find any green around. The streets were grimy, and its walls looked worn down. Even the paved streets looked chipped and cracked.

I had seen the city from the windows of the Armed Convoy’s carriage, driven by tamed monsters. Zenelaus had seemed so tiny and insignificant compared to the magnificent expanse of wilderness around it, but my impression completely changed once I was actually inside its walls.

“The Eye of the Crimson Lotus was just a hair’s breadth away from crushing that lich! However, a dullahan that was gushing out miasma appeared and got in his way at the last moment! The Eye of the Crimson Lotus didn’t actually lose!”

“City defense is the best! Even if I slack off, I get rewards! It’s not like the guild staff can keep track of everyone, after all. It’s way safer than exploring a dungeon and the pay’s good, so there’s no need to move to any other towns!” a man cackled.

The whole town was filled with vitality and vigor. Perhaps it was because more than half of the residents were adventurers who specialized in dungeon expeditions.

Monsters were on the prowl in the wilderness, and just getting to this city was a risk to one's life. Yet, everyone was absorbed in their conversations with vibrant faces. Among them, I spotted some adventurers from the Armed Convoy, which had just brought a fresh crowd of merchants and adventurers to Zenelaus.

Everyone was devoted to gathering the latest information. *I suppose I should have expected nothing less from a city of the Freedom Union, which loooves anything to do with money.*

"But with more and more adventurers showing up every minute," someone argued, "won't the rewards decrease sooner or later?"

"No way in hell! Look at how many zombies are loitering outside! No matter how many adventurers there are, the zombies will only increase unless we defeat the root of the problem: that lich!"

Outside Zenelaus, there were twenty-four dungeons in the wilderness that reflected the harsher side of nature.

These dungeons weren't just the classic holes that led to the underground. Some of these were tunnels in the mountain range, and there were even paths to the peak of the mountain range that turned into dungeons. It was practically a theme park of assorted dungeons.

I finally spoke up. "Charlotte... You saw all those zombies roaming around the wasteland too, didn't you? There were *loads* of them. The adventurers are fighting to prevent the zombies from invading the city."

Charlotte did not reply.

I continued on awkwardly with forced cheerfulness. "See? I was right on the mark with my deduction that something abnormal was going on in Zenelaus. This city is currently in great danger. I-I'm so glad we were able to find out what's really going on! I was worrying my head off about the situation in this place, you know?"

At the end of my poverty-stricken trip with Charlotte, we had finally, *somehow*, managed to arrive in Zenelaus, one of the prized capitals of the Freedom Union.

Charlotte's tone was steady when she finally replied to me. "Master Slowe. May I make one comment?"

"G-Go ahead!"

"Indeed, there are many zombies outside, and I see why you said that this town is in great danger. But this place is practically celebrating the whole thing, isn't it? You said that it was miserable and needed help, Master Slowe, but it doesn't feel that way at all. Did we *really* need to go out of our way to come here?"

"Uh, I mean, you're right, Charlotte. It doesn't feel like they're waiting for aid right now, but... S-Still!" I tried to argue.

"Even someone like me has heard that the dungeon in the Easton Rock Mountain Range is famous for having lots of tortoises that can be processed into precious stones. I know one could earn a fortune there. But even though the dungeon has been occupied by a fearsome lich monster posing a great danger to the city, these people are super cheerful, aren't they?!"

"Uh, well..." I stammered. "I can't really argue against that..."

The Easton Rock Mountain Range could be seen on the far side of the wilderness that surrounded Zenelaus. One of the twenty-four dungeons in the area was located there, and it was called the Carapace Temple.

Apparently, a lich had appeared out of nowhere and attacked, causing the dungeon to fall into the monster's clutches. And now, the lich was probably creating its puppets inside of it. The wilderness was suddenly filled with zombies staggering about, even though they normally wouldn't be in this area.

These zombies were originally humans, monsters, or a strange mixture of both, and they were all turned into undead puppets by the lich. Large groups of adventurers were currently surrounding the perimeter of the city, dealing with approaching monsters. They had all probably accepted the job from the guild.

No matter how you look at it, Zenelaus is in a very precarious situation, but uh... I faltered.

“That Archflare guy actually took out the elder zombies in one swoop!” a man shouted animatedly. “I was watching nearby, but that Flamberge isn’t anything to laugh about! It might be the luckiest dungeon drop found in these past few years!”

“The dungeon’s occupied by that lich, and the Adventurers’ Guild wants to get rid of that guy as soon as possible! That’s probably why they’re throwing money at the problem left and right! City defense right now can really earn us some great cash! Just defeating a few zombies outside the city brings money into our pockets, after all!”

“Did you hear that, Charlotte?” I asked. “This place is in a festive mood because it’s a city of adventurers. The Adventurers’ Guild seems to be handing out money like candy for some reason, so it’s probably quite the prosperous time... Ah, but I’m serious! This city really *is* in great danger!”

Charlotte’s silence was chilling.

“Word on the street is that there will be a special quest to fight the lich!” a man yelled. “Whoever takes down that lich will leap right up in rank! Someone even said that you could rise up to A-or S-class! A new S-class adventurer might come out of all this!” The man cheered heartily. “Excitement’s building for the final confrontation! Every day is so fun!”

Even right at that moment, the adventurers were laughing at ease with each other, boasting about the effortless money they had earned by beating up zombies.

I mean, I knew this would be the case, but seriously? Even in the anime, there were tons of people who enjoyed the fight with the zombies, so I expected this... But is this kind of uproar an everyday occurrence to these guys? Being attacked by a lich’s army? Really?

“You know, Master Slowe...” Charlotte began. “You were muttering in your sleep that Zenelaus had it bad and that it was going to be destroyed. On top of that, you even stopped eating properly... Because of all that, I thought this was important enough that I let you come here without returning to the capital! But look at the people here! They’re having the time of their lives! It’s written all over their faces that being attacked by monsters is just another normal day in

Zenelaus!”

Like Charlotte said, after I heard that something bad was going on in Zenelaus, I lost my appetite entirely. I had realized that the events of the anime were proceeding steadily even though I had driven Rooney back to where he came from, and it had been too much.

“Charlotte, shush!” I hissed with panic. “Careful, everyone can hear you!”

“The promise you made wasn’t just with any girl, you know! A promise with Princess Carina is a promise with the royal family! It’s essentially a promise with the queen herself!”

I tried to somehow pacify my infuriated little retainer. “I was completely in the wrong. I am sorry.”

If I consider what’s unfolding in Zenelaus right now, though, it’s way more important than my promise with Princess Carina. After all, the conflict in this city is the trigger that will lead to an outbreak of war with the Dustour Empire...

“When we arrived in Zenelaus, the Great Spirit of Wind said they would go off exploring and then wandered off somewhere... How are we going to make ends meet now...?” Charlotte wailed. “Master Slowe, do you understand the gravity of the situation? We’re broke!”

To be honest, I didn’t want to bring Charlotte with me. However, considering that certain future which lay in wait in Zenelaus...I had to depend on the power of the Great Spirit of Wind. This time, my power alone might not be enough to seize command of the situation. I could say that I had brought Charlotte along so that I could borrow the power of the Great Spirit.

I know, I’m a scumbag who always troubles Charlotte for my own selfish reasons. I’m a big bad Slowe who can’t even keep my promise.

“Ah, you’re ignoring me again with that complicated look on your face... I mean, I’ve gotten used to it, but still...”

But, honestly...I’m getting sick and tired of this role I have to play. I’m the only one who knows how important these events are, so I need to shoulder the burden all on my own. Jeez, I’m not a volunteer who works for free, you know?

Someone, please take this job off me, thanks! Surely there's someone with a stronger sense of justice out there!

Charlotte was oblivious to my thoughts, and her ire only grew in momentum...
Wait, why'd she freeze like that?!

"Master Slowe! I came up with the most brilliant idea!" Charlotte declared.

"All right, let's hear it. Charlotte, feel free to say anything you want. I want to take your opinions into consideration as much as I can."

"I get the feeling that you haven't given much weight to my opinion up until now, but...that's in the past," Charlotte muttered. "So, I was thinking that since we're here in Zenelaus anyway...we might as well become adventurers!"



The most outlandish proposal known to man came out of her mouth.

“I’ve managed to awaken my magic properly now, and you’re a super-duper strong mage!” Charlotte exclaimed. “We could make a great living as adventurers. We’d go off into dungeons, earn money like there’s no tomorrow, and we can simply move to this country! Luckily, the Freedom Union doesn’t care about one’s origins at all, so it’s perfect for people like us, who broke our promise with Princess Carina, and...”

“Charlotte, the life of an adventurer is really tough, you know?”

“But that’s probably the only choice we have left...” Charlotte muttered dejectedly.

A loud voice cut into our conversation. “There is no need to fear a lowly lich!!! We have the Eye of the Crimson Lotus on our side! The hero who has so many great feats under his belt has our back!”

“Charlotte, be quiet for a moment,” I said.

Charlotte pouted in displeasure.

I listened to the man making a speech. He spoke passionately with a loud voice to inspire the masses...no, the *adventurers* here in the city.

“After the battle a few days ago, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus stormed into the Easton Rock Mountain Range all by himself! He was able to valiantly get past the scarlet base of the mountains, crowded with zombies... Let me ask you this. Is there anyone else here who has the courage to rush into *that* place alone?!”

Right now, Zenelaus was under attack from a lich. That was for certain.

Well, they weren’t exactly wrong, but all of this was actually an attack planned by the Dustour Empire. To be more precise, it was an attack ordered by one of the Three Musketeers, Dreibach Steibelt. He was also known as the Living Dead and was a half-human, half-fiend apparition.

It was identical to what happened in the anime, and I slumped my shoulders at that thought.

In Huzak, I had managed to chase the scout Rooney back to the north. Despite

that, the Living Dead had still initialized his attack on Zenelaus, just like in the anime.

How in the world had things come to *this*?

The man continued on. “According to reports from the Adventurers’ Guild, there’s a new dungeon in the area beyond the base of the mountain range. There is an entrance leading to the dungeon overrun with the undead! It seems that the lich has indeed occupied the Carapace Temple! It has stolen our golden goose from us!”

Why hasn’t the future changed at all? In the official guide to the anime, they clearly wrote that if Shuya had chased Rooney away at that point in time, the war wouldn’t have happened!

But that’s not all. Rooney has the favor of Nanatrij, and he suffered a defeat. Under these circumstances, I don’t think Nanatrij would decide to ignore her own plans and start the attack on Zenelaus either...

Charlotte continued to lecture and nag me insistently long after the man’s speech had concluded.

“Master Slowe? Are you listening to me?”

Even though she might not seem like it, Charlotte had actually calmed down quite a lot compared to before.

In the middle of our journey to the Freedom Union, there was a time when Charlotte had broken down and bawled for real, wailing that she could never return to Daryth again. She had cursed me, calling me an idiot.

Whenever one of those episodes had happened, I had consoled her with flimsy lies I made up on the spot, saying that we were actually on a secret mission from Princess Carina. Unfortunately, that had only added fuel to the fire.

In the end, I had revealed the truth to her: something fishy was going on in Zenelaus. Charlotte had asked me what I meant by “fishy,” and oh boy, answering that question had been a big struggle.

“It’s not that I doubt everything you said though, Master Slowe. After all, well... You were right when you said that the Adventurers’ Guild was lying... I would never have thought that the dungeon had actually fallen into the hands of a monster... Ah, I can see it now. So that’s Nemesis... That’s a lot of people.”

Every town within the Freedom Union always had at least one certain establishment you could find without fail: the Adventurers’ Guild.

Daryth took on the stance of crushing dungeons immediately once they spawned, if possible, but this country managed them differently.

The Freedom Union did whatever it took to secure a lasting profit from the dungeons. Preserving dungeons by keeping them in a precarious balance between overflow and destruction was like child’s play to them. The scale and facilities of the Adventurers’ Guilds in this country were also in a whole other league compared to other countries.

However, the Adventurers’ Guild in this town was even more special compared to the rest. This location was known as Nemesis and acted as the guild’s headquarters for the southern half of the continent.

“Please line up for your rewards from the city defense quest! I repeat! Those waiting for your rewards, please line up! Hey, I didn’t say two lines; keep it to one!”

The plaza right before the robust guild headquarters was filled with adventurers. Nearly all of these people gathered here had probably taken on the city defense quest from the Adventurers’ Guild.

Wow, there are so many of them. Burly adventurers flooded the entrance of the guild headquarters, and the line was too long to be contained in the plaza before the building. Here and there, I could overhear complaints about people cutting in line and how long the wait was.

So this is the heart of the Adventurers’ Guild in the south, uniting all of the guilds in this part of the continent, huh? Unlike other guild offices, Nemesis was on a whole other level in scale and in the number of adventurers that made use of it.

Hm? A guild staff member just came out from the entrance and he's shouting something...

"A reminder to all of those who accepted the city defense quest: don't forget to prepare the documents filled in by the staff on the scene! Hey, you, over there! Line up properly! In addition, the registration of new adventurers is suspended for today and will resume at a later date!"

Here, the risk associated with a quest was proportional to the reward. On our way here to Nemesis, I heard many adventurers saying that the rewards for city defense were handsome. If the guild was handing out that much in return, it meant that the same amount of danger was involved.

"It's huge..." Charlotte muttered in awe. "I wonder how many people work here. Let's head in, Master Slowe."

"If we want to go inside, Charlotte, it seems that we have to get in line with everyone else," I said.

Adventurers who came to this city could gain information about monsters and traps in monitored dungeons, and they could steadily grow stronger while exploring within a safety net.

However, adventurers who only earned a living within the confines of Zenelaus without leaving were looked down upon by others, and they were regarded as amateurs. As a result, not a lot of people stayed here for a long time. Most would polish up their abilities, save up money, then leave for wild dungeons untouched by humans.

Zenelaus was an outlet for the desires of adventurers, and it held dungeons that spat out precious items. The adventurers in this city were probably raking in tons of money.

"Let's...not do that..." Charlotte muttered slowly.

"Yeah, agreed."

"That aside, you'd never find a city with this kind of feel in Daryth. I'm a little surprised," Charlotte admitted.

"Charlotte, beware of pickpockets. In a sense, anything goes in this place."

“Listen to yourself! We don’t even have enough money to steal.”

I whimpered out a snort. “Sorry. It’s all my fault.”

Being poor was painful. *At this rate, it’s probably better if we become adventurers like Charlotte suggested. At least that way, we could earn money...*

“Back to what we were talking about earlier...” Charlotte paused. “Master Slowe, how did you realize that Zenelaus was spreading fishy information on purpose?”

I hesitated. “Let’s walk while we talk. We’d be in deep trouble if someone from the guild’s staff overheard us.”

I cranked my head up to look at the Adventurers’ Guild building, Nemesis. This adventurers’ headquarters was the one where the so-called “truth” that Zenelaus was under the attack of a lich had originated.

Hundreds, thousands of adventurers lined up in rows and disappeared into Nemesis.

The building was just like a carnivorous plant attracting insects with nectar with how it freely dished out the special city defense quest to adventurers.

“Remember when we tried to find out more about Zenelaus? The information sounded stranger and stranger as we dug deeper. In one town, the rumors said that a new dungeon ruled by orcs had spawned here, but in another, apparently all was right in the world. There was even that ridiculous rumor about a new dungeon spawning, but the Eye of the Crimson Lotus crushed it because it wasn’t profitable.”

“So is it just like what you said in the first place, Master Slowe? The Adventurers’ Guild wants to hide the fact that a lich took over a dungeon?”

“Probably. I think the guild is purposefully spreading false information so that it’s difficult to know what’s *actually* going on here in Zenelaus. And who would be the mastermind behind all this? It’s obviously the overlord of the city, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus. It would be impossible to control the flow of information like this unless he was involved.”

Charlotte hesitated. “Do you think there’s a reason for all this?”

“If possible, I want to meet him and ask him in person, but unfortunately, we aren’t even adventurers... I hear that the Eye of the Crimson Lotus is a man shrouded in mystery, and that even the Adventurers’ Guild can’t keep track of his whereabouts or what he’s doing at any time. We probably won’t even be able to meet him unless we do something drastic.”

“But the Adventurers’ Guild seems to be asking for help from an extensive range of sources right now. If you said that you’re here to lend a hand, then—”

“That’s our last resort. I’m a Daryth noble, and one from House Denning at that. If I openly cooperate with a guild from another country, things are going to get messy... More importantly, we should probably find ourselves a base of operations first. I really don’t want a repeat of last time, when we went to inn after inn and they were all full so we had to sleep outdoors.”

“You should eat something, Master Slowe. You’ve only been drinking water lately!” Charlotte said worriedly.

“I just can’t stomach food right now...” I muttered.

We had been traveling penniless for a long time. *I’ll be frank. Even Charlotte hadn’t believed me at first, and many times, my spirit came to the brink of breaking. To a bystander, my actions would look like a big, fat betrayal towards the faith Princess Carina had placed in me.*

In the end, Charlotte had followed me regardless. A whirlpool of emotions in my chest was suffocating me, and I couldn’t work up even a bit of an appetite. I mean, just think about it! A war is going to break out all of a sudden. Zenelaus will fall, and the world as we know it will end. And I’m the only person who knows such a future is creeping in on us. It’s way too heavy of a burden! Of course I wouldn’t feel like eating anything.

“Are you *still* not hungry at all?” Charlotte asked.

“Yeah...”

Still, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, huh? I actually don’t know much about that guy. In the anime, he only showed up as the man who dragged Zenelaus into the war, and there wasn’t much else about him. However, many people hailed him as a hero... The guild staff and even the adventurers caught up in the war were

oblivious to the truth because he didn't enlighten them.

The guild master that these people place up on a pedestal as the hero of this city... What kind of person is he really?

I'm just curious because, well, I hear people singing the guy's praises everywhere in the streets here. My general impression of adventurers is that they're violent and self-centered, and they love booze. The adventurers of Zenelaus not only fit the stereotype, but they're even on the extreme end of the spectrum. They're a very rowdy lot. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus has the absolute faith of these people, so I'm curious what kind of—

A male voice interrupted my thoughts. "Do I have to repeat myself?! I've said time and time again that I'm going to remain in Zenelaus!"

"Then when are you coming back today?!" a girl asked, livid. "Think about how I feel, having to wait for you in a run-down inn while worried sick if you were going to come back without getting injured again!"

"Don't just shove your opinions onto me! Nobody ever asked you to worry about me!" the boy yelled back.

The girl was infuriated. "What did you just say?!"

We were in a city full of adventurers. People were arguing all over the place.

Someone else started to complain as well. "I came here to explore dungeons! Why do I have to fight zombies?!"

Another person consoled them. "You can earn big bucks without much danger involved though. Isn't that a win?"

"There's something way more important than evacuating right now!" The boy from earlier continued to argue his point. "The city's under attack!"

The girl provided her own rebuttal. "You're not even a citizen of the Freedom Union though!"

The boy grew more passionate. "I'm an adventurer! To adventurers, it doesn't matter which country you're from! And I've already told you that you can go back to wherever you want since you didn't end up registering as an adventurer, haven't I?!"

The girl wasn't about to step down either. "You...! Ugh! Remember who carried your unconscious body here?! So, when will you be getting back today?! Don't forget that we have to pay for our stay in the inn every day! Are you going to fight against those zombies until sundown...again... Huh...? Wait, the person who just passed by us... It can't be..."

I suppressed a sigh. *Yeah, it seems that couples and their clichéd lovers' spats really are everywhere. Just hearing this gives me secondhand embarrassment, you know!*

Charlotte tugged on my sleeve a couple of times. "Master Slowe, Master Slowe."

"Hm?"

"Didn't those two voices just now sound familiar to you?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Hm, I don't think so? They probably just so happen to resemble some people we know."

After all, the pair we know ended up going through some super awful stuff in Huzak. I wouldn't be surprised if they had decided to call off going to Zenelaus. Actually, that would be the best choice.

Even if they had stubbornly stuck to their original plan and had arrived in Zenelaus, this place is currently under the attack of zombies. If they had found out that this city's in hot water, even those two would probably have decided to return to Daryth.

"Please turn this way, Master Slowe. Why are you squeezing your eyes shut with that pained look on your face?"

I paused awkwardly. "I-It's not like I mean anything by it. Charlotte, did you see someone you know or something?"

On our way here to Zenelaus, we had departed from the industrial, smoke-filled Galland City. We were escorted by a great number of adventurers as we made our way to our destination.

During our trip, we spotted many people fighting with zombies, and the adventurers that served as our guides insisted that we not speak of what went

on in this city anywhere else. Since one could earn lots of money in Zenelaus right now, they didn't want this information to spread.

My thoughts stilled for a moment as dread crept up my spine. *There's no way that guy would join the other adventurers and fight the zombies, right? Surely he wouldn't? He's technically a Daryth noble, so it'd be ridiculous, right?*

And of course, there's no profound reason why I'm not looking or anything.

"Um, well..." Charlotte trailed off awkwardly.

There was a long, shrill yell of realization from somewhere in front of me. "I knew it was you!"

She's so loud... And what does she mean by that?! My appearance isn't so iconic that some random person could just recognize me on sight! I've been losing weight like crazy lately, after all. I could even call myself a standard human size now, to be honest. At the very least, I'm not obese. Charlotte also said that in my current state, people wouldn't start talking behind my back even if I go out in public.

Hm? Wait a minute. Thinking back, that was a very harsh comment...

My thoughts desperately searched for an escape from reality as I slowly, fearfully opened my eyes.

Zenelaus wasn't a vast city. It was small and packed tightly with people. Thus, if a friend or acquaintance was around, one could easily expect to bump into them within a few days. However, I had only just arrived here. Just what kind of minuscule chance was there to meet someone this fast?

"It's you, Piggy Slowe! Why are you here?!" the girl shouted. "Aren't you supposed to be in Daryth right now?!"

Oh, heavens above, I thought helplessly. No matter where I go, I just can't escape these guys, can I?

Given the choice, I would have preferred to not meet up with these two. They only caused trouble everywhere they went. The pair, Shuya and Alicia, stared hard at my face from point-blank range, scrutinizing me.

Uh, hey. Alicia, just how long are you planning on gawking at me for?!

“Hey, Alicia,” Shuya muttered. “Who are you mistaking this guy for? Are you saying this guy is *Denning*?! Don’t make me laugh. Denning isn’t this thin for one, and he’s in the capital right now. Hm? But, that punchable face and those eyes that look as if he’s arrogantly looking down on the whole world... I guess if that Piggy Duke did lose a bunch of weight, he’d probably look something like that, yeah.”

I enunciated my threat slowly. “I’m going to send you *flying*, Shuya. Seriously.”

“His voice! No way!” Shuya, who was standing behind Alicia, turned pale. He even had the nerve to take a few steps away from me.



It was almost as if he had encountered a monster, and I felt my heart crack like glass at that reaction, just a little. *Also, this guy just said something incredibly rude, didn't he? Can I beat him to a pulp? That's totally fine, right? Okay, time to get cracking.*

A man cut into our conversation. "Shuya, who's this? You know this guy?"

Shuya seemed to stumble over his words. "Mister Zodd! Uh, um... I could kinda call him an acquaintance? No, he *is* an acquaintance... But well, I just never expected to meet him here, of all places... I'm surprised you recognized that this guy is Denning, Alicia."

"It took me a moment, but Miss Charlotte is with him too, so it wasn't too hard," Alicia said.

"If you guys know him, that means that brat over there is a Daryth noble, huh? Interesting." The man raised an eyebrow. His tone sounded as if he was belittling me, and I felt a tiny spike of irritation.

The man who spoke up was equipped with light armor, and he had placed one of his hands onto Shuya's shoulder after the redhead had taken a few steps back. His long, chestnut-colored hair was tied behind his head, and he had a lithe figure. He carried a slender blade with a single edge. *He's a swordsman, I see.*

He was exactly like the typical rowdy Zenelaus adventurer I had imagined, and seeing how Shuya was acting so respectful around him, I could tell that the man was an adventurer of higher rank.

"Mister Zodd, it is best to not associate yourself with this guy," Shuya warned. "He's from a rather...unique family, and..."

"You mean that his family's ranking is above yours, at the very least."

"Well...quite a lot higher..." Shuya muttered.

"But Shuya, you've picked up a lot of combat experience here in Zenelaus. At least in that respect, I think you're better than this brat, who looks as if he only has his family's social standing going for him."

Indeed, the man might have been right about that: Shuya felt completely

different than when he was back at Kirsch. To be blunt, he was a new man. So he *did* accept the city defense quest, already having participated in numerous battles with monsters.

Shuya's clothes were worn out, but the confidence in his face was clear. He also didn't seem unsure around me, unlike how he used to be. It was clear that he had grown a lot from the whelp he had been.

The flippant-looking man wasn't the only person behind Shuya though. There was one more person beside him: a woman, who had been staring at me with immense curiosity for a while. She had short, blue hair, and she was dressed in rather revealing... I mean, dressed in the style of a thief, in clothes that allowed her increased mobility. *Oh wow, that's a lot of knives. I wonder how many she has in total.*

She started paying more attention to me the moment Shuya had implied that my family's standing was quite high. It seemed like she was quite the calculating person.

I actually recognized these two adventurers. *These guys...they're from Zylush.*

"Say, Shuya. The boy over there looks like he has something to say to you guys, so let's bring them back with us," the woman suggested. "We're just having a meal after this, after all!"

"She's right. If they're your acquaintances, Shuya, it's no problem," the man said, then turned to me. "Come with us."

"Uh, but..." Shuya glanced repeatedly at me, trying to gauge my reaction.

Ew, that gives me the creeps. If you don't want me to tag along, then just say it outright.

He's already joined up with Zylush, huh? It's all going according to the anime's plot, to the bitter end. I see how it is.

After Shuya had arrived here in the anime, he had encountered a high-ranking adventurer named the Archflare. The man was the wielder of Flamberge as well as the leader of the adventurer party Zylush, and he would go on to become Shuya's master.

In terms of numbers, Zylush couldn't compare to the Armed Convoy, which had brought us from Galland City to Zenelaus. However, it was filled with people who were each powerful in their own right, and the party upheld the motto of quality over quantity.

Normally, it was a party of six people including the Archflare, but only the easy-to-anger deputy party leader Zodd and the nimble thief Nalita were in Zenelaus at the moment.

"You over there," the woman addressed me. "If you come along, we'll treat you to something good."

"I'm coming!" I immediately replied.

I was broke, so I couldn't resist a free meal. And not only that, but the moment it was mentioned, Charlotte had grabbed my arm, which was my main motivation.

"Hey, Alicia..." Shuya muttered slowly. "Am I dreaming?"

"Don't ask me..." Alicia replied just as slowly. "I'm just as surprised as you are."

"*That* Denning? Not having an appetite? No way in hell. He'd usually demolish three times what I could eat in a breeze! I'm sure you also remember what happened during the eating contest..."

My journey to Zenelaus hadn't been so hard that it had been unbearable. I had just had a mental breakdown because my mind was going in circles worrying about the future that would probably come to pass in Zenelaus.

Thanks to that, I hadn't been able to eat anything for a while. At that moment, I was the thinnest I had ever been since the title of Piggy Duke had been slapped on me.

Alicia looked shell-shocked. "Piggy Slowe not diving into food even when it's presented to him... He isn't even a pig anymore... Miss Charlotte, what in the world happened to this guy?"

"Um, well... You could say that Master Slowe isn't feeling well...?"

Perhaps trying to be considerate, the pair from Zylush gave us a wide berth and sat a distance away from us. However, I knew I couldn't let them hear a word of what I was about to say next. I cast a minor spell to prevent people near us from hearing our voices.

"Hey Denning, if you're not gonna eat, then answer my questions," Shuya demanded. "Why are you in Zenelaus? After that big fuss in Kirsch, you were invited to the capital, right? I know that for sure."

Yep, I knew Shuya would ask that. It's way too weird for us to be here in Zenelaus. On top of that, I'm not an adventurer like him, so I have no connections with this place at all.

However, I do have a realistic excuse ready. There was a certain, minor rumor among people who pay attention to those sorts of things, and I happened to hear that rumor on my journey from Daryth to Zenelaus.

"I actually came here to find you two," I said.

Shuya was puzzled. "Huh? Why us?"

"Shuya, you're in deep trouble. Alicia suddenly disappeared from Kirsch, so people assumed that you took her somewhere. Technically, she *is* royalty. A princess studying as an overseas student at Kirsch Mage Institute, at that. They say you brought her outside campus without contacting anyone. What were you thinking?"

Shuya was at a loss for words for a moment. "No way."

"You two got along well in Kirsch, so people might even think you're eloping or something." I shrugged.

"Don't speak nonsense! Elope?! With Shuya?! That's absurd! And what do you mean by 'technically'?!" Alicia snapped.

"If you want to fix it, contact Cirquista immediately and tell them that she's going to return at once," I said.

Shuya was fighting zombies in Zenelaus despite being a Daryth noble, and that was an issue, but he wasn't the only problem. Alicia was also one. In a sense, her case was a lot crazier than his.

You're a princess, you know? How could you just sneak out of campus as you pleased?! And you're in Zenelaus, of all places! In the anime, you were given a big talking-to by people from Cirquista after all this... I'll give you a warning in advance. Try not to cry.

At first, the pair had been knocked off their feet, but they slowly regained their composure.

Alicia summed the situation up. "So, you came all the way here to find us, Piggy Slowe."

I hesitated. "I guess you could say that."

I whimpered inwardly. Charlotte's sharp gaze from beside me dug into me like knives.

"How did you figure out where we were, though?" Alicia asked. "We never told anyone that we were coming here."

I shrugged. "There was a mountain of books related to Zenelaus in Shuya's room."

Shuya squawked in indignation. "You went into my room without permission?!"

"It was an emergency. You should actually thank me."

I haven't done that at all, though. I really, really haven't. So please, Charlotte, don't look at me with those eyes...

"Getting back on track... You two, and especially you, Alicia," I addressed them. "Do you even understand what's going on here right now? It's a war. Zenelaus is waging a war against a lich, a monster that's nearly immortal!"

The real reason I had come to Zenelaus was to investigate what was going on in this city. My opponent was the pride of the Dustour Empire, one of the Three Musketeers. In the anime, there had been frequent flashback scenes that suggested the man hadn't wished for the war to happen. However, he was the one who ultimately caused the fall of Zenelaus, triggering the war itself.

"It's obvious what's going on. Of course I'm going to evacuate," Alicia declared.

“In that case... Shuya, what are you going to do?” I asked.

“I’m going to stay until the end.”

I doubted my ears for a moment. “What? Surely you’ve earned enough money by now. I heard that the rewards are really good.”

“True, I was hooked in by the money at first, but things are different now.”

My impatience seeped through. “What’s so different, exactly?”

“I now know more adventurers, and I even have comrades. They are all people whom I can trust to have my back. I can’t just run away by myself.”

The adventurer from earlier, Zodd, came over. “I don’t want to disturb your conversation, but Shuya, I heard that a problematic bunch of zombies appeared and our leader went out into the wilderness alone a few seconds ago.”

Zodd placed a hand on Shuya’s shoulder. The man seemed to be in very good spirits.

In contrast, I was on edge. *I knew this would happen. It’s just like the anime. This guy won’t run away from Zenelaus. If Shuya’s going to remain here though, it means that a certain future would be set in stone.*

“Break time’s over!” Zodd declared. “We’re going to crush the zombies on the perimeter, but what about you? You don’t have to force yourself. I wouldn’t mind if you chose to prioritize your chat over here.”

“Please wait!” Shuya stood up in a hurry after Zodd mentioned the Archflare. In the anime, that man had been a reliable ally who would become Shuya’s master. “If the old man is there, then I must go too! It’s so rare for there to be an opportunity to speak to the Archflare himself!” Shuya turned to me.

“Denning, I owe you one for coming to find us. But I need to go.”

“That man didn’t say you had to go,” I argued. “There’s no need for you to participate in city defense and put yourself in danger like that.”

Shuya frowned. “It’s like you said earlier, this city is currently under the assault of a lich, and it’s in a very precarious state.”

“But to me, it seems that the adventurers are enjoying themselves. Plus, Alicia said that she’s going to evacuate, didn’t she? Shuya, you should also—”

"I'm an *adventurer*, Denning. Since I'm here in Zenelaus, I want to help protect this city." Shuya turned to Alicia. "That's just how it is. Alicia, I'm going."

"H-Hey!" Alicia yelped. "Wait, Shuya! We haven't finished talking!"

Zodd and Nalita had already gone ahead and Shuya trailed after them, leaving the restaurant. As for those of us left here, we were all speechless.

If I had to describe the mood with one sentence... *That guy must be kidding me.*

Alicia heaved a long sigh as she collapsed onto the table. She held her head in her hands, completely at her wits' end. "That hopeless idiot..."

Well now, let's take a moment to put together what I know about Shuya Newkern.

He's a second-year student at Kirsch Mage Institute. He's the heir of a baron house, and in terms of his family's standing, they aren't too high up in the aristocracy. His family lands are barren, and I can't say that they reap much profit from them.

At Kirsch, he had been putting time into earning money through divination with his crystal ball and everyone thought he was odd. However, he's loyal to his friends, and he often gets dragged into all kinds of trouble. He's on good terms with Alicia, an international student, and he stands out slightly among the students at school.

"Miss Charlotte, don't you think Slowe has overdone it with his weight loss?" Alicia asked.

"He has... He's been rapidly losing weight, and..."

"Have you been managing this guy properly, as his retainer?"

"M-Managing?"

"Yes. I mean, I think it's a good thing for this guy to slim down, but I feel that this pace is too extreme."

Charlotte was speechless for a moment. "I-I did try to force him to eat! But

Master Slowe...”

“Oh, really.” Alicia didn’t sound convinced. “From what I remember, though, I got the vague impression that you were a disaster at cooking, Miss Charlotte.”

“Hey!”

If I’m not mistaken, during the Zenelaus arc, Shuya and Alicia had quarreled the whole time...

Oh well, that’s nothing to worry about myself. The biggest problem is that Shuya is serious about intervening in the fight that’s going to happen here.

If I only considered his abilities back at Kirsch, he would have just been dead weight here.

However, things are slowly clicking into place, and he has been gathering the experience required for him to participate in the coming battle. Those adventurers from earlier are a prime example of that.

“The inn we are staying at is down this street. It’s a little dingy, but I hope you don’t mind,” Alicia said.

“I don’t mind at all, Lady Alicia! As long as it’s cheap, I wouldn’t care even if there are big bugs around!”

“What kind of reaction is that, Miss Charlotte? Are you repulsed at this place or something?”

“N-No, that’s not the case at all!” Charlotte hastily replied. “C-Come on, Master Slowe, let’s head in! W-Wow! The wallpaper’s peeling off, and uh... It really has that kind of antique feel to it!”

Anyone who knew a thing or two about the world of adventurers knew of the Archflare, who possessed Flamberge. People who knew the Shuya back at Kirsch probably wouldn’t believe their ears if they heard that the man had taken a liking to him and invited him into Zylush.

The same thing had happened in the anime. I wonder just what made Shuya

seem so interesting to the Archflare.

My thoughts froze. *Wait, maybe it's that thing? The crystal ball that he owns?*

Just like Flamberge, that crystal ball was one of the magical artifacts that Eldred had created and dispersed into the world. Did he empathize with Shuya or something because they both owned items that could draw out power from the Great Spirit of Fire?

However, the crystal ball Shuya owned was special. All of the people who had come into possession of that item over the years became addicted to its mighty power and sent themselves down a path of self-destruction without fail. In the end, their bodies were taken over and they exhausted their powers, even against their will. It was a disastrous force.

"Huh? What did you just say, Miss Charlotte? I must have misheard you."

"Staying in the same room saves us money, so..." Charlotte shrugged. "Plus, it's nothing new."

"N-Nothing new? You don't mean—"

If the true origin of Shuya's crystal ball was ever revealed, Daryth would probably use any means they had to destroy it, even if it meant utilizing their army.

Eldred was also known as the Devil of Temptation, and his power was dangerous. Furthermore, and unfortunately for Shuya, Eldred had taken a liking to him. If Shuya deeply wished to gain power from the bottom of his heart, Eldred would probably lend him a hand gleefully.

Even though the Great Spirit knew that the consequence would be Shuya's own destruction.

"So why is our room next to yours, Alicia?" I complained. "I mean, I don't really care, but still."

We only rented one room for the two of us. There wasn't even a single shelf

in it, only a bed and a table. The wallpaper was peeling off and there wasn't any sort of carpet or covering on the barren, cold, stone floor. The lamp sitting on the table would probably barely illuminate the room at night with a dim light.

There were no chandeliers, curtains, or fancy rugs in this dismal room. It wasn't fit in any way for a girl at the top of the aristocracy like Alicia.

"This place is falling apart," I commented. "Alicia, are you really okay staying in a place like *this*?"

"I have my reasons!" Alicia huffed. "Nobody would ever guess that a noble like me would stay in such a rundown place. And, well... I could choose to move to somewhere else at any time, but Shuya would be pretty pitiful if I did."

"Why?"

"Lately, he hasn't been consistent with whether he'll return at night or not. If I disappeared all of a sudden, he'd be lonely when he got back here. I also have the feeling that...Shuya would be even more devoted to his adventurer work if he no longer had a place to return to."

Alicia could probably move to any other establishment in a heartbeat if she wished. However, *this* place was where Shuya would return to in the evenings. Alicia deeply cared for Shuya in her own way.

"Yeah, you might be right..." I muttered. "Hm?"

There was an odd-looking cloth on the wall. I flipped it up and found myself staring into a huge hole.

"Apparently, the man who stayed in this room previously opened up a hole in a fit of rage. That's why it's so cheap," Alicia explained.

"That makes sense for them to reduce the price... You know, you've become much tougher now, Alicia."

"What do you mean by that? You've seen what Shuya's like, so I have no choice but to become tougher myself."

"I guess." I hesitated. "I said the same thing to Shuya earlier, but you should really get in contact with Cirquista immediately."

"I know that! You don't have to be so pompous about it!" Alicia snapped.

“And you’re one to talk, Piggy Slowe. I bet you snuck out of the capital without permission.”

I had no good reply to that. “Uh...”

I mean, it was really bothersome. If I had stayed in the capital, I probably could have spent my time being fawned over by everyone, but I had gotten sick of that life in just a few days.

“I don’t know what happened to you, Slowe, but I’ve also experienced my fair share of troubles. Troubles called zombies—you know, *those* zombies! At this point, who cares about my room being rundown? Miss Charlotte, on the first day of the zombie attacks, it was awful... Nobody batted an eye even though there were monsters all over the city. I knew this place was full of adventurers, but I didn’t expect that! Apparently, it’s a normal occurrence for monsters from dungeons to come here.”

“What?!” Charlotte gasped. “Zombies all over the city?!”

“Yes, Miss Charlotte. After seeing something like that, you can’t do anything other than laugh at that fact, right? Anyway, I have nothing but free time until that guy gets back, so I suppose I’ll explain what went on here...”

After that, Alicia gave us a rundown of everything. Right after they had arrived in Zenelaus, Shuya had dragged Alicia to the guild to register as an adventurer. Alicia had thought the registration was just a small matter, so she agreed.

Her journey through Huzak had probably given her a lot of food for thought. According to her, she had thought that the idea had merit if it meant that she would get better at magic. There were many adventurers who were mages. A noble’s life filled with restrictions and shackles didn’t appeal to everyone.

However, right in the middle of her registration, the Adventurers’ Guild had officially announced that a dungeon had fallen into enemy hands. Not only that, but they had even announced that it was the work of a lich, which was at the top of the food chain of zombie-type monsters.

“Obviously, everyone in Zenelaus was left reeling at the news. The ruin of what was once a grand mage, a lich, had taken over a dungeon, after all,” Alicia said.

“Well, liches usually devote themselves to furthering their magic, so that reaction makes sense. They usually have no interest in fighting with humans.”

“But the Eye of the Crimson Lotus said that the lich in question is very aggressive. He also said that it was changing the dungeon monsters into puppets even at that very moment.”

I paused. “And then, it actually attacked Zenelaus.”

“Right. It was like a living nightmare.” The color drained from Alicia’s face. It seemed that the assault of the zombies was a traumatic memory for her.

The words of the guild master had turned out to be accurate, and the lich began its onslaught. It had brought a vast army of monsters with it—proof that it had managed to turn the dungeon’s monsters into zombies within the span of only a few days. With all that done, it had attacked Zenelaus, the city where adventurers gathered.

“The Adventurers’ Guild ordered the adventurers in Zenelaus to drive back the monsters. The plan was that if the lich appeared, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus would show up to fight it head-on. He’s a hero of the adventurers here, retired from the forefront of battles. He actually was the one who had defeated the famous Wandering Armored Warrior, so everyone was sure that he wouldn’t lose, not even against a lich. However, it seems that he had spent too long in retirement.”

I hesitated. “Wait, did he *lose*?”

“No, not exactly. I didn’t see it with my own eyes, but word is that he had forced the lich into a corner in the wilderness, and he was just one step away from victory. However, he couldn’t finish the job. The lich escaped, apparently. Things only tumbled downwards into hell after that. The lich then set up its base near the summit of the Easton Rock Mountain Range, and it began to send zombies towards Zenelaus during the day. Meanwhile, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus seems to have been injured relatively significantly, and he hasn’t come out of Nemesis ever since.”

“I cannot believe that’s what happened,” Charlotte muttered. “He was even the hero who defeated the terrifying Armored Warrior, and yet...”

“Miss Charlotte, that’s just how dreadful liches are... And well, now, rumor says that the Eye of the Crimson Lotus is resting himself in preparation for the eventual showdown. While he recovers, the adventurers in this city are taking care of the monsters the lich sends our way daily. Remember how Shuya walked off earlier? Yeah, that’s what he’s doing.”

“But it feels like they’re all excited about all this, aren’t they?” Charlotte asked. “Even though this is a really dangerous situation.”

Alicia hesitated. “Well, that... It’s because the guild is throwing money at them left and right so they’ll join in the city defense effort. That’s why the whole city’s on cloud nine right now. People are getting injured, and there’s even a death toll! However, the guild provides expensive healing medicine to anyone who suffers injuries, and they’re sparing no expense.”

“Why is the Adventurers’ Guild going that far?” Charlotte asked, her voice tinged with a hint of doubt.

“The dungeon the lich took over was the most popular dungeon for adventurers looking to make a fortune, that’s why. The guild is probably suffering some enormous loss in profit right now. As Shuya put it, for adventurers, this battle is to avenge the destruction of a dungeon that everyone knows and loves. Hey, I’m just wondering... Outside of the city, what are they saying about all this?”

“They don’t know a thing. Nobody knows that Zenelaus is under the attack of a lich,” I said.

“No way! The information hasn’t gotten out at all?!” Alicia exclaimed.

“That’s right, Lady Alicia. I haven’t heard any of this... Even on our way to Zenelaus, our adventurer guides told us not to spread information about what we saw here...”

Alicia seemed to sink into her thoughts for a while before she spoke up again. “I see... Zenelaus is currently experiencing an unprecedented economic boom, so people might not want to tell others about such a profitable opportunity. You could earn lots of money here right now, after all... On top of that, the idea that a guild-managed dungeon has suddenly been taken over by an outside monster is so terrible that you can’t even find a lick of humor in it. It’s probably

going to be a huge blow to the guild's reputation."

"Um..." Charlotte hesitated. "Lady Alicia, is it *really* okay to stay in this city? We don't know when the lich might attack, right?"

"We don't... Zenelaus could fall at any time. It could even be tomorrow."

Alicia's hands trembled slightly. Up until now, she had spent her nights in a city with only unfamiliar faces around. She must have experienced a lot of anguish.

She had followed Shuya and come to Zenelaus. In the anime, Alicia had tried all kinds of things to make Shuya leave the city with her, but right now, she probably felt as if she were all alone in the world.

"Alicia... You probably scared yourself by talking about the zombies, didn't you?" I said. "Ah, that reminds me. When we were kids, you'd immediately start bawling if I told you a scary story..."

"Wh-Who are you talking about?! Stop making stuff up!"

I began telling a horror story relating to a zombie. "Once upon a time, an undead zombie grandma and—"

Immediately, Alicia pursed her lips tight and her face began to look even paler.

"O-Ow!" I yelped. "Charlotte, what was that for?!"

"Please don't start talking about scary things out of the blue, Master Slowe!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"Ah... Right, these kinds of stories aren't exactly your cup of tea either."

"U-Unlike Lady Alicia, it's not like I'm scared of zombies or anything! Not at all!" Charlotte stammered. "But, Lady Alicia, let's sleep in the same room tonight!"

"I-Indeed... That's a brilliant idea, Miss Charlotte. Well, that's how things are, so, Piggy..." Alicia paused, seeming to mull over her choice of words. "I mean, Slowe, could you please sleep in my room instead?"

"Um... I mean, I don't mind..." I trailed off.

Zombies, huh? It seemed that Charlotte was also scared of them. Come to think of it, whenever the Z-word was mentioned in Zenelaus, Charlotte always seemed to freeze for a moment or two...

Before me were two beautiful girls, frozen stiff at the mention of zombies. They held each other's hands tight, trembling from head to toe.

"So, uh... Back to the topic of Shuya," I said.

"That idiot who's up to his neck in city defense work? What about him?" Alicia muttered.

"Is he even pulling his weight when he participates? You know, not to be mean or anything, but even back at Kirsch, he was only slightly above average in Practical Magic class."

"He was." Alicia nodded. "But he's become stronger and changed in many ways. Lately, he's been acting really strange though. His mumbling to himself has gotten even worse than before, and sometimes...it even feels as if he's actually having a conversation with somebody I can't see."

"Tell me more," I said slowly.

Alicia told us that ever since they had arrived in Zenelaus, Shuya's habit of talking to himself had become more frequent.

According to her, Shuya had come back from his first city defense battle looking excited about something. Ever since then, his strange habit had only gotten worse. He had bought a glove for his right hand, and he had embedded his crystal ball into it.

It almost seemed to her as if somebody were inside the crystal, and Alicia had interrogated Shuya about whom he had been talking to. Shuya had answered that his conversations were with his alter ego. Alicia had demanded an explanation, saying that his answer didn't make sense, and after that, Shuya had stopped talking about this mysterious conversation partner altogether.

"Lately, he's been going around with those people from a party called Zylush, and he seems to think that I'm in the way. On one of the zombie attacks, a famous adventurer took an interest in him, and well... He's seemed like a

completely different person ever since. He doesn't listen to a word I say either..."

"Master Slowe, you look really pale. What's wrong?" Charlotte looked at me, worried.

It took me a while before I could speak up again. "It's nothing. More importantly, Alicia... I see that you've been investigating all kinds of stuff in the meantime."

"Of course I have. Shuya's life is at stake, after all."

That made sense. Shuya and Alicia were friends who put each other above all else. Alicia had trusted Shuya enough to follow him, even when he'd decided on the crazy idea of cutting across Huzak as a shortcut to Zenelaus.

"To tell you the truth..." Alicia hesitated. "A lot of things happened on our way to this city. Yet, that idiot... He doesn't even care about how much he makes other people worry about him."

It seemed like Alicia wasn't going to talk about Huzak. *I won't bring it up unless she does. That's a problem they have to deal with themselves.*

That aside, this isn't good. After the fight with Rooney, it looks like the connection between Shuya and Eldred has become stronger.

The Great Spirit Eldred probably began to force a link with Shuya so that he could protect that guy, since Shuya had been on the brink of death. At this rate, there's going to be a reenactment of that tragedy in Zenelaus. That's a huge issue by itself, but it isn't all I have on my plate.

"Um, Lady Alicia... By that, do you mean that Mister Newkern's mumbling to himself happens more often than when he was at Kirsch?"

"Miss Charlotte, you already knew about that habit of his?" Alicia asked.

"I don't mean to be rude or anything, but Mister Newkern is pretty famous for that..."

Alicia sighed. "Really, what should I do about Shuya?"

I hesitated before I answered her. "It would be a bother if you lost even more of his trust by confronting him again. So, uh, let's put that matter to one side

and try to persuade him to evacuate to another town. Shuya's underestimating the battle that's on the horizon. In the end, he isn't some veteran adventurer hardened by experience."

"Are you going to help persuade him too, Slowe?" Alicia asked at length.

"No way. Think about it. We get along like cats and dogs. Even if I tried to talk some sense into him, it'd have the opposite effect."

"I don't think that's really the case," Alicia muttered.

The guild master of Zenelaus was clearly suppressing information about the city and not letting a single word get out. On top of that, he was even dishing out money to keep a large number of adventurers here. The situation was very grave. I needed to drag Shuya out of Zenelaus as fast as I could.

Alicia finally spoke up again. "I don't think Shuya would even listen to what I have to say at this point though."

"But that's the only choice you have, isn't it? The people of Zenelaus are laughing off the whole thing as an everyday occurrence, but it's not the same for us. Just like you said, a famous adventurer group showed some interest in Shuya and now he's letting that fact go to his head."

"What are you going to do then, Slowe?"

"I..." I hesitated. "I'm planning on looking for a way to meet the person in charge of Zenelaus, by any means possible."

Chapter 2: What Must Be Done

What mattered right now was my determination and also my resolve.

Heading in the direction of the Easton Rock Mountain Range's summit, where the lich was said to be, I dashed up the mountain and snorted a battle cry.

I had to make sure of one thing. The Adventurers' Guild had come to the conclusion that their enemy was a lich, but that was wrong. Their real menace was one of the Three Musketeers, Dreibach Steibelt.

When he was a child, this man had been continuously exposed to a spell that turned people into monsters, and he now has the appearance of a dullahan himself. Normal dullahans in the wild utterly despised relinquishing their solitude, so if I found a dullahan on the mountain range now, I could be pretty confident that it was Dreibach Steibelt.

I snorted, long and loud, before stopping myself. "I'm not an orc anymore; I don't even have the leisure of messing around and making that sound! And what the hell, why are there so many monsters?!"

If the guild defeated one of the Three Musketeers during the fight with the lich, they'd happily spread the news far and wide. Zenelaus would become the city that defeated one of the empire's heroes, the one known as the Living Dead, while having kept everything under wraps. The reputation of the Freedom Union would soar to unprecedented heights.

However, things wouldn't go in the favor of the Freedom Union's plans. Zenelaus would suffer a grave defeat against the power of the musketeer, and a gruesome war between the north and the south would begin.

"You've got to be kidding me! Damn that lich bastard, just how many monsters has it turned into puppets?!" I exclaimed.

The Easton Rock Mountain Range was steep. On top of that, the higher I went, the more and more dangerous the zombies became. Eventually, the

whole place was flooded with them. No wonder the Adventurers' Guild had sent out an official notice warning everyone to stay away from the new dungeon.

For me to break past these guys and reach the dungeon... No matter how many helpings of lunch I ate, it wouldn't be enough to fuel me through to the end!

Voices filled with burning resentment seared themselves into my ears. *I just might have nightmares about this.*

Even an experienced adventurer would probably want to run with their tail between their legs if they faced a sight like *this*.

The moment I spotted the floating gray robe in the dark night, the battle kicked up into high gear.

It was the lich. There was a high chance that the dullahan would be near it as well.

"Die! Die! Die!" the lich howled in a distorted voice.

"Do you have any other words in your vocabulary, you lich?!" I yelled.

The lich was definitely looking at me from beneath its robe and it began to glide towards me.

Powerful monsters like high-ranking zombie varieties could float along the ground, almost as if they were declaring that walking was a bother. From beneath the robe the lich was shrouded in, two arms reached out in my direction. *It gives me the creeps. It's just like a ghost.*

Defeating a lich wasn't a simple matter in the least. They were very tricky monsters to deal with. There was one legend about how someone succeeded in purifying one by single-mindedly attacking it for three whole days and nights, finally managing to banish it from this world after all that.

However, liches were seekers of paragon in the world of sorcery. They almost never attacked human establishments. *It must have a great resentment against people... No, in this case, it's probably just obeying the will of the musketeer.*

"Why do you attack Zenelaus, lich?!" I exclaimed.

“Die! Die! Die!”

“Ignoring me, huh?! I’m starting to get curious about what’s under that robe of yours!”

It was a popular opinion that liches didn’t have substantial bodies and that an indomitable will was all that drove them. Liches were resurrected mages who had both remarkable talent and lingering attachment in life. The lich I was facing was especially noteworthy. It had been the dungeon master of an S-rank dungeon in a Northern Dustour territory known as the Laboratory. That dungeon had been a headache for the empire for a long time.

It had taken pity on a human baby that had been abandoned in the dungeon. It continuously showered the child with an ability that would eventually transform the human into a monster. Over time, that baby grew up with a tremendous power within him. When that baby grew into a young boy, he had taken off into the outside world, equipped with the knowledge taught to him by a lich.

At the same time, the lich continued to watch over the boy from the shadows, and as the years went by, the abandoned baby eventually became the youngest member of the Three Musketeers.

The lich howled with distorted laughter.

“No way, an ordinary zombie was able to hit *me*?!” I gasped.

The zombies made by the lich were extremely high-quality. To fully defeat them, I needed to erase all traces of their bodies without fail. I had fired powerful spells in quick succession, each with enough force to destroy all the approaching zombies...and that had backfired on me.

I realized that within the few hundred zombies I had annihilated, there had been one monster enchanted with a strong resistance against magic.

Never in my wildest dreams had I ever imagined there would be a zombie that could withstand my spells. Thus, I had made light of the group attacking me earlier, thinking that none of them could match me in any way.

“Lich,” I said slowly. “That thing you just did isn’t something you can pull off with such a nonchalant air around you.”

That lich had used necromancy to control the zombies. It was a taboo technique that tricked the dead into thinking that they were still alive.

Under normal circumstances, even zombies would recognize that they were dead if their heads were blown off and they would disappear. However, the zombies created by that lich weren't normal at all. Even when they had lost their body parts and were nothing more than a lone severed hand, they would still lunge my way.

That lich's curse is so intense that the zombies can't recognize the boundary between life and death anymore. Like I expected, its power is unparalleled as a necromancer. So this is the infamous dungeon master of the northern dungeon—a lich that has consumed hundreds of high-ranking adventurers.

By nature, liches weren't supposed to devote their efforts to battle, but I supposed this one had probably had a lot of experience in combat fighting alongside Dreibach.

"You must be kidding me..." I muttered. "I heard that you had only arrived here relatively recently!"

For some reason, even withered trees came alive. Slits appeared on the light-brown bark. Haunting eyes snapped open inside the rifts, and they all looked at me simultaneously.

I even saw more of the lich's loyal subjects, including monsters known as shadows and the lapis.

It's far too dangerous for me to continue fighting in their territory.

A lich was born when a mighty mage sought out immortality, and these shadows manifested from standard mages. Even though they were a step down from the lich, their intelligence was still off the charts compared to normal zombies. These resurrected mages were powerful monsters.

The robed, footless monsters smoothly glided in my direction as they floated a little above the ground. It was as though literal shadows were closing in on me. *That was why these guys were called shadows.*

At this point, it was clear that this entire mountain was the lich's stronghold.

“This is way past what one person can deal with...” I muttered again.

I used to think that the Living Dead and the lich causing the fall of a country all by themselves was a cock-and-bull story, but who would have thought that they were this powerful?

I might have been a little rash. I can't believe I snuck into enemy territory, alone, without even an inkling of a plan! Thinking that I might be able to defeat the lich by myself by some chance, I rushed here myself, but...

“Damn it!” I clenched my teeth. “Time to retreat!”

I ran all the way down the mountain range in one sprint.

However, zombies weren't the only monsters that were trying to close in on me. Other types of monsters were pouring out from the small dungeon located beneath ground level of the Easton Rock Mountain Range. These things then began to fight against their fellow monsters. Among them, I even saw former dungeon monsters which had probably evolved into shadows, as well as lapis which used wind magic.

This place had many monsters that were susceptible to zombification. The lich probably decided to make this place its base because it wanted to expand its army.

“I wonder how much the Adventurers' Guild would pay me if I sold them some information about the zombies...” I muttered to myself.

In high spirits, I blasted away the looming zombies, but I suddenly felt a chill run down my spine. Somebody was watching me. I stopped in my tracks and looked for the source. I froze when I realized just who it was.

A voice not unlike a gust of wind called out to me. “Who are you?”

No reasonable person would be in this kind of place, the Easton Rock Mountain Range, at this time of night. The thought of hearing somebody's voice was ridiculous. But someone was definitely there.

The voice paused. “Right now, the Adventurers' Guild has prohibited anyone from entering this place.”

Oh no, I messed up. I knew I mustn't let anyone see me come here. Just like

the voice said, Zenelaus has issued an order banning adventures from exploring any of the dungeons in the area.

The voice continued. "If you are an adventurer, the commands of the guild are absolute. Surely you must know that."

The Easton Rock Mountain Range, occupied by the lich, was no exception to that ban. In fact, people even said that just entering this general area would make the guild consider revoking one's adventurer license.

I wasn't an adventurer, but if the guild found out that I had acted against their orders, my hands would be tied in Zenelaus.

"It seems that you aren't an adventurer after all."

And the person talking to me right now was actually the person I was most curious to speak to.

The overlord of Zenelaus, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, stared at me square in the eyes. Something about him set him apart from the typical riffraff of adventurers in Zenelaus. He didn't look like a person whose occupation was to fight. He seemed to be a gentle guy who would be at home working as a valet or something similar.

His voice was steady. "If you are a spy from the empire, your life ends right here."

"Wait, no! I know it's going to be hard for you to believe me, but I'm really not anyone suspicious!" I exclaimed.



However, the air around the man starkly contrasted his appearance. His face looked kind, as if he couldn't even bear to squash a bug, but this guy could definitely harden his heart whenever needed.

He was the guild master, a man whose background was full of mystery. He had a cursed eye which was said to have destroyed his own homeland and wore an eye patch over it. His strength was so overwhelming that it was rumored that monsters ran with their tails between their legs the moment this man entered a dungeon.

But hey, hold up a minute! Why is he so hostile towards me?!

The next moment, his weapon, Sylpheed, also known as the Seed of a Hero, bloomed abruptly from the ring he wore. The metal around his finger transformed, and the famed battle-axe made its magnificent entrance.

"Hey! Please put away the menacing stuff! I'm Slowe Denning. I came from Daryth to seek out the truth of the situation in Zenelaus!" I yelled.

"From Daryth? And Denning, you say? I can't believe this! You're trying to say that you're from the Country of Knights, and from House Denning, of all places? Surely you could have come up with a better lie. Compared to the empire's spy I caught a while ago, you are very lacking."

I-I'm not! I wailed inwardly. *He even thinks I'm from the empire?! I-Is there anything that can prove my identity?! Something that would immediately show that I'm not his enemy!*

Ah, that's right! I managed to get past all the borders with just this.

In the darkness, I threw my wand at him as it was etched with the Denning crest. It seemed that even the mighty Eye of the Crimson Lotus was taken aback. *I get it, considering that a wand is the lifeline of mages. But by doing this, it should show that I have no intention of resisting!*

He was quiet for a moment. "Where did you get a hold of this? I haven't heard of the death of any Dennings recently."

His face was filled with doubt. *So he's trying to say that he can't trust me completely. Not yet, at least.* I clicked my tongue inwardly. *How paranoid can*

this guy be?!

“I’ve met you before,” I said. “You saved a Daryth noble once as an adventurer, didn’t you? You were invited to a dinner party held by House Denning, and—”

“...Where?”

“In the Holly Olive Chamber of the royal castle in Daryth City! Our queen really took a liking to you, and you were given an offer to become a Royal Knight! But you turned it down, and the Guardian Knight tried to cut you down. I should be the only one who knows this.”

There was a long stretch of silence after my speech.

The man finally spoke up. “Why is a member of House Denning here in Zenelaus? And not just any Denning, but the Dragon Slayer, Slowe Denning.”

“I can tell you why. You’ve been spreading lies. What’s all this about a new dungeon spawning? A lich attacking this city? True, the lich is making all these zombies, but the real mastermind behind all this is a human.”

The air around the man turned sharp. “Tell me everything you know.”

“That depends on your next move, Eye of the Crimson Lotus. At least, that’s what I’d like to say, but I’ll tell you one thing. To be more precise, that human in charge is an assassin from the Dustour Empire. All of this is caused by the power of one of the Three Musketeers, Dreibach Steibelt, isn’t it?”

And then I realized that behind the man was a tall pile of corpses.

The mood, which had temporarily eased, tensed up once more. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus seemed as if he was hiding something abominable behind that smile of his.

“You’ve got me there. I thought nobody else knew about that. So, what do you want? If you intend to make this information public, then...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not going to.”

“In that case, why—”

I cut him off. “I’ve answered your question, so it’s my turn now. You’ve known

the identity of the lich, as well as who the true enemy is, for quite a long while now, haven't you?"

"Recently, I accosted an imperial spy who had posed as an adventurer. That's how I found out that their first target was Zenelaus. It's now my turn to ask a question. What tipped you off?"

"You've been spreading misleading information all over the place and have been lying about Zenelaus. Anyone with a sharp intuition would realize that *something* weird was happening here."

The man hesitated. "You need a lot more than a sharp intuition to come to that conclusion from *that*. It's downright frightening. That being said, this is rather awkward. I wanted to settle everything before someone like you dug up the truth, but, well... How did you realize that the enemy was a musketeer, though?"

"I had somewhat of a scuffle with a member of the empire in Huzak. I heard it from that guy. More importantly, Eye of the Crimson Lotus, did you decide to do this all on your own? Did you turn Zenelaus into a battle zone without consulting anyone and decide to try to fight the strongest military asset of Dustour all on your own?"

"So you were the person who drove that man back. I see now. Too many of our adventurers had died at his hands... But to answer your question, how could I have done all of this by myself? The top echelon of the Freedom Union are my partners in crime. They're in charge of funding the battle and regulating the flow of information. However, for people inside Zenelaus, let's just say that only very few know the truth. Of course, that is if *you* don't spread it, Slowe Denning."

"I won't say anything," I declared. "More importantly, Eye of the Crimson Lotus, why are you all alone in this—"

The hero of the adventurers shook his head, and the battle-ax slowly returned to its ring form. I remember hearing that this was a sign showing that he had lost his animosity.

"The lich, who constantly cursed the musketeer, is currently building up an army of monsters. There'll be a war, and many adventurers will die. I am their

guild master, so I'm the man who will be sending them to their deaths. I am duty bound to help them fight with as much of an advantage on their side as possible, so I've been investigating the lich's army."

This guy hadn't brought any subordinates with him, and he had come into the wilderness by himself.

There was a bulky book at his waist. The man opened it and flipped through its pages, showing off its contents to me. There was an abundance of information inside of it.

I was speechless. *This is absurd. You must be kidding me. How long did it take him to learn all of this?!*

"Do you think I am a fool?" he asked, and he smiled.

I looked at the Eye of the Crimson Lotus and felt my face stiffen.

Yeah, I knew you were that kind of guy. In the anime, this man would forgo sleep in order to research the followers of the lich because he was the guild master of Zenelaus. He probably wanted to learn as much as he could to make things easier for the adventurers he was dispatching to the hellish battlefield.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus is trying to defeat the musketeer with only Zenelaus's power. He's an S-class adventurer, so he's probably quite confident...but he's going to lose.

In that case, should I tell him to wake up and look at reality?

I can't. His resolve is admirably unbreakable. He's like a captain prepared to do his best and go down with the ship if need be. I couldn't possibly ever say something like that to him.

"I think you're a fool, yeah. You took everything upon yourself... You probably haven't been sleeping properly either, have you?"

"I started this fight. I knew what I was getting into."

Despite his youth, this man had climbed to the top of the Adventurers' Guild. He probably had the weight of the world on his shoulders. He had probably even completed a few tasks just as outrageous as this one in the past.

"Eye of the Crimson Lotus... What is your goal? Why are you trying to fight the

musketeer? And why are you hiding all this information?”

The man’s tone was light. “It’s simple, really.”

He seemed like a kind, honest man who wasn’t two-faced. My impression was probably right on the mark.

In one of Dreibach’s flashback scenes in the anime, the musketeer had regarded this guild master as the strongest person he had faced. Unfortunately, the screen time had mostly been reserved for Shuya’s fights with everyday zombies, so I never got to know just how the Eye of the Crimson Lotus had fought and suffered defeat.

What I *did* know was that in that flashback, Dreibach had even thought that if the guild master had just a little more stamina left in him, the musketeer would have been the one to fall instead.

The man before me continued. “I’ll stop this war. Stopping even one of the musketeers in their tracks would be enough to halt it completely.”

I inhaled sharply.

“If it gets out that a musketeer is hiding in the south right now, there will be no turning back. Daryth, the alliance leader of the Great Southern Alliance, would lead the charge against them, and things would immediately spiral down into an all-out war. It would be unsalvageable by that point.”

“Yeah, probably,” I said at length.

“That is all the more reason why I would end things here in Zenelaus. I must not let anyone else learn the truth.”

I was at a loss for words. His thoughts completely mirrored mine, word for word.

At the same time, I realized that even if this man were to defeat the musketeer, he had no plans of making that fact public.

He’s taking everything onto his own shoulders, and he’s basically declaring that he doesn’t need riches or glory, huh...

“That aside, Slowe Denning,” he addressed me, “may I ask what you witnessed in the area above here, where you came from?”

“I saw that the true form of Dreibach Steibelt is a dullahan. You can recognize him with a single glance. That thing is on a whole other level. He even seems like an alien life-form.”

The man seemed to mull over my words. “May I ask how you knew what I wanted to ask?”

“You want information on the monsters, right? Someone of my skill would be of help, in that case.”

I was a little mystified at my own words. They were showing faith in a man whom I had never talked with until a few moments ago. *To think that somebody is actually working from the shadows to prevent the war, other than me! And in this current time period, before it's even starting!*

His eyes widened. “Slowe Denning, what in the world are you...?”

“I’m saying that we should cooperate. You can just make use of my power to aid the defeat of the musketeer.”

“Are you out of your *mind*?”

I knew many things because of the anime, and one of those things was the fact that this guy was planning on sacrificing himself.

This man understood everything that was waiting in his future, and yet he was still trying to handle it all by himself.

If he had said that this was the work of a musketeer, everyday adventurers would probably run for the hills. The Three Musketeers were the superhumans of the north, who didn’t know the meaning of the word “defeat.” And it just had to be the most vicious one we had to face...Dreibach Steibelt, the Living Dead.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus had planned on fighting alone against the assassin sent in by Nanatrij. If his fate followed the anime storyline, then...he would become the man who shouldered the weight of the world. The man who challenged the musketeer to a battle and *lost*.

“I take pride in my ability to judge character,” I said evenly. “However, if you know the rumors about me and think that I’m not worthy of your trust, that’s

fine as well.”

“...Why are you doing all this?”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s because we think the same way on this matter.”

The guild master was preparing for battle so he could prevent the oncoming war. If that was the case, then there was no way I wouldn’t help.

To be frank, it was probably going to be tough to gain this solitary hero’s complete trust. However, it should be possible for me to support him from the shadows.

I wasn’t an adventurer, so if I collaborated with him openly, it would earn me the scorn of the adventurers in Zenelaus. After all, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus had gathered the adventurers to try and defeat the musketeer.

“I came to this city to nip the war in the bud,” I said. “If we stop the musketeer, Dustour will be forced to change its plans of uniting the continent. They’re relying on the Three Musketeers’ power, after all.”

There was also the fact that in the original timeline, Shuya had gone on a rampage after he saw the fall of the Eye of the Crimson Lotus and the Archflare.

This was an important decision that would become a turning point. It was vital to stack the odds in Zenelaus’s favor.

“Our opponent is a musketeer. Do you believe that Zenelaus has a fighting chance?” Even now, the guild master’s voice had a hint of doubt as he asked me for my opinion.

“I don’t. At this rate, the city that you’ve built up will crumble into nothing, for sure. It’s not particularly farfetched to think that, really, since the most powerful person in Zenelaus is planning on facing the enemy while he’s dog-tired.”

“Then why do you want to help?”

“If I cooperate, things will change. I’ll investigate the monsters under the lich’s command in your place. Then, you can put all your efforts into taking down Dreibach Steibelt.”

In the anime, he had tried to prevent as many adventurer casualties as he

could. He spent countless sleepless nights gathering information. That was why he hadn't been able to fight the musketeer in a rested state or with impeccable preparation.

That hadn't been all. Even though the guild master had known that the musketeer transformed into a monster during fights, he hadn't been sure which monster was Dreibach and had wasted some of his strength meaninglessly on the wrong ones.

Just as I thought that, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus waved his hand. One shadow, which had approached me from behind, crumbled into a heap. *He had been aiming for it the whole time, I see. I didn't even notice.*

The battle-ax, which had materialized again in the blink of an eye, slowly returned to the ring once more.

"I thought that it would be a pipe dream to fight the Living Dead in peak condition. However, it seems that your power is in a similar league to mine, Slowe Denning."

"Are you going to trust me?"

"I may not look like much, but I *have* climbed to the top of the Freedom Union. It's a country full of sly foxes posing as merchants."

The chief of the Adventurers' Guild of the south, who governed tens of thousands of adventurers, extended his hand to me.

He has quite a lot of confidence in himself, doesn't he? I thought wryly. *People even say that he's the greatest genius ever since the Adventurers' Guild was established. He's the real deal.*

"I'm placing all my bets on your victory, Eye of the Crimson Lotus. I will do everything I can to help."

"Slowe Denning." He nodded. "I want you to investigate the entirety of the Easton Rock Mountain Range in my stead."

"Investigating monsters? Leave it to me."

With that, I succeeded in securing an alliance with one of the S-class adventurers.

“My comrade was bitten by a zombie! Does anyone have any holy water?!”

“A novice adventurer, aye? The guild has free holy water! The second guild branch is the closest one to here!”

The adventurers in Zenelaus were oblivious to everything. These zombies crowding around the city... What in the world were they aiming for? They had no idea.

Not even I knew why the musketeer was attacking Zenelaus. It was different from Dustour’s usual strategy. However, I knew one thing for sure: the real enemy wasn’t that lich.

That aside, it looks like the Eye of the Crimson Lotus’s scheme is a huge success. By throwing cash at participants of city defense, he’s making them stay here.

Now that they were banned from entering any of the dungeons in the wilderness, it wouldn’t be strange for many adventurers to leave Zenelaus, but I heard that those cases were few and far between.

A youth wailed somewhere nearby. “Big brother, look at that person. He ordered a crazy amount of food, but he hasn’t touched it at all.”

“Don’t even look. It’ll just make you hungrier.”

“We became adventurers, but we barely earn anything!” The younger boy pouted. “Zombies are scary, and we can’t even participate in the beginner dungeon training right now. We’re only going to get poorer by the day.”

“We can’t do anything about it!” the elder brother exclaimed. “On top of that, just going back to Galland City, the closest city from here, costs a fortune! Since zombies are wandering around, we need guards or something.”

The younger boy whined. “But *you* were the one who said that we could eat good food if we became adventurers, big brother! We haven’t eaten for a whole day!”

Some adventurers came to Zenelaus with nothing but big dreams. However, the current situation was a travesty for people like those two, who were real

fledglings in every sense of the word.

Right now, many dungeons were sealed off, and requirements for entry were very strict. At the same time, city defense was too dangerous for adventurers fresh out of the oven, so they were useless.

Fighting zombies as a fledgling... It's probably a bit difficult. I mean, there isn't anyone soft enough to save an adventurer who isn't in their party, so... The guild will provide money to adventurers who can't even reach the novice adventurer stage, but accepting that cash also means being deemed a failure.

"Please, have this if you'd like." I offered my food to the pair.

"Huh?! R-Really?!" the elder brother gasped.

"To tell you the truth, I have no appetite... Feel free to have as much as you like," I said.

"Th-Thank you so much!" the elder brother stammered.

The younger boy looked at his brother. "B-Big brother, is it really okay for us to eat it all?"

The title of adventurer didn't guarantee that one could stand on their own. A significant number of them would end up dying in a novice dungeon after a stroke of bad luck, and there were also plenty of others who gave up because they realized they couldn't fight against monsters.

Coming to Zenelaus wasn't the starting point of an adventurer's career. The real start was when an adventurer saw the dark entrance of a dungeon in person, and when they had to make the decision whether to enter or not.

"Yeah." I nodded. "I'll give you some money too, so treat your little brother to lots of tasty food, won't you?"

The elder brother was moved. "Thank you so much!"

"No problem. I haven't been hungry lately, and it'd be a waste not to eat all this. Honestly, it would be a great help if you'd eat this in my stead."

In exchange for helping the guild master, I had received a great sum of money. With that much, one could probably live a few months in this city without any issues.

The cost of living was high in Zenelaus. Money that would last a few months here was enough to pay for half a year in other cities. It would probably cover those siblings' living expenses for the meantime.

Huh. Now that I think about it, adventurers who actually earn a lot are the exception to the rule. They might feel like enlightened people, or they're full of confidence, or there's something else that sets them apart. Take the example of the Archflare, who leads Zylush and invited Shuya to his party. Apparently, he started off hacking orcs apart from the very beginning.

"I suppose I'll go back and sleep now," I muttered to myself.

Now that I knew how determined the Eye of the Crimson Lotus was, I couldn't bring myself to indulge in a carefree meal.

A few days had passed since I took on the quest from the guild master. For the past few days, my days and nights were completely reversed. Every night, I struck out to gather information inside the wilds, and I worked as a guard for a guild staff member who was apparently a professional in this field. I was filling in for what the guild master had done in the anime.

"This magical sword can cut through the darkness. It's now on sale! First come, first served!"

"Is there anyone who wants to form an adventurer party with me? I've got a secret hideout in Zenelaus!"

"For a limited time, we're offering escort services to Galland for dirt cheap! Half the price of the Armed Convoy!"

But this change in my lifestyle wasn't an important matter. I knew the real thing I should be focusing on was something else. A certain someone called Shuya.

On the day we arrived in Zenelaus, Shuya hadn't returned to the inn that night. Apparently, there were stations scattered around the entirety of Zenelaus's perimeter, and their accommodation facilities were very extensive. Shuya had probably stayed in one of those.

If this had only happened once, I could let it slide as a once-in-a-while

occurrence, but lately he had been away day after day.

It seemed that Alicia and Charlotte had been trying to persuade Shuya to evacuate with them, and these discussions had lasted well into the night. *He probably got miffed.*

But for now, I'll leave the job of talking some sense into him to Alicia and Charlotte. I don't think that guy would ever listen to what I have to say.

"Oh boy, this inn is as run-down as always," I mumbled to myself as I opened the door, which croaked out a miserable creak as it moved.

Indeed, nobody would probably ever imagine that the princess of Cirquista, a major power, was staying in this kind of place.

I stared for a while before speaking up. "So, what are you two doing?"

I had been looking through the hole that connected our rooms. I watched as Alicia sat on an uncomfortable-looking chair as she faced the desk and Charlotte leaned in to look at what she was working on. They were mumbling and seemingly giving opinions to each other. It looked as if they were having lots of fun.

"Writing a letter. I'm writing to my parents, saying that I'm going to return soon, so they shouldn't worry about me," Alicia answered.

"You *still* haven't written one?" I asked, appalled.

"Oh, shut up. I didn't know what to write!"

"If you send that letter from this city," I said slowly, "they're going to trace it back to here."

"I know that. That's why I'm going to go to an evacuating merchant tomorrow and ask them to send it from somewhere else."

Alicia rushed out of Kirsch without their permission and came to Zenelaus, right? You can't just laugh it off as her being too impulsive or having a rebellious spirit. To be frank, she's nuts! What kind of princess would trudge into a danger zone on purpose?! If I said this, she'd boil over with anger, so I won't. But my point still stands!

“Um, Lady Alicia...” Charlotte hesitated. “Saying that you ‘went on a trip with a friend’ might not be the best idea, in my opinion...”

“Why is that?” Alicia quirked an eyebrow.

“People would definitely ask about this friend of yours. If that happens, Lady Alicia, do you think you would be able to tell them the truth? That you were with Mister Newkern?”

Alicia crossed her arms and mulled it over for a while. “No, I can’t.” She sighed. “This one goes into the bin too.”

“Then, how about this? You came to play around in the casino of the Freedom Union! If you wrote that, they might think that it fits your personality and they’ll buy your story!”

Alicia went quiet for a while. “What do you mean by *that*? ...But you’re right; that’s a good plan. You’re amazing, Miss Charlotte. It’s a lie through and through though. Is that really okay?”

“That kind of a lie is fine. Back when I had to report Master Slowe’s daily life in Kirsch to the members of House Denning... That was a wild ride.”

Charlotte mumbled something I couldn’t hear into Alicia’s ear, and the two seemed to be getting heated up.

That reminds me... Back then, Charlotte used to make detailed reports about me to House Denning, didn’t she?

“So what have *you* been up to lately?” Alicia addressed me finally. “You’ve constantly been coming back early in the morning. You also look tired all the time.”

I hesitated. “Well, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus kind of asked me to do something, so...”

Charlotte shouted in surprise. “Huuuh?! M-Master Slowe! What is he like?!”

“He was one of the nicest people you could ever meet... I also got to know what’s going on in his head. I can’t tell you much about the details, but...” I paused. “I’ve decided to cooperate with him.”

That man had predicted what would happen in the future. Somewhere in his

heart, he probably knew that if the war really happened, he couldn't win against the Dustour Empire. However, considering the delicate situation, he knew he couldn't make this knowledge public either. Thus, he had chosen to carry it all on his own shoulders and fight on his own, believing that he had a chance if he only faced one of the musketeers.

"How are things on your end with Shuya? Do you think you'll be able to persuade him?" I asked.

Oh. Bad question. The lively atmosphere in the room plummeted immediately. With a thick veil of gloom over her, Alicia slammed her head onto the table with a bang. *It looks like she's really at the end of her rope...*

"Are you okay, Alicia?" I asked carefully.

"It's no good. It's completely hopeless. That guy's completely brain-dead!"

"Ah, I'm not surprised..."

I guess I expected this to happen. In the anime, Shuya had participated in the showdown with the lich in the end.

"I swear, this time, I'm completely fed up with him! I *knew* that he was missing a few brain cells, but I didn't know he was missing this many! But those so-called Zylush adventurers share the blame. They think it's so funny, and they say whatever it takes to rile him up. No matter what they say, there's no way he has the talent needed to be an adventurer... I hear that their leader is some big-name guy, but what in the world was he thinking when he dragged *Shuya* of all people into his party?"

I hesitated. "Who knows? He probably saw some of himself in Shuya. Alicia, don't blame yourself too much."

"I know... But surely even someone who's that stupid would calm down at the eleventh hour, just before the final showdown."

"I hope that's the case..." I muttered.

Unfortunately, Alicia's hopes wouldn't come true. Shuya would participate in the battle against the lich, together with Zylush. And then, Zenelaus would fall.

There were plenty of adventurers in this city, and one of them was even the

famed S-class adventurer I had made a deal with earlier. Everyone probably thought that the idea of defeat was silly against a lich.

But I knew that they were wrong. They *were* going to lose. The people Shuya respected would die one after another, and Shuya... Shuya would go berserk.

And then, the Great Spirit of Fire, Eldred, would steal Shuya's body from him.

Right now, I was living my life like a nocturnal creature.

"I'm exhausted again today... The guild staff sure are knowledgeable about monsters though. I shouldn't have expected anything less."

While the sun traveled across the sky, adventurers would be protecting the city while zombies were out and about. After the sun hid below the horizon, adventurers would return to the city after the zombies retreated as well, and I would go out into the wilderness with a guild staff member.

I could have totally gone during the day, but the zombies were more sluggish at night. On top of that, going to the mountain range during the day meant that there would also be monsters from other dungeons trying to pick a fight with me.

"I'm not hungry today either..." I muttered dejectedly.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus continuously showered me in money, but I had no use for it. I had told Alicia and Charlotte that my job wasn't too dangerous. However, if I showed them this sum of money, they'd probably go ballistic with panic.

Vibrant laughter from somewhere nearby caught my attention. "This voice is..."

I recognized this voice. I spotted a long-haired, haughty-looking man who was in very high spirits. He was part of Zylush, the adventurer party led by the Archflare.

If someone ranked the adventurer parties present in Zenelaus right now, Zylush would be powerful enough to make it into the top ten.

Those guys refused to receive rewards because Zenelaus had molded them

into adventurers who could stand on their own two feet, and they were working diligently to protect the city. I admired them greatly for that.

Or at least I would have if Shuya hadn't been one of them.

"Mister Zodd!" Shuya shouted excitedly. "I fought better than yesterday, didn't I?!"

"Shuya, you're surprisingly good at seeing the big picture on the battlefield. You surprised me back there. You're good enough to match up with me when I had just started out. You have promise," Zodd praised the young man.

"Oh, don't listen to that guy!" Nalita said with a note of exasperation. "You're way more composed than Zodd used to be! You were calm even when surrounded by those elder zombies, despite you saying that you've almost never explored dungeons! I think I'm starting to see why our leader invited you!"

Shuya's face lit up. "Am I that good, Miss Nalita?!"

"You sure are! You know, you should really settle down here. There's no need to go back to Daryth. You have siblings back in your family lands, right? You can just leave the family stuff to them! Being an adventurer really suits you, Shuya!"

...Instinctively, I hid myself in an alley.

That brat! How dare he be so carefree! Doesn't he know how worried we are?!

The people with him are probably with Zylush. Zodd and Nalita, I see. They probably just returned together from the city defense quest.

"Are you sure you're not going to evacuate though?" Nalita asked. "They're recommending that adventurers of your class leave the city..."

"I'm all right! There is no way I could run away all by myself!"

Zodd did a wolf whistle. "Good speech, Shuya! Now that's what I call a man!"

That bastard. Run away, he says?! Alicia has been paying for his room this whole time. Does he even know how she feels? Shuya was completely oblivious as he talked to the others, and I felt an irrational anger well up as I watched him do it.

That was why I came out of the alley and stood in their way.

“Hey, Shuya,” I hissed. “You look like you’re having the time of your life, don’t you?”

“Denning...” Shuya narrowed his eyes. “What do you want?”

“What’s this? You little, glaring... Are you trying to pick a fight?” Zodd frowned. “Watch who you’re talking to, chap. Hm, wait. I’ve seen you somewhere before... Oh right. I met you a little while ago.”

“Shuya. Haven’t Alicia and Charlotte been telling you to leave this place?” I snapped.

“It has nothing to do with you, Denning.” Shuya turned away from me. “Come on, we should get going.”

“You sure, Shuya?” Zodd glared hard at me. “That guy was totally asking for a fight.”

Very few people were willing to provoke an adventurer on the cusp of an A-class rank. Nevertheless, I ignored Zodd and continued to address Shuya. However, that guy tried to pass by me by walking around, and thus—

“Are you trying to run away from me?”

Shuya stilled with an enraged gasp.

I continued. “So you really *are* having the time of your life, Shuya, playing make-believe adventurer.”

“Denning,” he hissed, “what did you just say?”

I purposely spoke in a way that would get on his nerves and provoke him. My choice of words would show that my hostility didn’t stop at Shuya; it would rope in the other adventurers as well. However, I couldn’t just stop there.

Zodd’s face visibly soured. *This guy’s anger switch is way too easy to flip!* I thought to myself, appalled.

“I said, do you feel less sorry for yourself by playing make-believe adventurer?”

“Denning, right now, I am putting my life on the line to protect this city. The

monsters summoned by the lich aren't the only ones out there. Monsters are even coming out from other dungeons. I am going to fight to my last breath to protect Zenelaus."

"You're a noble," I reminded him. "The people you ought to protect are Daryth's citizens. Am I wrong?"

Shuya took a while before he could answer. "Well then, what have *you* been doing? This is a city of adventurers. You're not one, so get out!"

Excuse you! For the past few days, I've been working with the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, gathering information for the guild and living a nocturnal lifestyle!

"Listen here, Denning. I'm strong now. I'm different from someone like *you*. You were born with a silver spoon in your mouth and with natural talent in magic, fated to sprint along the fast track of the career path of elites," he hissed.

"Oh really? So you just thought that I was an elite noble who was privileged from birth. I see how it is. In that case, this 'great elite' will enlighten you some. Shuya, you think you're strong? How? You gained a shady power and you're letting it get into your head. What can *you* do against the lich's army? I bet your sorry behind just stands by and lets those two protect you the whole time, like every other day."

"What did you just say, Denning?!"

"I'm saying that you're a pathetic guy who can only watch as others protect you. Just like back then."

Shuya gritted his teeth. "How *dare* you!"

The redhead looked openly aggravated by my words. He slid on his glove, and its embedded crystal flashed briefly with a gleam of light.

Shuya Newkern's power was experiencing exponential growth as he borrowed Eldred's might. Perhaps Eldred was talking to him, even at this very moment. I was a smidgen interested in what that seasoned, extraordinary being had to say about me.

“I’m *not* lacking in skill...”

“You are. Even at Kirsch, you didn’t stand out much.”

“Shut up...”

“And more importantly, what’s with this spell you’re casting? The gap between us is like heaven and earth, but you’re actually thinking of fighting *me*?” I sneered.

Responding to Shuya’s will, a sea of fire orbs had manifested and were floating nearby. If he could fully control all of them at his will, yeah, I guess I could say he had indeed gotten stronger.

However, not all of it was Shuya’s own merit. It was definitely a show of Eldred’s power.

“You’ve never failed to rub me the wrong way, Denning. I’ve always thought that.”

“Well, what a coincidence, because I feel the same about you. So, Shuya, you want to fight me?”

“I’ve changed, Denning.”

“You have. You didn’t have that tacky glove before, right? Actually, I’ve been thinking that for a while now. You’re a pretty tacky guy.”

Shuya’s head snapped up at me in anger.

How well would this guy fare against the lich I met in the wilds? This guy, who I know couldn’t even put up a fight against Rooney in Huzak!

His newfound strength is nothing but an illusion.

That’s why I will crush him right now, so he won’t stand back up.



“Denning!” Shuya hollered and took one step forward.

At that precise moment, his spell activated. The floating fireballs swooped down on me. *There’s one, two, three, four...they’re only multiplying. It’s Shuya’s signature spell.*

However, they all snuffed out before they reached me.

There was a commotion. A circle of onlookers was already around us. Scuffles like this were an everyday occurrence in Zenelaus and brawls between adventurers were a common source of entertainment.

Shuya looked dumbfounded. “Wha—”

“What’s with that look?” I scoffed. “You’re wondering why your spells disappeared. It’s written all over your face. Let’s see... If an amateur like you swears to evacuate from here, I don’t mind telling you why that happened.”

A bigger inferno flickered into existence above us. It looked very impressive, and the peanut gallery of gawkers began cheering.

It wasn’t just some nobody fighting either. One of the participants was a known newbie whom the Archflare and Zylush had set their eyes on. The crowd narrowed their eyes in concentration, trying to gauge Shuya’s worth.

However, that spell was practically nothing. It wouldn’t even serve as a distraction. Just learning a few tricks that could draw out Eldred’s power wasn’t nearly enough for him to get a hit on me.

He didn’t even hold a candle to the people I had fought up until now, like No Face or Sepith. Thus—

“Use your charmed blade, Shuya,” Zodd ordered.

“Are you mad, Zodd?! We can’t let him use that without our leader’s permission!” Nalita exclaimed.

“Do you even have a brain? If our guy loses, our reputation would take a hit. Shuya, put that brat in his place.”

Charmed blades were swords specifically for mages. They were pretty popular magical artifacts for us spellcasters, but they didn’t come cheap. *What’s with*

that smug look on Shuya's face? I thought with irritation.

"See, Denning? I'm a new man now."

"You certainly have gained some pretty intimidating comrades, from the looks of things. However, a baby like you is just going to be dead weight in their party, don't you think?" I taunted.

I'll beat his confidence to a pulp. Right now, this guy is only thinking of himself. He tossed aside Alicia, who stuck with him all the way here, and he chose those strangers who had no relation with him whatsoever.

But...Shuya is going to be the one who ends up killing them. His body will be taken over by Eldred, and he'll kill those comrades who gave him that charmed blade. Finally, after he remembers everything that happened... The queen of Daryth will set him up as a tragic hero.

Which is why I am going to break his spirit now. For that sake, I'll even become a villain if that's what it takes.

After all... Shuya, you might not realize it yet, but the path you're heading down only leads to war, you know?



Shuya had made the first move and Slowe Denning had replied in kind.

"Hey! What in the world is that brat doing?!" an adventurer exclaimed.

"He neutralized the spell with his own wind spell. Well, well, we have quite the capable guy here. Unless he knows the redhead's power veeery well, he couldn't pull off a stunt like that."

Brawls in Zenelaus were an everyday occurrence. However, very few battles turned out to be so one-sided as this one.

The charmed blade was hindered by an invisible wall. The redheaded youth's attacks couldn't reach his opponent at all. That was how extraordinary the other mage was.

The pair seemed to be having a conversation of some sort, but the people around them couldn't hear their words.

The boy with black hair, Slowe, had said something, and Shuya had seemed shocked by it. Nobody could hear the details, however. Shuya, still shaken, distanced himself from Slowe.

Only a short period of time had passed since their exchange of blows had begun, but it was clear that Shuya was fatigued. There was a definite difference in ability between the two.

“I’ll be damned; he abbreviated his chant! This guy definitely has enough power to pick a fight with Zylush. He’s not just a hothead!”

“Yo, Zodd!” an adventurer called out. “That little redhead over there doesn’t look like he has any chance here. Wouldn’t it be better for you to take his place?”

After Slowe had said something to him, Shuya started behaving strangely. He maintained his distance from him and almost looked as if he was scared to approach for some reason.

The battle was at a stalemate. Slowe didn’t show any intent to attack Shuya aggressively. He had stuck to only defending himself from the very beginning. Compared to the desperate Shuya, Slowe looked completely at ease.

The onlookers had gathered because they heard that a member of Zylush was having a squabble, and now they were booing. There were even guild staff members among the curious crowd.

If the clamor spread even further, this battle would end up influencing Zylush’s reputation in Zenelaus. Nalita felt anxious; she hadn’t expected such a big commotion. If their leader saw this scene, things would not end well.

“Zodd!” she yelled. “We’re banned from fighting seriously in brawls in our party! Leader’s going to be *really* mad! We need to stop him!”

“Shut up, Nalita! As long as Shuya wins, all is well!”

“But he’s been acting strange since that boy said something to him! He’s lost his confidence!” Nalita looked over and let out a frustrated groan. “I can’t just let this go on! That guy’s practically bullying him!”

“Even if that’s the case, Shuya hasn’t given up. This is *his* fight. He’s a Daryth

noble who went out of his way to come to Zenelaus. Like how we did in the past, he came here desperately wishing to become stronger! That's proof of how resolute he is, isn't it?! We mustn't cut in!"

The deputy leader of Zylush, Zodd, wasn't blind. He knew that the power gap between the two was overwhelming. Shuya could never win against that boy.

Right now, the black-haired boy was making earth puppets, and perhaps out of playfulness, he was leading Shuya around by the nose.

Zodd stared hard at the boy. The boy from the Country of Knights was a multi-element mage; people like that were a rare find. His power was the real deal. *Could I even win against that guy?* Zodd wondered.

"That brat's overdoing it. If he goes any further, he'll be smearing mud on our party," Zodd declared.

The man prepared to take action. However, someone grabbed his shoulder. The fingers gripped tightly and dug into his shoulder with force.

Zodd snarled from the pain. "That hurts, ya know?!" He turned around angrily, and he found—

"Don't make fun of me!" Shuya yelled. "You never change! You've always looked down on people from your high and mighty station!"

"Of course I would, Shuya. The students of Kirsch and I practically live in different worlds."

"Yeah, and that's called looking down on people, you know?!"

The redhead boy didn't have natural talent like Slowe did. However, he earnestly worked to better himself day after day.

This earnestness was something that I felt we had lost along the way.

His desire to become stronger... Watching him, I realized that I had lost that drive. That's why I invited him, a novice adventurer, to my party.

"Leader, I am so sorry. Zodd and I were both with him, and yet..." Nalita

trailed off.

A man approached the pair of fighting boys. He drew out the longsword he carried on his back and brandished it before him. With that, the dancing puppets Slowe had made burst into flames.

“I was the one who invited him to this adventurer party,” he announced. “If you are planning on continuing this fight, then I will be your opponent.”

The man let out a grandiose sigh. This gesture was enough to cause the wild atmosphere to dissipate into nothing.

The aura around him set him apart from other adventurers. He was the Archflare, a special A-class adventurer. He had the powerful presence of an influential figure, aged exquisitely with experience into perfection.

He stepped forward, interrupting the fight. Silence took over the crowd, and you could nearly hear a pin drop.

This man was one of the leading influencers in Zenelaus based on his strength alone. He was the wielder of the magical sword that spouted flames, and some even called him the right-hand man of the Eye of the Crimson Lotus.

“You’ve caused a great commotion, Shuya,” the Archflare said. “Fall back now. I will deal with the rest.”

Shuya hesitated, then said, “Understood.”

Shuya was mortified. The Archflare was the last person he wanted to show such a pathetic sight to. Shuya had joined this party and decided to stay in Zenelaus because he had wanted to be useful to this man, whom he admired.

Meanwhile, the black-haired boy, Slowe, faced the man who barged into their fight. “It looks like Zylush has a grave shortage of people. I can’t believe that you invited such a small fry into your party.”

“As the leader who represents my adventurer party, I should make you pay for what you did on principle. However, the guild master has told me that you’re one of his allies.”

“Interesting... Who would have thought that the hero of the adventurers unexpectedly has a loose tongue?”

“There is one thing I would like to ask you, however. For what purpose did you torment my young party member? What is it about him that spurs your distaste? This boy has talent. It’s just that nobody has realized it yet.”

All eyes were on Slowe. His face twisted with bitterness. “You say he has *talent*? I’ll make one thing clear first. You people are going to be the ones who regret your decision later.”

It was impossible for anyone else to know the truth. For nobody could foresee that in the upcoming battle, Shuya was fated to go on a rampage and destroy Zenelaus.



I had let him rile me up into starting a fight, and he had beaten me to a pulp in front of that giant crowd.

I let out a groan of frustration in my mind. *Why did I even do that?! Denning is a dragon slayer. I knew I didn’t stand a chance against him, not at all, but I saw red and couldn’t stop myself... But after my time here in Zenelaus, I’ve grown at least slightly stronger...right? Yeah, I’m pretty sure I did. Yet, I was still a helpless baby against him.*

It hurts... All the joints in my body are aching.

Even before the fight, my body had been in tatters. After all, I’ve been driving away those invading zombies all day, every day. I’ve been fighting alongside seasoned adventurers; I would be surprised if I wasn’t worn down.

However, this pain is different. If I had to name it... I’d call it heartache.

I feel downright awful. I ended up sullyng Zylush’s reputation...

I let out a long, long sigh.

“Well, that sigh sure was something. So here’s where you were. I was looking for you.”

I felt someone pat my head. I couldn’t bring myself to smack the hand away.

Hesitatingly, I said, “Old man...”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it. In the past, I used to lose all the time too,”

he said.

This man was a famous, high-ranking adventurer. I had gotten to know him a few days after the lich first made its attack on Zenelaus. He had struck up a conversation with me during one of my routine solo zombie battles, and I had been in his care ever since.

The sword on his back, Flamberge, made it obvious who he was. He was the leader of Zylush, an adventurer party that required its members to incorporate red in some form as an accent color in their attire. He was respected by many, and he was always surrounded by a crowd of adventurers.

And I had been the one to smear dirt on the reputation of the old man's adventurer party.

I had lost to a mage who wasn't even an adventurer. The news had spread like wildfire, and I had been mocked countless times. I was so ashamed that I couldn't dare look at him and I had hidden here. Yet...he ended up finding me anyway.

"I am so sorry. It's all because I lost..." I muttered.

"It's fine. That's part of the life of an adventurer. Besides, everyone will forget it soon enough. On that topic... Shuya, was that a friend of yours?"

"I wouldn't call him a *friend*, but..." I replied at length.

"I see. Well, I guessed that much from your interaction. Still, you got quite the flashy beating. Who *is* he? Is that boy the rumored guild ally Piggi-Du?"

"P-Piggi-Du? What's what?"

"The guild master is gathering powerful people to prepare for the decisive battle ahead. One of them, Piggi-Du, is apparently especially remarkable... But that boy probably isn't him. He doesn't really *feel* like a Piggi-Du, you know?"

"I think it must be someone else..."

"Yeah. He's much too young for our guild master to recruit. He probably came to this city from somewhere after hearing rumors. What did that boy say to you though, Shuya? Zodd and Nalita said that you had seemed extremely unnerved when you tried to use your charmed blade."

I was silent. I couldn't tell the truth to the old man. There was no way I could.

When I had slashed at that guy, he had told me to be careful of the crystal ball I had.

Gaining significant magical skills overnight was too good to be true. He had told me that, then said that I should know this better than anyone else. That I should question just *who* was "lending" me power.

His face had been more serious than I had ever seen as he warned me about all this.

Denning knew about my secret. That was why I had been so shaken.

The old man observed me. "I see that there's something you can't tell me, Shuya."

"Sorry..."

"It's fine. You are a noble from Daryth. You're different from us; we're all recluses who have cut our ties with the world. If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to. You can figure it out by yourself. Now then, I'm heading off, but I want to say one last thing, Shuya."

I had certainly become stronger than before. After my experiences in Huzak, I worked hard to drive back the zombies here in Zenelaus. With everything I had gone through, the way I went about using my spells had changed. I could feel the difference very clearly. I had learned how to control my magic, and I also gained a special power.

I owed everything to the voice inside the crystal ball, who called himself Eldred. However, at the same time, I also knew that this was crazy. I was more aware of that fact than anyone else.

Which reminds me... That guy said something. He insisted that I must refuse if the voice ever asked me whether I wanted power. What's with that? What was he trying to say? I thought to myself, miffed. *Ah, but Denning was always very knowledgeable about things like history. Maybe he has an inkling of who this mysterious power truly is.*

But...I'm needed to protect Zenelaus.

“Remember this. As a noble, you’ll probably return to Daryth someday, but stay with us until that day arrives at least. We all think that you’re one of us.”

I paused, moved. “Thank you very much.”

“I’m heading back to my usual post. When you’ve regained your spirit, come along too! Zodd and Nalita were also very worried about you. Do you hear me? A real man keeps his word!”

I hesitated for a brief moment. “Yes, sir.”

I used to have the impression that high-ranking adventurers were all difficult and fussy people, but the old man was different. He had looked after me, and he had taught me how to live as an adventurer. Once, I had even confided in him about my anxieties about being a noble.

Alicia had claimed that adventurers were all barbarians, but I actually wanted her to get to know the adventurers as well. There was a lot we could learn from them.

But, well, she was a princess. I couldn’t exactly force her to do anything.

“Hey, Eldred. Do you think I actually have talent? Are people only paying attention to me because of your power?”

“No! Remember what that man said? Shuya, you have the ability to move the hearts of people.”

I was silent for a moment. “How?” I muttered self-deprecatingly. “Just like Denning said, it’s all your power. I haven’t changed at all.”

Indeed, I had gained strength, but it wasn’t truly mine. That guy didn’t have to spell it out for me. I already knew that I was only borrowing Eldred’s power and nothing more.

That was probably why I got irrationally mad when he pointed that out. It was a sore spot. Denning’s words were the irrefutable truth, and thus, I hadn’t been able to control my emotions.

It was just like he had said. I shouldn’t even be in this fight. Normally, I wouldn’t be involved at all.

However, there were people who treated me as their comrade, and that was more than enough reason for me to be here.

“Shuya, you will probably surpass that kid one day.”

“Me, surpassing *Denning*? Him, a dragon slayer? That’s unbelievable...”

“That may be the case. But you are strong, Shuya, and I know your strength. However, your brand of strength isn’t something tangible.”

“How can you be so confident?” There was a note of bitterness in my tone.

“I have watched you for a long time. Shuya, you are a human who is capable of sacrificing your life for someone else’s sake. You did as much back then, as well as when you first heard my voice.”

I paused. “When I first heard your voice? When was that again...?”

“I’ll make you remember. And then, keep wishing for power. The stronger your yearning, the more power I will provide.”

Eldred had mysterious powers.

He could support me in battle or even show me the view from someone else’s eyes. These powers helped me a great deal.

But...what is this? Something’s burning? What is it? Is this something I saw myself? When was this? I can see the Newkern lands. My barren hometown.

Huh? But there’s greenery around. Wait... Isn’t this the weird power that Denning mentioned? What did Denning say earlier...?

“Ah... Ugh...” I groaned.

H-Huh? My head... I can’t think. My body feels weak.

That’s right; he told me to refuse it. But it’s impossible. Gradually... I can’t even open my eyes anymore...

Who...is that? Somebody is shaking me. I feel sick...

“Shuya! Damn it... Eldred! There’s no way I’ll let you brainwash Shuya!”

I can’t...think...

“Show yourself, Eldred!” I screamed.

There was a pause. “What a rather untimely intrusion,” he hissed from Shuya’s lips. “Just like I thought, kid, you realized the truth.”

Before my eyes, Shuya’s body stood back up from his collapsed position on the ground.

Shuya was an idiot who even Alicia couldn’t talk sense into, and he had been my biggest bickering opponent back in Kirsch.

However, the guy standing in front of me wasn’t the Shuya that I knew.

“When did you realize who I am?” the being said. “When did you figure out that I am Eldred?”

The “Shuya” before me was possessed by Eldred, since the real one had lost his consciousness. From Shuya’s mouth, I could hear that spirit’s voice.

It was so, so annoying.

“You are one of the peerless Great Spirits, and the Great Spirit of Fire at that. I would never have thought that someone like you would care about such a small detail,” I mocked.

“Answer my questions, Slowe Denning. What is your aim? Why are you trying to get in my way? Why did you choose to come into contact with me now? And on top of that, earlier, you deliberately tried to confuse Shuya.”

Anger bubbled up within me as I listened to Eldred go on and on. I couldn’t forgive him. *The destruction of Zenelaus in the anime was all this guy’s fault.*

To tell you the truth, Shuya... The one who would destroy Zenelaus isn’t a monster, nor is it the musketeer.

It’s you.

To protect Zenelaus, you’ll draw out too much power from the Great Spirit and go berserk.

“Eldred, I don’t plan on having a long, meaningless chitchat with you. Your mere possession is enough to cause a burden to Shuya’s body. However, I’ll make one thing clear.”

“Go on.”

“If you dare lay your hands on Shuya, I will kill you.”

“Interesting. How are—”

“In the state you are in now, even the Great Spirit of Wind might be able to end you,” I said, belittling him.

“...You are an impertinent kid, through and through.”

With that, it seemed that Eldred no longer wished to speak with me.

It had been a complete bluff on my end, but... *That spirit had even realized that the Great Spirit of Wind was around...*

“You there! Wanna join my adventurer party?! If you’re able to pick a fight with Zylush, you’re definitely good enough!”

“I heard that he even managed to make the Archflare withdraw! What a guy!”

I had planned on lying low in Zenelaus, but the story of my fight with Zylush was the hottest topic in town. It seemed that they looked highly upon me because I had faced the high-ranking adventurer Archflare without backing off at all.

If news of this gets into Charlotte’s and Alicia’s ears though, I’ll be in deep trouble. Those two are trying their hardest to persuade Shuya to leave, but with that incident, Shuya’s probably going to become even more stubborn.

Ugh, I really messed up... But I’m not the only one at fault, I think...

A guild staff member had started a conversation with me as he passed by me. “Sir Piggi-Du. May I have a moment of your time?”

I frowned. “I remember telling you to never talk to me in public.”

If at all possible, I didn’t want adventurers to see me interacting with the guild staff.

There were an infinite number of adventurers in this city who wanted to get chummy with guild staff members and benefit from that relationship. The staff knew of many things that the public wasn’t privy to. For example, they had

information about new monsters that would bring in a fortune, as well as newly discovered magical artifacts.

However, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus gave out strict punishments to anyone involved in an incident where guild staff members leaked information about dungeons.

“It’s about the man you mentioned—Silva. We confirmed that he has arrived in Galland City, and—”

I went quiet.

It seems that nearly all the players needed for the showdown are here, huh?

Interlude: The Oddball Noble

At the end of our journey from the Denning lands, Charlotte and I had finally arrived at...

“So *this* is Kirsch Mage Institute, huh? I came here once during the test, so I suppose this is my second time here,” I muttered with annoyance.

“Jeez! Why are you whining like a child just because you weren’t able to fit into your favorite clothes?!” Charlotte exclaimed, exasperated. “Only someone like you would put off moving into school until the morning of the entrance ceremony, Master Slowe! Come on, we’re going to be late. Please hurry!”

Kirsch Mage Institute’s entrance ceremony took place on a nice and warm sunny day, and it was my first step forward as the blackhearted Piggy Duke.

“But look, Charlotte. There’s someone over there who seems like he’s going to be late too, just like me. See that redhead over there?”

“Huh?! Oh, you’re right... But Master Slowe, you *promised* that you’d be a good boy here, so please, absolutely do not do something like fall asleep in the middle of the entrance ceremony!”

“I know, I know,” I said, slightly exasperated. “You’re such a worrywart, Charlotte.”

They say that if you truly love your children, you should let them out to explore the world beyond. Well, in my case, it’s probably more accurate to say that they weren’t able to handle me back at home, so they kicked me out.

This school was like a lavish, miniature garden where nobles in the midst of adolescence were educated and trained to become splendid mages. It was a three-year-long boarding school. With the exception of our biannual long holidays, we would live together with nobles of our age and a few gifted commoners.

“If you were to ask the adults in the imperial court, everyone would agree

that their time at Kirsch Mage Institute was... Consequently, your parents, as well as your ancestors whom you may not be familiar with, walked these very grounds...”

I was listening to the grand speech of the headmaster Morozov Pedaworks, who had mentored many capable mages in this school over the years, but...

The headmaster chuckled. “How delightful. It seems that one of your peers has already fallen asleep, and right under *my* nose at that. He must have had quite the wonderful education in his past.”

...if I remembered right, I had slept like a hog while standing upright back then.

I had snored the whole time, so I had probably been a big annoyance to the people around me. After all, it was likely the first time that everyone got to see the headmaster of Kirsch, one of the living legends in this country, in the flesh.

But, you know, I’ve already met him. I was the only one who had an interview as a part of my entrance exams in the first place, and that was with him.

What had I said back then, I wonder? If I’m not mistaken, the headmaster... The headmaster had asked me whether I had anything precious to me. I had answered in the affirmative, and the interview had ended at that. Abruptly, in just the blink of an eye, I had been accepted into this school.

But nobody could speak out against my actions. After all, I was from a ducal house, the famous House Denning. A member of the Household of Mages, which held the most authority in Daryth, was enrolling in this school.

Not a single Denning had come to this campus for the sake of education up until now, so my peers were probably filled with trepidation. Not only that, but I was also rather infamous for the fact that even House Denning had given up on me, and my bad reputation even crossed over to other countries.

“Hey!” a voice nagged at me. “Hey, you! Wake up!”

Nobody would ever try talking to me while I was happily away in dreamland. Of course not.

But who would have thought that somebody would pinch my cheeks, of all

things!

“Don’t ignore me!” he hissed. “The headmaster’s watching. If you get his attention right from the start of school, you’re not going to have it easy!”

I hesitated. “You. Wait. Are you actually talking to *me*?”

“Who else do you think, Mister Chubby?”

“Huh?” My eyes widened. “I could never have imagined that someone would dare denounce me as ‘chubby’ in my first meeting with them.”

I was really shocked. I seriously thought that my heart would leap right out of my chest. Think about it—I’m a Denning, you know? A Denning!

I cracked my eyes open just a little, and red hair invaded my field of vision.

This had been my first meeting with that guy.

This had been when the former prodigy of House Denning first met the boy who would go on to save the world.

“Everyone takes everything so seriously... The best way to enjoy lessons is by not participating in them in the first place! Oh, but I need to make sure that Charlotte doesn’t find out.” I snickered to myself like a cat that had gotten the canary. “I’ve already noticed that Charlotte makes detailed records of my everyday life and sends them back home!”

To put it mildly, life at Kirsch Mage Institute was the best! No matter what I did, nobody could tell me off.

My bad behavior didn’t change the fact that I was from House Denning. Even the teachers didn’t want to bring unnecessary trouble upon themselves, so they left me alone. As a result, even if I skipped classes, nobody said anything about it.

Just one month had passed since my school life had begun, and practically everyone knew that I was to be treated with caution.

Okay, I don’t feel up to it today, so I’m going to leave the classroom now. I felt many sets of eyes glued to my back as I left the room. However, no one dared to say anything to me.

I headed out of the school building and walked wherever my feet would take me. It was during this little stroll that I heard the muffled voice of someone quarreling with someone else on the other side of the school building.

I took a look. “That red hair... Hmm, I think that’s...Shuya Newkern, or something like that?”

If my memory had served me right, he was an eccentric guy who earned pocket money by telling fortunes. He had been standing next to me at the entrance ceremony, so I remembered him.

Right now, he was standing in front of a commoner, seemingly defending that student. They were surrounded by several upperclassmen.

Well, “quarreling” wasn’t exactly the right word. It was more like Shuya was firing off statements one-sidedly at the others.

I squinted my eyes and muttered to myself. “Not only that, but the commoner over there... Aren’t they the student from the rumors? Their parents did some shady stuff, had part of their assets seized, and they may quit school soon. Wow, that redhead is really stupid. Even if he helps out a troublesome commoner, it won’t benefit him one bit.”

Moreover, didn’t that student also try and fail to steal some of the upperclassmen’s wallets in desperation? I think that’s the one.

Apparently, the student had done it on impulse, but it was probably going to be impossible for them to live a peaceful life in this school after that.

What a noble considered to be pocket change was a fortune to a commoner. There were many nobles here who didn’t have the first clue when it came to money and didn’t keep track of it. That student had probably thought that the nobles wouldn’t notice one missing silver coin.

But, well, the commoner dug their own grave, enough to become a target of bullies. I guess it’s inevitable that someone would try to extort money from them.

I had an aha moment. “Oh, that’s how it is. Looks like that guy’s surprisingly righteous, huh?”

From what I could hear, it seemed that Shuya had found out about the bullying and was telling the upperclassmen to stop.

But, well... As long as it didn't go overboard, even the school turned a blind eye to such things.

After all, we were in Daryth, where commoners and nobles coexisted. Outside of the school, a much harsher reality was lying in wait, and that was the reason for the lenience on campus. If someone tried to steal a noble's wallet, they could even be killed for the crime. As a result, if bullying at school went too far, the staff would interfere, but that only happened once in a blue moon.

The staff knew that clearly, and they only accepted commoners who could survive in such an environment. As for the commoners, they came with the knowledge that this mage school hadn't been built with them in mind.

Kirsch Mage Institute was a school established for nobles. Commoners had to harden their resolve when they enrolled.

I sighed. "Well, I guess I owe that guy one for waking me up during the entrance ceremony, so I'll give him a hand."

I'm surprised though. I hadn't gotten the impression that Shuya was such a compassionate guy.

Oh, Shuya took the commoner by the hand and slipped away from that group. With leers on their faces, I saw the upperclassmen say something to Shuya, but that guy kept on walking.

When we passed by each other, frustration was clear on his face. In the end, Shuya probably failed to retrieve the commoner's money back from those students.

That guy... Why is he trying to look cool even though he'd gain nothing from it?

What a fool...

"What do you want, fatty?" one of the older students sneered. "Shoo. Go away."

"My seniors," I addressed them with derisive politeness. "Is it fun picking on

people weaker than you?”

“Watch your tongue,” one snapped. “We only kindly told a commoner unworthy of Kirsch the truth. ‘You don’t belong here.’”

“My, my.” I raised an eyebrow. “You’re only a student too, and I believe that you have no authority to do that. More importantly, do you all not have class right now?”

One of the others replied, choosing his words slowly. “What about *your* classes, first-year? Skipping only one month into school?” He paused. “And we’re probably the students who are the most worthy of being here in the first place. You must know the marquess house which currently holds the most authority within this school, and we are their—”

“Hey, quit it!” one of the other students warned. “He’s... He’s that Denning guy!”

“D-Denning?! Th-This thing is *Denning*?! But his appearance doesn’t live up to it at all—”

“Well, I’m so *sorry* that someone like me is a Denning.”

Lately, these lackeys of the marquess household House Groux had been getting pretty cocky. I faced these third-year students, and...

The next day, the second son of House Groux bowed down right in front of me in the dining hall.

“Pardon the rudeness of my associates. Please accept my apology to you.”

I looked on silently.

“However, you are very thoughtless, despite your status as a member of House Denning. It is against the rules to use your wand for brawls within the campus.”

I didn’t reply.

He harrumphed. “It seems that the rumors of the Fallen Wind are true.”

And ever since that day, the rumor spread that getting involved with me only

led to catastrophe.

“Yo, Shuya. That’s a nasty look on your face. What happened?” I asked. “I have to say though, you have a pretty strong sense of justice, even if you pack no punch at all. Why did you do that?”

He clenched his teeth. “Delphin quit school. It’s definitely those guys’ work.”

“Well, you should think twice before doing anything about it. You’re from a baron household, and you’re trying to oppose a marquess household. Ridiculous.”

“Wait, Denning, did you actually fight them for my sake—”

“Hah? This is Kirsch Mage Institute, mind you. Did you really blindly believe what that headmaster said?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That commoner voluntarily threw themselves into a society where their social standing means they’ll never belong. That’s why they turned out like *that*.”

“Get to the point, Denning.”

“Let this be a lesson to you. You should stop sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong. I’m trying to tell you to keep your head low. You’re going to be crushed at this rate.”

Kirsch Mage Institute was like a miniature version of Daryth’s aristocracy. In this place, the only things that mattered were one’s family standing, the power of one’s parents, their economic clout, and their family’s military strength. Even if a student had a bit of talent in magic, it didn’t change a thing.

And on the next day, just like I had expected, that redhead came into class with a swollen face.

I *did* warn him that if a noble got involved with commoners due to a bit of pity, he would become a magnet for trouble.

“I’ve lost track of how many times this has happened... Did that guy turn his

ears off when I gave him some advice?!”

Nobles who were on the bottom of the social ladder, fruitcakes, commoners whose extreme talent caused them to be shunned... That guy actively got chummy with all of the problem students, and it only fanned the flames of conflict wherever he went. There were probably many incidents that would have faded away quietly in the background if only that guy had never gotten involved.

Despite all those incidents, Shuya hadn't changed his ways at all.

I breathed out a heavy sigh. “What a hopeless guy.” I had already gotten used to cleaning up after his disasters from the shadows.

But over time, he had gained friends. *Well, yeah, from a bystander's perspective, he's like the hero who would stand up for their sake. We're like night and day, while I scuttle around sneakily behind the scenes.*

“Hey, have you heard the news?” a student muttered. “Apparently, we have an international student here now.”

“And a princess, no less! You should try wooing her!” another egged on.

“I'm not stupid! She used to be the fiancée of the Piggy Duke! If that guy is still hung up on her in some way, I'll be walking to my death!”

Countless times, I had pulled a few strings behind the scenes to save Shuya, and with each incident, the rumors about me only became more exaggerated. First, the third-years started fearing me, then the second-years began to anxiously watch out for any change in my mood, and finally, my peers stopped interacting with me.

At first, some people used to strike up a conversation with me out of curiosity because, well, I was a member of House Denning who was at this school. Over time, however, that number plummeted to a big, fat zero.

“Let's see... Mister Haul, please refrain from leaving your room tomorrow. According to my reading, if you break the promise you made with your friend yesterday, you might suffer!” Shuya said.

“A-Are you sure, Shuya? A while ago, I had a terrible time after I ignored your

divination's advice! B-But Shuya, what in the world is the source of this voice that you can hear?!"

Shuya was an eccentric guy who told fortunes using a crystal ball. *That guy has gone off to do something silly again... But I wonder about that too. Just whose voice can he hear?*

To pass the time, I had made all of his fortunes come true using my spells. But one day, the cat was finally out of the bag.

"Hey, Denning!" he yelled. "You're doing something to my clients, aren't you?!"

"What's this all of a sudden?" I grumbled. "Your clients? Oh, those people from that weird part-time hobby of yours."

"Don't call it a hobby! This is my job!"

"A job where you listen to voices talking to you?" I asked incredulously. "Are you sure you're not high on some fishy drugs?"

"Damn you, Denning...!"

Teasing him had been great fun, so I continued to carry out pranks on Shuya despite his protests. After that, he had begun to find fault with me at every single opportunity, and it even frequently evolved into squabbles.

That guy wasn't bound by his social standing, and his stance as a noble had been interesting to me. That was why I had found so much joy in watching him.

"Hey, have you heard? Lady Alicia, of all people, apparently made a friend of sorts," a student gossiped.

"Oh, I certainly have! That oddball, right? The one who always carries a crystal ball."

On top of this newfound joy, he became friends with Alicia, who seemed like she had been bored here at Kirsch.

I'll be honest—Alicia has been on my mind for a very long time. She used to be my fiancée, after all.

Since she had come to this country, I wanted her to have a good time.

“Hey, Shuya!” Alicia yelled. “I *told* you to wait for me!”

Alicia had smiled very little ever since she came to Kirsch, perhaps because she didn’t fit in very well. Shuya had been the one who changed her tune. After she became friends with him, I could clearly tell that she was having fun.

Let me confess something. I was over the moon about that! But at the same time...maybe I felt somewhat jealous of Shuya too. After all, I am the blackhearted Piggy Duke, and it’s too late for me to be friendly with Alicia again. I chose to be with Charlotte. Forgetting that choice and trying to get on good terms with Alicia again is the wrong path.

“Master Slowe! Have you made any friends yet?!” Charlotte exclaimed at me one day.

“Nope. It seems that everyone is scared of me. That aside, Charlotte, can you believe it? There’s someone more foolish than *me* at this school!”

“Master Slowe!” Charlotte said chidingly. “How many times have I told you that you should not make fun of people?”

“But it’s really laughable, you know? He makes no sense whatsoever. Hearing a voice from a crystal ball is way too wild!”

Charlotte hesitated before she could reply again. “I must say... You look really happy, Master Slowe.”

I continued to observe him, day after day. He had given me so much joy that it was enough to make me forget my current situation.

This place was Kirsch Mage Institute, a place where nobles mingled with each other, and yet I had found a noble who completely deviated from the definition of one.

And this certain person...went by the name of Shuya Newkern.

“Master Slowe! Master Slowe! Please wake up!”

“Huh...?” I mumbled. “Wh-Wha—” I howled in shock.

Rolling, rolling, rolling...bang!

It took me some time to comprehend what in the world had happened to me. I felt something chilly. *Okay, so this is the floor. I fell onto the hard, rock floor. Charlotte shoved me!*

Ow. But I don't think Charlotte would do that without good reason. She had forgiven me in the end, even after I'd broken my promise with Princess Carina by coming to Zenelaus. She had even believed me in the end that the guild in Zenelaus was hiding something.

Surely, there must be excruciating circumstances for her to shove me onto the ground.

"Is there something you need me for, Charlotte?"

Still, that was such a nostalgic dream. A dream about Shuya, of all people. I have never had one of those before.

"Good morning. Master Slowe, do you know why I'm angry?" Charlotte said slowly.

Yep, she's definitely mad. It doesn't feel like she's criticizing me for sleeping in the middle of the day, though. Ah right, Charlotte knows that I've been living a nocturnal life lately, so it can't be that.

I had been taking advantage of the fact that zombies were less aggressive at night to investigate the subordinates of the lich with the guild's staff members. This was all preparation to minimize disadvantages for adventurers in the final battle.

Well, I didn't really want to say this, but in exchange for that, the guild was footing the bill for Charlotte and Alicia's living expenses. Other than that, I had also requested that the guild send guards to protect the two whenever I wasn't in Zenelaus, though it seemed that these two hadn't realized it yet.

In that case, what was Charlotte so angry about?

The gears in my mind whirled in order to figure out the problem. The answer came to me in a flash of inspiration.

There was food left on the table. Alicia and Charlotte had prepared a meal for after I had gotten back in the morning, and it was left untouched.

I guess I deserve a scolding in this case. They were considerate of my state and made food that is easy to stomach.

Well, Alicia no longer calls me Piggy Slowe either. I'm a scrawny little Slowe now.

"Um, Charlotte, I'm sorry. You put in all that effort to cook for me, but I wasn't able to eat any of it..."

"That's not it. I'm sad about that too, but that's not the point."

"Huh? It's not?"

"It's completely different! You are *way* off target," she stressed. "When I went outside just now, I heard a veeery bad rumor."

I hesitated. "A rumor?"

"About how a certain young mage beat the newcomer of Zylush black and blue."

"Oh..."

"It was Master Slowe, right?"

"Uh..."

"It was *you*, wasn't it? And that newcomer was Mister Newkern, right?"

I hung my head in defeat. "Yes. You're right about everything."

Charlotte had always kindly watched over me from afar, even when everyone had bad-mouthed me back at Kirsch. At the end of the day, Charlotte had always been very lenient towards me.

That same Charlotte was now fuming! This was one of the rare times when she was actually furious. She was *enraged* about how I had given Shuya a vicious beating!

"Why did you do something so cruel?"

Panicked, I began to ramble. "You two have been trying to persuade him every single day, but it just goes in one ear and out the other with that guy! Look at Alicia! She's so ragged now, and she's panic-stricken about how Shuya might be killed by a zombie, and yet... When I saw Shuya in high spirits with

those adventurers, I just, well, kind of saw red, you know? I tried starting a conversation with him, and it somehow developed into a fight, and I thought...I thought that I had to resort to using force with him. If he realized that he's weak, maybe he might decide to evacuate Zenelaus, so..."

I trailed off then sagged my shoulders. "You're right. I'm sorry; I was completely at fault."

"You used to quarrel a lot with Mister Shuya back at Kirsch too, didn't you? Why is that?"

It was just like Charlotte said, and it was just like what happened in my dream earlier.

He had Alicia by his side this whole time. Yet, he threw her aside in Zenelaus as he became obsessed with playing make-believe war.

Alicia was all alone again, just like how she had been when she first came to Kirsch.

...That was probably why I felt so much rage when I saw what Shuya was doing now. *Alicia is waiting for that guy in a trashy inn while he's doing all that, but he...*

"Because Shuya is Alicia's only friend," I answered.

"Huh? Um, could you elaborate?"

"If you take a moment to consider why Alicia followed Shuya here...it's pretty obvious. Think about it. Alicia doesn't have aaany interest in dungeons or monsters, does she? Yet she still followed Shuya to Zenelaus. That's because Shuya Newkern is a precious friend to her."

"Wait, Master Slowe, it can't be... Did you argue with Mister Shuya because of..."

"That guy brought Alicia all the way to such a dangerous city. Even the evacuation route to leave via the wilds is perilous enough. Despite all that, he's neglecting Alicia here, and I can't stand that. Those two are more than friends on top of all that..."

Charlotte froze. "Huh? No way! Are you saying that...?!"

I nodded slowly.

All Charlotte could do was robotically repeat her exclams of surprise and the phrase, “No way!”

It seemed that her anger from just moments ago had been completely blown away.



But I haven't said anything wrong, right? I mean, Shuya and Alicia are going to end up in that way in the future.

"Now that you mention it, Lady Alicia *did* come to Zenelaus with him as a pair. Right... There's no way that nothing happened..."

"Miss Charlotte!" The star of the show finally made her appearance before us. "I didn't find you in your room! How about we borrow the kitchen today and cook together?" Alicia looked at the table. "Ah, hey! He hasn't eaten it at all!" She then turned to me. "Slowe... Why are you on the ground?"

"You see, there are some very complicated events that led up to this..." I trailed off.

"Ah! We put in all that effort to cook for you, so... Come on! Eat up! Slowe!"

"Hey, don't shove it into my face!" I yelped. "I *really* don't have an appetite right now!"

Chapter 3: Before the Final Battle

“Sir Piggi-Du! You have such extraordinary spellcasting abilities as well as deep, profound compassion for monsters! You have the makings of an adventurer whose name will go down in history. Why do you insist so stubbornly on rejecting our offer?”

“Uh, no... I am serious, please, *please* spare me that fate.”

“We will not give up! We saw the amazing things that you’re capable of... Like how you’re able to bring staff members to the Easton Rock Mountain Range even though it’s still under the control of that lich! An average adventurer, no, even a high-ranking adventurer would be insufficient for that task! Moreover, your knowledge...no, your *love* towards monsters goes so deep that you are able to discuss them with us! With your wisdom, the only person that exceeds you at this point is the Eye of the Crimson Lotus himself! Very few high-ranking adventurers actually take an interest in the differences between monsters, you know! Ah! Sir Piggi-Du! Please wait! Sir Piggi-Duuu...!”

“Pardon me, but my job here was done the moment I brought you back to Zenelaus, so I shall get going now!”

“S-Sir Piggi-Du! Our guild master has a message for you! S-Sir Piggi-Du! Please be at your inn this evening!”

I could still hear the voice of the middle-aged guild staff member as I took off at lightning speed into the streets of Zenelaus.

It was still early in the morning and the sun hadn’t shown its face yet. Even a bustling city like Zenelaus was dead silent at this time of day. Thanks to that, I didn’t have to worry about anyone finding out that I was the rumored Piggi-Du.

Day after day, I set out to the Easton Rock Mountain Range while guarding guild staff members.

Before all this, I had been pretty confident in my prowess as a monster geek,

but the real professionals were on a whole other level.

With just one look, these guild staff members were able to analyze a monster's weak spots and determine their habitats. They could even make a rough estimate of how many of them there were, or even how many had been turned into puppets by the lich. I was in awe of these people.

Something caught my eye as I walked through the city. "Huh! So the guild has even started making flyers like this."

"In preparation for the decisive battle ahead, the Adventurers' Guild is recruiting additional support staff to back up our adventurers! If you are interested, please come to one of the guild branch offices!"

If we only sent valiant adventurers forward to defeat the lich, we would be fighting at a disadvantage. Judging by this posting, there were probably enough heroes, but there were relatively few people backstage helping to run the show.

I had made a suggestion to the guild staff members proposing that they could recruit fresh-out-of-the-oven adventurers as support staff. Seemed like it had paid off. If those two brothers were still in this city, they could probably find work as support staff if they saw that flyer.

"Looks like the guild is suddenly getting pumped up about the battle," I observed. "But the guys there are slave drivers... Well, I guess it *is* pretty fun, being in the know of the inner workings of the Adventurers' Guild."

Some guild staff members were former adventurers, but most of them were amateur fighters who didn't even know how to wield a weapon. To be frank, escorting these guys to the mountain range under the lich's rule was exhausting. They wouldn't stop throwing their ridiculous requests at me, like when one had wanted to study the ecosystem of the lich's dungeon. I had been really troubled by those.

Not only that, but we took off at night when we wouldn't attract attention. I had to be extremely attentive to my surroundings as their bodyguard in the dark, and oh boy...

“So far, none of the staff members have sustained injuries. Oh, actually, wasn’t there one guy who tripped over his own feet and hurt himself? But still, good job, me!”

If people find out that I’ve been using my abilities to protect citizens from another country though... Everyone back in House Denning would probably throw a fit. They’re really set in their ways.

House Denning had protected Daryth for generations, and we were the guardians of our country. Now, one of our members, *me*, was intervening in a battle taking place in a foreign land.

Now that I think about it, this is the first time that I’ve been away from Daryth for so long. As the blackhearted Piggy Duke, I spent my days fooling around in the Denning lands and at Kirsch.

I am now treading a path that is different from everyone else’s in my house.

My brothers are probably all glued to the front lines... In the end, it seems that even after my change of heart, I’m still the same old problem child.

I’m always dragged around by other people’s issues or circumstances, and this time, the world’s future is at stake.

There was a long, incredulous yell. “Isn’t this too expensive?! There’s a limit to how much you can rip me off!”

“L-Lady Alicia! Everyone can hear you...!”

In the middle of my journey back to the inn, I heard some familiar voices. *Wait. Don’t tell me that was...*

I spotted Alicia trying to haggle prices with a merchant. *Wow... Doesn’t she worry at all about what other people will think?*

“But Miss Charlotte, these prices are clearly more expensive than yesterday! I thought that if we came early in the morning, they would have lots of fresh food in stock that only just arrived, but then this happened!”

The merchant tried to placate her. “Y-Young miss, Zenelaus is currently limiting traffic between here and Galland City. Despite that, only more and more adventurers are gathering here, so...there’s a shortage of food...”

“Please stop, Lady Alicia... This is really embarrassing...” Charlotte mumbled.

“But this is way too overpriced!”

“M-More importantly, Lady Alicia, are you sure you don’t have to go try and persuade Mister Shuya anymore?”

Alicia hesitated. “It’s fine. That guy doesn’t listen to what we say anyway! I’m fed up with him! We went all the way to the guild to make a request for him to evacuate with us, but he’s still so stubborn! On top of that, Slowe even began saying that he’d remain in Zenelaus if Shuya doesn’t evacuate too!”

I see. Alicia...has already gotten over Shuya. No, it’s probably more accurate to say that she’s trying to avoid thinking about him.

Her friend was planning on being a part of a war. She probably feels overwhelmingly helpless, but she’s putting on false cheerfulness.

But it seems that she’s also worried about me.

“What matters more right now is Slowe! He’s only getting more haggard by the day!”

“I understand. Um, please lower your prices even more! This is too expensive!”

Those two are probably very stressed from all of this, but I can’t evacuate to a neighboring city with them.

“I wonder if I’ll be able to fall asleep at all today...” I mumbled to myself.

...I just can’t run away and leave Shuya behind.

A drawn-out sigh escaped my lips. “I can’t sleep at all...”

It was just before noon. The fight that would decide the fate of the world was just around the corner, and that knowledge was weighing down on me so hard that I couldn’t even swallow down my food.

In contrast, life in Zenelaus was the same as always.

Adventurers chatted with each other on the streets. “Whew, I’m exhausted! Earned some big bucks again today. The zombies are never in short supply, so it’s like it’s raining cash out there.”

“From what I’ve heard, these monsters are way more stupid since they’re being controlled by the lich,” another man remarked.

“In that case, the lich taking over that dungeon might have done us some good. After all, it’s super easy to earn some cash on the city defense quest, even if we slack off a bit.”

From the windows of my room, I could hear the voices of adventurers who had returned from the city outskirts. This hotel...no, this run-down inn faced a back alley, so I often overheard people’s *true* opinions of things, as they spoke without the pleasantries needed when within earshot of others.

Jeez, these guys... Compared to the zombies in the mountains, the ones wandering about the wilds during the day are nothing but low-tier monsters without free will. Don’t you know that?!

And they’re so loud! I can’t relax and sleep quietly with all this going on. Well, I guess I do prefer this over being forced awake by the voices of adventurers fighting among themselves...

“I suppose we’ll leave the lich to the seasoned adventurers who have been showing up recently, and we can continue to leisurely hunt zombies ourselves. It’s clear that we’re going to win.”

“Even if the worst happens and the high-ranked adventurers can’t deal with it, we already know that the Eye of the Crimson Lotus will definitely make an appearance to fix it all!”

“Right!” The man cackled. “Since their last match ended in a draw, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus probably needs to sweep away all those rumors that his skill is waning. They did say that he struggled against a weird dullahan too, so all the more reason for that.”

The adventurers seemed to be pretty used to rather pressing situations, and they were the perfect picture of calm, but...

Guys, do you really understand what’s at stake here? The fate of the world is counting on this battle! This city is facing a precarious predicament that’s enough to make even me lose my appetite! They’re all completely at ease because they think that the Eye of the Crimson Lotus can defeat the lich, but

come on! The real enemy is actually Dreibach Steibelt!

That man is such a dangerous foe that even the Eye of the Crimson Lotus wasn't able to defeat him in the anime! Well, I'm helping that guild master out from behind the scenes this time, so he should be able to go into the fight fully prepared, so...things are a bit different.

"That's probably for the best. Hey, Bellarsi, have you heard of the newbie in the Archflare's adventurer party?"

"Ah, that redhead brat. Shuya, I think? I heard that the Archflare personally approached him, so I've been wondering what kind of outrageous guy he is. It turns out he's not so different from us. What in the world did the Archflare see in that kid?"

"How could we know what goes on in the mind of an almighty, high-ranked adventurer? That aside, I'm really curious about who might defeat the lich and become a new S-class in the end... I suppose our best contender is still probably Snow White. All those A-class adventurers and people who graduated from this city are coming back to Zenelaus in great swarms. Even that Fog Mage came today, did you hear?"

In this city, the zeal to fight the lich only grew hotter and hotter by the day. On the streets of Zenelaus, everyone was gossiping about who might be the next generation of S-class adventurers.

This was all because of an official announcement by the overlord of Zenelaus, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus. It said that he would officially name whoever bested the lich as an S-class adventurer.

"The guild's even arranging healing potions for novices like us when the final showdown happens. They're usually cheapskates, so this is very generous for them."

"Do you think we'll really fight the lich here in the city like the rumors say? Won't this city take a beating?"

"It's better than climbing the mountain to reach the dungeon where that lich has set up camp. That's hell, you know?"

Just like the Eye of the Crimson Lotus had planned, Zenelaus was steadily

making preparations to take out the lich such as setting up traps and strategically stocking magic items and healing potions inside buildings. A guild staff member under the direct command of the Eye of the Crimson Lotus had explained to me that they were receiving aid from wealthy merchants in the Freedom Union.

I knew it was all going to end up for naught though, because Eldred was going to take over Shuya's body and go on a rampage.

A man's voice cut in and interrupted the others. "Hey! So this is where you guys were slacking off! Break time was over ages ago!"

"Ah, Leader. What's the fuss about?"

"Walaki bugs have appeared in the wilds and the guild is going to prepare a special quest ordering their elimination! This is our chance to kill them first and to curry favor with the guild, no, with the Eye of the Crimson Lotus!" the leader shouted.

There was a pause before someone else spoke up. "Leader, we're a puny adventurer party. Such a powerful man wouldn't hear us out—"

"Is your head empty?! The Eye of the Crimson Lotus pays attention to the performance of every adventurer in Zenelaus! I'm not kidding, I swear! He praised me a while ago, after all! He said it was wonderful that my training for the newbies was going along well!"

Now, as for Shuya, who seemed to be a small celebrity in the rumor mill of Zenelaus...

Alicia and Charlotte had continued to try and persuade him for days and nights on end. However, the results had been dismal. In fact, his attitude had gotten even worse. He had started to boast and make grand statements, like claiming that he was also contributing to the protection of this city and that the military prowess of the city would diminish if he wasn't around.

I wanted to scream at him that his existence didn't make a single difference in the fighting capabilities of Zenelaus. In fact, I had actually tried to march straight into his den and shout that to his face, but the two girls stopped me on the grounds that it would cause another fight. Apparently.

That bastard is probably getting so cocky because he's been going around with Zylush. I gritted my teeth. Even when he comes across me in the streets, he goes out of his way to completely avoid me.

Inwardly, I heaved a sigh. I'm doing all this for his sake, though. He also seems to have gotten chummy with more adventurers recently, and it doesn't look like he has any plans to come back to our inn or to evacuate.

I let my exasperation wash over me.

That aside, the wonderful Eye of the Crimson Lotus has been successful in gathering the fighters he needs, which is the only great news.

That guy's sooo popular though. If everything continues to be smooth sailing, our strategy against the musketeer is probably sound.

All that's left now is dealing with Shuya. Well, with Eldred, really. A while ago I gave him a small warning, so been there, done that... He probably wouldn't take over Shuya's body and go ballistic too quickly, so I should be able to set up a countermeasure before then. But the ideal scenario would be getting Shuya to leave the city in the first place...

"You know... Rather than participating in the final battle, wouldn't we earn more money escorting evacuees to nearby towns? They say that people would pay a fortune for bodyguards on the day of the showdown."

"A fortune? Why?"

"Word on the street is that a royal princess from an unknown country is in this city. I dunno if that's the reason why so much cash is churning around, but I heard that the giant adventurer party, Armed Convoy, is going to show up with all of their members as guards."

"Fancy that!"

...They're probably talking about Alicia.

In the room next to mine, Charlotte was currently packing their belongings in preparation for their evacuation to Galland while Alicia was off shopping.

As for the Great Spirit of Wind, they had finally realized the severity of the threat that the lich in the mountain range and the musketeer posed. A while

ago, they had asked me in a very, very roundabout way what I was going to do about those enemies.

If Shuya got involved in the upcoming final battle, the future wouldn't be a pleasant one. And that Great Spirit most definitely had an inkling that something disastrous was about to unfold as well.

"We're right before the final battle, but...I'm already so tired..." I sighed.

I had been taking over the duties that the Eye of the Crimson Lotus had taken care of in the anime. Unlike the guild master, who knew the Easton Rock Mountain Range like the back of his hand, this was a foreign land to me. Despite that fact, none of the guild staff members had been injured.

I've tried really hard, don't you think? I've done enough! Everyone is probably going to praise me. I wonder, just how much effort have I put in? It feels like a lot... Surely I deserve to be showered with compliments that I'm a really good guy. For example, someone like Princess Carina should totally do that... Maybe I should even think about aiming to become her Royal Knight or something...

A voice shattered my segment of escapism. "Master Slowe! May I have a moment?!"

"Hey, Charlotte... What is it? Have you finished packing already? Alicia seemed to have a lot of stuff to pack though..."

"I just remembered something important!"

"Uh... What?"

"You once said that you were going to buy me a wand, didn't you?!"

I hesitated. "Oh, that..."

"I ended up losing my wand on our return trip from Huzak, so I need a new one!"

Yikes. I had completely forgotten about that.

"You promised, Master Slowe! In the orc village, you swore that you would buy me a new wand!"

“Charlotte, calm down!”

“Come on, let’s go! This is a town of adventurers, so there are a lot of wands for sale in the marketplace! And you don’t have to get me a high-grade wand either!”

“H-Hey! Let go of my arm!”

“I mean, when else could you buy me one if we miss this chance?! Right now, I’m stuck in a situation where a wand is vital! And! When we were in the orc village, you *promised*, Master Slowe!”

I sputtered. “Well, y-yeah, but...”

“Take a moment and think about it carefully! Soon, Lady Alicia and I are going to leave, and it’ll take a few days to get to safety. What if monsters attack us during that time?!”

I tried to reassure her. “The reputable Armed Convoy is going to escort you guys, so you’ll be perfectly safe. And you’ll have the Great Spirit of Wind with you.”

We had arranged for Charlotte and Alicia to leave Zenelaus the coming evening. They would journey for two days to the neighboring Galland City, cutting across the wilderness.

The wilds were currently an unruly place, but even if all else failed, Charlotte had the Great Spirit by her side. Right now, the Great Spirit in question was in the corner of the room, either sleeping or...passed out...but in any case, she would be fine.

“But anything’s possible! I need a wand so that I can protect Lady Alicia!” Charlotte argued.

“Okay, okay, fine! I see your point, Charlotte, so please, keep it down!”

Charlotte had seemed to overcome some sort of personal mental barrier after her experience in Huzak, and she would probably continue to hone her skills as a mage from now on. However, this was bad timing. We were in the Freedom Union, the land where the war would soon begin.

But I did promise to buy her a wand...

“A waaand!” Charlotte insisted. “Back in the orc village! You promised! Master Slowe!”

All of a sudden, Alicia made her entrance, poking her head around the door. “Miss Charlotte, what are you making a fuss about?! I could even hear you outside. Something about orcs? What’s going on?” It seemed that she had finished her shopping.

I yelped in surprise. “Alicia?! Hey, I told you to never barge in without asking first!”

We had kept our time in the orc village a secret from Alicia.

“I knocked, but you two didn’t hear it because you were making such a racket,” Alicia huffed. “More importantly, have you gotten thinner *again*? The bags under your eyes are monstrous too. Have you been sleeping properly at all?”

I didn’t know how to reply.

“You haven’t been eating the food I’ve made either.” Alicia frowned.

“Ah... You still can’t eat, Master Slowe?” Charlotte asked worriedly.

“Sorry...” I muttered. “I just don’t have an appetite.”

I couldn’t help it. The fight in Zenelaus would decide the fate of the world.

If the musketeer won, the empire’s involvement in all of this would definitely be exposed. Feigning that it was all the lich’s doing wouldn’t work anymore. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus knew that clearly, and that was the reason why he had gathered so many capable fighters here. He was making full use of his influence to attract powerful warriors.

I evaded the question. “Even someone like me has my own worries. More importantly, why are you here, Alicia? Didn’t you have something you needed to do?”

“The Adventurers’ Guild has announced the makeup of the lich’s army in Easton Rock Mountain Range,” Alicia explained.

Already? Our investigation only just finished today. They’re very fast. I suppose I should have expected nothing less from the guild staff members handpicked by

the Eye of the Crimson Lotus.

I had a part in this, so I'm curious about how they summarized the information in the end.

Alicia continued. "But that isn't all. In preparation for the lich's attack, they also announced the adventurer parties taking part in the final battle."

"Miss Alicia..." Charlotte gasped. "You don't mean..."

"Yes. Shuya's name was there, listed with that adventurer party..."

"Drill the information on the monsters into your heads!" an adventurer yelled. "Their weaknesses are all written here!"

"Apparently, some brute called Piggi-Du was bringing guild staff members to the Easton Rock Mountain Range so they could get this information. Not only that, but he was able to protect them for days on end with no injuries! Who in the world is he?!"

Adventurers were packed tightly into the spacious plaza before the southern headquarters of the Adventurers' Guild. This rush of people was caused by the recent announcement that revealed the posts each adventurer party would be stationed at for the battle with the lich.

Participation would count towards a special quest for which the guild would provide an exceptional reward. The rewards for this particular quest were lavish and generous in every way, whether it be money or ranking progression.

"The Adventurers' Guild is giving out holy water like there's no tomorrow! Please take some if you are worried about curses!"

"Have you heard the news?! The Archflare exterminated the devil monster that the lich had sent!"

"Outta my way! I can't see anything!"

"Where are we stationed?! I bet it's somewhere where we can earn a fortune! Hm, outside... Not bad! At least we don't have to worry about the battle junkies dragging us into their messes inside the city!"

The adventurer party posts could be roughly split into two categories: one

inside Zenelaus and another outside. Those outside would take out the countless zombies present there, and those inside would take on the big bosses of this battle as well as the lich that led them all to the city.

The massive swarm of zombies coming from the Easton Rock Mountain Range always made a beeline for Zenelaus. Thus, positioning adventurers with the most offensive capabilities on the outskirts of the city would usually make sense, but things were different this time.

“Look, brother, we’re inside!” one adventurer shouted. “In fact, we’re right in front of Nemesis! Here, where the lich is going to come!”

“Indeed, brother. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus probably considers us worthy of the title of S-class... However, how did the guild master learn that the lich was going to come right to Nemesis?”

“Who knows?” The adventurer shrugged. “However, his information never fails to be correct. I daresay that he has learned something that led him to that conclusion... For example, the extremely intelligent lich might have its sights set on the hidden treasures of the guild.”

“Look,” a new face whispered, “those two are the infamous Cleaver Brothers. The guild master even reached out to savage people like them?”

All of the most competent adventurers were stationed here in the plaza.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus would face the Living Dead himself. We expected the lich to try and interfere while that happened, so it was arranged that stout warriors like these high-ranking adventurers would face it.

In other words, none of the adventurers with real skill were stationed outside the city... Unfortunately, this meant that the outskirts would probably become a bloody battlefield with a high death toll in its wake.

“What are you looking at, Slowe? Come on, Shuya’s name is listed over there. He’s outside.”

Alicia grabbed my hand firmly and I finally spotted that guy’s name. First was Zodd and Nalita from Zylush, and then his name followed theirs.

It looks completely out of place there... He doesn’t measure up at all. Zylush is

an adventurer party with voracious, skilled fighters. They even have raid experience in that S-rank dungeon, the Demon Prison. No matter how I think about it, those two are in a completely different world from him.

Those two members of Zylush would probably protect him like they did in the anime, but, well... If Shuya had been alone, considering his abilities now, he would have fallen into the embrace of death in an instant.

“Out of all the contenders, who’s the favorite for defeating the lich? The obvious choice is Snow White, right?”

“Archflare is up there also. Ever since he got Flamberge, his reputation has flown off the charts! He’s a favorite of the Eye of the Crimson Lotus too. His party has also been participating in city defense this whole time.”

There were even people dressed up as zombies here, even though the fight was drawing near. The whole city had a festive mood.

I looked towards Alicia and our eyes met. *Looks like we’re on the same wavelength... We can’t stand watching all this.*

Alicia sighed. “*This* is why I hate adventurers...”

“Alicia, make sure you and Charlotte leave today. Someone else also mentioned this earlier, but today’s the last day you’ll be able to go and seek refuge in Galland.”

Alicia pursed her lips, staying silent for a moment. “I know, okay?”

Most of the noncombatants had evacuated by now. The only ones left were doctors who were former adventurers, guild staff members, or adventurers who chose to become support staff. Even if Alicia had a wand on hand, she still stuck out like a sore thumb among the crowd left in the city.

As for the reason why Alicia had continued to stay in Zenelaus even after things had progressed to this point... It was all for *that guy*.

“Hey, Alicia. Please tell me where Shuya is right now.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why do you want to know that?”

“I want to meet him again and talk, face-to-face.”

...Yeah, you know, I really can't leave him like that, no matter how many times I think about it.

“Shuya is currently in that place where Zylush often hangs out. That guy's already a regular patron there.” There was a hint of exasperation in her voice. “Apparently, adventurers who take on the city defense quest earn a lot of money, and he's been on it every single day, so he's living the rich man's life now...”

I would be hard-pressed to categorize Shuya Newkern as a friend. Even in the anime, we had been fully hostile to each other, and I had suffered terribly after Charlotte got intimate with that guy.

But, even despite that...I still wanted him to evacuate because I knew of the tragedy that would unfold after the final battle.

“Hey, who do you think might defeat the lich and become an S-class adventurer?”

“Oh, it's definitely going to be Snow White, Lady Mariana!”

“Hey y'all, have you heard? Apparently, the fact that a lich took over the dungeon hasn't spread outside this city at all. The guild's restricting the flow of information.”

“Who cares?! I wouldn't want anyone to steal our fun!”

I could sort of see why Shuya had said he liked Zenelaus. This city was filled with freedom. Nobody knew of his past, and he could become his ideal self. In the anime, Shuya had said that he had enjoyed the preparation time building up towards the decisive battle.

“I must say, ever since the Eye of the Crimson Lotus took on the post of guild master, the guild has been much less stingy! They'll loan out weapons and equipment, and I've only heard good things about him. Long live Zenelaus! Long live the Eye of the Crimson Lotus!”

Alicia slowly spoke up again, “I have to say, I'm rather surprised.”

“About what?”

“I mean, I thought you *hated* Shuya, Slowe.”

“...I do. I utterly despise him.”

“Then why are you trying to save him? You could just leave him to do whatever.”

Back at Kirsch, we had always glared at each other, and I had even recently beat him to a pulp. Us two being buddy-buddy? One would have to be blind to say that we were friends.

He had chosen to cut across Huzak to come to Zenelaus, and he had placed Alicia in great danger in the process. Even when Alicia tried to reason with him, even when Charlotte had said that he should evacuate to the neighboring city, he had rejected it all. To put it mildly, he was acting completely unfit as a Daryth noble. But...

“But he’s a good guy, isn’t he...?”

I had been so offended by him at school because he was so sincere and straightforward, and he had something that I didn’t.

I had probably simply been envious of him. As I’d watched him, I had ended up thinking, *Oh, how fun would it be if I were able to live like that?*

Just after I spoke up, Alicia whacked me on the back.

“Ow!” I yelped. “What was that for?!”

“Yeah, you’re right. That guy’s an idiot, but he’s also a hopelessly good guy!”

With a brilliant smile, Alicia told me the abundantly obvious truth.

That’s why...I definitely won’t accept that kind of future.





“Aaah...” A youth whimpered before letting out a long, wretched howl of despair.

I thought about the future that was portrayed in the anime. This was what Shuya was fated to become, from what I remembered.

There Shuya stood, as one lone figure among the ruins of Zenelaus.

Next to him was the musketeer, who now took on the shape of a human since he had been liberated from his curse.

Dreibach Steibelt pointed his blade at Shuya’s neck.

“Why didn’t you stop me?!” Shuya hollered. “Someone of your caliber should have been able to *kill* me!”

“You will soon forget all this. If you are the vessel of Eldred, he will likely erase all the memories that would serve as an inconvenience to him.”

“No way in hell would I ever forget what happened!” Shuya spat back at him. “I caused this! I killed everyone! I saw it all! *I saw it!* But I wasn’t able to stop him! He took over my body! I shouldn’t have trusted Eldred... Damn this power!”

“You are similar to me,” the man observed. “I was enthralled by the lich, and your body was the vessel of a Great Spirit. However, Eldred killed the lich, and he spared me.”

“I’m begging you, please... Please kill me. I deserve to die. All those people in Zenelaus, my comrades, I...” Shuya wailed. “Mister Zodd, Miss Nalita... All of the Archflare’s comrades, I...I killed them!”

Shuya was begging for his death from the bottom of his heart. He stood before his enemy, one of the Three Musketeers, who had the appearance of a dragon knight. The boy’s tears slid down bead after bead as he continued to beseech the man to act.

They stood in the center of the devastated city, right before the crumbling building of Nemesis. The mysterious power Shuya had gained had caused a rampaging inferno, and it had reduced this city to ashes.

Shuya had been conscious the whole time. His eyes were peeled the entire time as he watched himself destroy the city.

...It must have been unimaginable torture.

“A war is going to begin soon, and Lady Nanatrij is the one who will start it. You have a duty. You have *strength*. That is why I shall not kill you here. Bend the Great Spirit’s power to your own will and control it. And then, please, stop her.”

Shuya whimpered, breaking down. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I don’t want this... I hate all of this... Why...”

“Sleep. You will have forgotten all of this by the time you are awake. Your memories will then tell you that I had been the cause of all these evils...” There was a wry note in the man’s voice. “That the Living Dead had been the one to wreck Zenelaus.”



I definitely wouldn’t ever let that future happen. And that’s why I...

Opening the door, I made my entrance, and I was greeted by the stench of alcohol jabbing at my nose.

A staff member looked at me and hesitated. “My most sincere apologies, but we are fully booked today.”

“I know. I don’t mind,” I replied.

“Um, a-are you perhaps meeting someone here?”

“No. Please don’t mind me. I shall take my leave immediately once my business is finished here.”

“Ah! E-Excuse me, sir, but Zylush has booked this entire place for their personal use today!”

“I know.”

I was familiar with this pub’s interior. After all, this had been the place those guys went out of their way to bring us to the day Charlotte and I arrived in Zenelaus.

And honestly? The staff member didn't have to spell it out for me. Outside the pub, there had been a huge poster on display, declaring that this place was booked for a high-ranking adventurer party and their associates today.

"Well, well. Who do we have here? *You* again? Hey there, little mage bully," a voice drawled.

I looked around, and I found those guys here, just like back then on that first day. I spotted Zodd first, who was a part of Zylush, the adventurer party led by the Archflare, a high-ranking adventurer. Shuya was also there, sitting at the same table.

They had been enjoying a nice chat about the upcoming battle. Out of the group, the only people I was familiar with were Zodd and Nalita. *Which likely means that the other adventurers are acquaintances of Zylush.*

An unfamiliar woman chimed in. "Who's that little one, Zodd?"

"I mentioned him to you before, Lioness, remember? It's that guy, that Daryth noble who beat Shuya black and blue with magic," Zodd said with spite.

"Oooh! So this little one was him! Huh..." She looked at me with interest. "Hey, if you're a noble, don't you want a bodyguard? I'm quite a skilled one, I promise! Since you're still here, it means that you're going to join in on the final battle, right? Or are you going to head to Galland on the escorted trip today?"

Shuya had dragged his feet, but he finally addressed me. "What do you want, Denning?"

"Charlotte and Alicia are going to leave for Galland this evening. Alicia says that she hopes you'll go with them. They're still waiting for you outside, even now."

Up until now, Alicia and Charlotte had tried countless times to urge Shuya to leave. However, they had never been able to make him budge on the matter.

"Hey! He ignored me..." She pouted. "How disappointing."

"Looks like you were given the cold shoulder, Lioness." Zodd barked out a laugh. "But hey, you over there. We've booked out this place today, and you're not one of our associates, are you? So get out. Right now."

It was clear that I was unwelcome. I had beaten Shuya to a pulp right in front of their eyes not too long ago, so I probably had left a bad impression on them. Adventurers were people who didn't keep a tight leash on their tempers.

I ignored the people who were getting riled up and continued to talk to Shuya. "Shuya, change your mind. Leave with Alicia."

"How many times do I have to repeat myself, Denning? I am staying in Zenelaus," Shuya declared.

Zodd let out a laugh at that. "Are you guys hearing this? Hey, Shuya! Is this guy your dad or something?!"

The adventurers all dared to roar with laughter at me. *These guys tick me off. Can't they all disappear into thin air or something?*

Perhaps the foulmouthed Zodd realized what I was thinking. He glared daggers at me.

"Staying?" I was incredulous. "What can *you* do? I sure don't know. Back then, you were shaking in your boots, and you weren't able to do anything, remember?"

"Shut your mouth! I'm not the same guy as I was back then!"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't see the difference. You've never even won against me either."

"You scum!"

"I'm only stating the truth," I reminded him. "And have you even contacted your family? They're probably worried sick about you at home."

I bet that he probably, almost definitely hasn't contacted them. In the anime, his parents had been stressed to the limit, anxious that he might have been caught up in the battle in Zenelaus and had died somewhere along the way.

"Ha ha!" Zodd's laugh was not a nice one. "Shuya, this guy really is your dad! Hey, am I wrong?"

I fought down my urge to yell at him.

Shuya was resolute. "Denning, just go back."

“No, thank you. I promised Alicia that I would drag you out. Come on... Don’t say such nonsense. Let’s go back. Here, stand up.”

Shuya had been sitting on the end of the table, and I grabbed his arm.

“Don’t touch me!” Shuya snapped.

The adventurers before me, including those from Zylush, all had grins plastered on their faces. Unpleasant ones. Especially Zodd, who was laughing his bottom off.

Curse you guys! I’m not just trying to make a scene, you know! And I came here to talk sense into this guy. No matter how much they ridicule me, I can’t back down that easily.

Shuya seemed to be at his wits’ end. “Denning, what is it with you?! Ever since last time, you’ve been acting so... What do you want with me?! We aren’t even friends! Why do you keep buzzing around me like some fly?!”

I was similarly frustrated. “Shuya, do you understand what’s going to happen?! The scale of the battle is going to be on another level compared to the city defense quests you’ve been doing! Just like the Eye of the Crimson Lotus revealed, it won’t just be the lich’s army. Several dungeon masters have come out too!”

Zodd fanned the flames. “Hey, Shuya, don’t lose this time! Right now, you’re our proud comrade and a member of Zylush. If you lose again, our reputation will be in the gutter because of you!”

Perhaps Shuya remembered our previous one-sided battle, and I saw his hand reach towards his wand.

I *knew* how hardheaded this guy could get. My pleas would never reach his heart... In the end, we weren’t friends or even anything similar to that. Just like how we were in my dream, we had been enemies at Kirsch Mage Institute.

Putting that aside, these adventurers are such a pain in the neck. I gritted my teeth. “All you gawkers, shut your traps! This is between him and me!”

“Interesting, he thinks *we’re* intruding!” Zodd sneered. “Hey, Mister Oh-So-Noble from the Country of Knights, you’re the one who barged so rudely into

our private party at this pub! Well now, what kind of noble reason do you have for that, I wonder? Hey, what are you looking at me like that for? You wanna fight?!”

The tension was so high that it was clear that the other shoe was going to drop at any moment.

I didn't think that I would get away scot-free after picking a fight with a high-ranking adventurer party. I had known what I was walking into, but there was something even more important that I needed to do.

The moment I had entered this pub, I had already braced myself for the inevitable scenario that all the people in here would turn on me as enemies.

“Do me a favor and just go back. I'm staying and fighting with everyone.”

“Shuya, cut it out already!” I screamed.

“Stop yapping! This is the Freedom Union! You might have been the mightiest of nobles back in Daryth or something, but you're now in the city of adventurers! And you're not one, so don't you dare act so arrogantly!” Zodd spat. “If you stay here any longer, you're going to sour my wine. I'll be your opponent.”

“Denning!” Shuya half ordered, half pleaded at me. “Please, just leave!”

Damn it, my stomach is twisting in anger. Yeah, this was why the blackhearted Piggy Duke despised this guy, and I'm now slowly remembering it all!

That dream says it all. He's overwhelmingly sincere, always walking straight ahead with his head held high. But if he participates in this battle...something terrible is going to happen! Why won't he believe me?!

The voice in his head is going to toss him headfirst into a pit of misfortune!

“Shuya,” I finally managed after a long stretch of silence. “I'll make one thing clear. I don't know where you're getting your power from, but nothing in this world ever comes without a cost. It's dangerous.”

Zodd's voice cut in. “Hey, bring on the drinks! The final battle's only a few days away! We might die, ya know?! Time to drink more of the stuff while we can!”

I know that I'm forcefully imposing my opinions on him. But there's a bitter future lying straight ahead in his path. Even if he becomes stronger by borrowing Eldred's power, he won't gain happiness.

Back at Kirsch, this guy had managed to make Alicia regain her smile. That's why I want him to relish in bliss in a peaceful world in turn. Is that too much to ask?

Alicia had been waiting outside and ran up to me as I exited the building. "Slowe, what happened?! It sounded really rowdy in there!"

However, the tense mood inside the pub seemed to be clear enough to those outside, and it seemed that she realized that I had failed in my attempt.

"Shuya said that he's going to stay with the group of adventurers," I mumbled.

Alicia bit her lip. "I see. Looks like it was all in vain."

"Sorry, Alicia. It was impossible for me. That guy is more stubborn than a mule."

On our way back to the inn, we walked down the streets of Zenelaus, which were buzzing with excitement over the coming battle.

The last time I had argued with Shuya, I had given him a clear warning. However, it seemed that he hadn't paid it any mind and was relying on Eldred's power as always.

I had hoped that my words would sink in, even just a little...but from what I had seen so far, I was uneasy.

"It's all right. Thanks for even trying to talk to him. But you know, I actually had a tiny bit of hope that you'd succeed. If it was Slowe doing the talking, Shuya might actually listen...or so I thought."

I blinked dumbly. "Huh?"

"Because that guy happened to admire you in some ways."

"You must be kidding me."

In response, Alicia shook her head in the negative. She then continued and told me why she thought that way.

Ever since the incident with the black dragon, Shuya had been acting strangely. The students all seemed as if they were in a daze, but Shuya had watched me, and only me, the whole time. According to her, on their way to this city, Shuya once muttered his true feelings, saying that he wanted to become someone like me. Someone strong enough to protect everyone when it mattered.

Alicia had declared that it was a simple matter and that Shuya should just let me train him. Shuya had replied that he'd rather die than do that.

...I'd have to agree. Me? Watching over his spell practice and giving him advice? Not even in a thousand years!

"Jeez, do you know what kind of amazing feat you managed to pull off? You slew that black dragon. *You slew a dragon!* Shuya wasn't the only one who started acting weird. Even our upperclassmen and our juniors followed in his wake... The princess and all those other people were fawning over you, so you probably didn't realize, but Kirsch practically exploded with talk about you."

It seemed that my dragon-slaying saga had a greater influence than I had thought.

"Even if that's the case, there are all kinds of ways to accomplish that," I argued. "Of all things, why is he suddenly trying to join a war against monsters in Zenelaus?"

"Part of it is probably his craving for strength, but I don't think that's all."

I hesitated. "What do you mean by that?"

"That guy wants to feel like he's needed. Like he matters."

Ah... Yeah, she's right. Even in the anime, he said he was really happy when his comrades recognized him, so that makes sense.

"But...it's definitely strange," Alicia said.

"What is?"

"He suddenly made progress by leaps and bounds in magic ever since he

came to this town. It's unthinkable... How is he cheating his way through all this...?"

After saying that, her worries about Shuya seemed to all evaporate. She single-mindedly let out all her frustrations and complaints about Shuya, which had been pent up for quite a while.

Still, she observes Shuya so closely... Ah. Oh, right. The only person whom she can call a friend is Shuya. Shuya to her is probably like Charlotte to me... Wait. That might not be quite right.

With adventurers fooling around in the corner of our vision, I walked down the path that led to the way back. *They're all so lively now, but in the anime, Zenelaus was destroyed in the upcoming war. Many of them died in the battle.*

"Don't look so grim, Alicia," I consoled her. "I'll protect Shuya, so don't worry about it."

In the anime, Alicia regretted leaving Shuya by himself in Zenelaus. If I remember right, she thought that he had died and felt that she should have tried to be more forceful about making him leave.

But this is not the anime. I am here in Zenelaus, after all.

"What's with that look?" I complained. "You don't trust me?"

"I do..."

Seriously... Back when I was the blackhearted Piggy Duke, just the sight of me had been enough to make her hostile, and yet...

She hesitated. "So please, I ask you... Please protect that idiot."

When had I gained so much trust from Alicia, I wonder?

A day had passed since Alicia and Charlotte left Zenelaus.

I was idling around in the streets.

"Back when the guild master had been only an adventurer, nobody had ever been able to keep up with our hero as he explored the lower levels of dungeons! However, he has *us* now! Even if the power of each individual is

insignificant, we will support our guild master as a whole!”

“This will be great fun! I never imagined that so many people would be joining forces!” a voice shouted excitedly.

In other countries, Zenelaus was seen as a city of depraved people who didn’t place any weight on their own lives.

However, that wasn’t true. This was actually a robust city located in the center of a desolate wilderness. Adventurers discovered valuable items here, and those items would spread across the continent with high price tags attached.

In preparation for the lich’s onslaught, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus had made an official announcement that solo adventurers should proactively join or form adventurer parties.

If one took a look at Shuya now, one could see just how much of an effect the adventurer party had had on him. That guy had only recently gotten to know Zylush, but he already seemed to think of them as family. If people assembled adventurer parties and helped each other along, the chances of total annihilation would drop sharply.

In reality, everybody treasured their lives greatly here in Zenelaus.

“I never thought there would be a day when we would fight side by side.”

“Oh, shut up! If it wasn’t on the guild’s orders, nobody would want to fight together with a guy like you!”

“Aw, it’s not half bad, though! Don’t be so shy!”

Now, I thought that I could start to see why Shuya was trying to protect this city, even if he had to risk his own life. He was proud of his identity as an adventurer, including all of those aforementioned aspects bundled inside.

I probably didn’t have the right to order him to quit being one.

I let out a snort.

I hadn’t been affected by the excitement rising in the city, so I rested in my tattered room, passing the time by zoning out.

There was food on the table, which those two had prepared for me. However, I couldn't even take a single bite. I couldn't even be bothered to try and dine outside.

"I've done everything I could," I muttered to myself.

I stared through the window and observed the world outside. I could feel the liveliness of the city prickling my skin.

Even though Zenelaus was on the cusp of war, it was the same as always. Brawls, disputes... It seemed that the Archflare's adventurer party was playing an active part in the defense of the city as usual.

There was a polite knock at the door.

"Oh, I hear you. You can come in whenever," I said.

The guild staff member wore a uniform with fine fabric which fit him snugly, and one could tell him apart from an adventurer with one look. "I thought I would find you here, Sir Piggi-Du..."

The young man was courteous—a very rare quality to find in the people of this unruly place.

He was a favorite of the Eye of the Crimson Lotus. When I had undergone those investigation trips to the Easton Rock Mountain Range, this youth had been the one managing those scaredy-cat guild staff members.

Maintaining his upright posture, he began to speak. "We have discovered traces of a large-scale battle on the mountain range, as well as numerous monster corpses. Sir Piggi-Du, that was your doing, was it not?"

I paused when I heard that. "Who knows? Someone with too much time on their hands might be the real culprit."

"Surely you jest. The adventurers of Zenelaus obey the instructions of the guild. However, in this city, the only person of consequence who isn't bound by our rules is you. So how was it, may I ask? What did you think of those monsters?"

"You're talking in circles. Get to the point. Why are you here? You have something you want me to do, don't you?" I asked wryly.

The man paused. “The Eye of the Crimson Lotus has a message for the Dragon Slayer of the Country of Knights.”

There were only seven S-class adventurers in this world. One of them was the overlord of Zenelaus, who had decided that he would take on one of the Three Musketeers, the pride of the Dustour Empire.

The role he wanted me to fulfill was exactly what I had anticipated.

I wasn't an adventurer. Someone like me interfering directly with Zenelaus might affect morale. It was pretty clear that was the case, seeing the attitude of Zodd and the other adventurers.

Thus, I was to arrange a situation where the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, who had made prior preparations for the showdown, could use his power to its full extent. That was my job. I had never intended to be a player under the spotlight, but... *Maybe I'm also getting a little battle-hungry from the excitement in this city.*

“And that concludes the guild master's instructions. I must say, I find it intriguing that you almost look as if you had expected this all along.”

“Well, yeah...” I shrugged. “I feel that he's too much of a slave driver though.”

“That just shows how much faith he has in you.”

“It sounds so much better when you put it like that,” I said wryly. “In the end, I haven't seen him in person at all after that one meeting, you know.”

“Our guild master is a very busy man. Even the guild staff members are unable to always precisely know what he is doing at any moment in time... However, we trust him. Are you not similar in this respect, Slowe Denning? Wasn't that why you chose to head to the mountain range in our guild master's place, even while being slowed down by such dead weight?”

“It's a strange feeling,” I admitted. “That man is pretty much a stranger to me, but I still have so much faith in him.”

When I had run into him in the Easton Rock Mountain Range, I had thought that I couldn't—and shouldn't—get in the way of his concrete resolve.

I wasn't an adventurer. I didn't have the right to participate in the battle coming to Zenelaus.

However, I had also thought that...no matter how many people I antagonized in the process, I still wanted to help him as much as I could. *I suppose this is a hero, someone who can move people's hearts.*

"The guild master also..." The man paused, choosing his next words carefully. "Excuse me, the adventurer Graham said the same thing. He mentioned that he saw himself in the Dragon Slayer of the south."

"Graham..." My eyes widened. "Wait, is that the real name of the Eye of the Crimson Lotus?!"

"Oh dear, my tongue has slipped. His name is one of the most closely guarded secrets of the Adventurers' Guild. After all, the moment that S-class adventurers accept Sylpheed, they lose their name."

"Proof of your trust in me, eh? Ha ha, you guys are always good at making people do your bidding. But more importantly, about Charlotte and Alicia..."

"The Armed Convoy is guarding them, so you do not need to spare any worry for them. They have secured a few A-class adventurers, as well as many B-class adventurers, among their midst. And pardon my rudeness, but...wouldn't it have been better for you to call *him*? His achievements as an adventurer are also rather impressive—"

"My colleague is going to stay in Galland, and that was my condition for my cooperation."

"Ah, that's right, that was the case. My apologies."

The effects of the battle wouldn't stop at this city's limits. It would cause monsters to commence their attack on Galland City as well. But if that guy is there, it's probably all right.

"I must say though, I'm in awe over how charismatic the Eye of the Crimson Lotus is. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that he practically gathered all

the adventurers of the Freedom Union here to fight the lich. He's quite something."

"We are surprised as well. To think that he would go so far to fight it... And at the same time, we are very chagrined. It means that we are not at all useful to our guild master..."

"You should just focus on what you can do. And yeah, I'll take on all of your requests. My post will be..."

Ever since I realized I knew about the future, my life has been filled with nothing but battle after battle. Okay, let me make one thing clear. I only want to live happily with Charlotte, and I don't want to poke my head into fights if I don't have to.

However, the battle in Zenelaus is special.

Hey, Shuya, you probably don't know this, but...

"I see that you wish to be stationed at the space between Zenelaus and the Easton Rock Mountain Range, in what's basically Ground Zero of the wilds. I hear your request."

...right now, I'm prioritizing you over Charlotte and Alicia, you hear me?

Chapter 4: What Is Going On?

“Shuya! Focus on the fight!”

It had been my dream ever since I was a kid. I had always yearned for a future where I could flourish on the battlefield and grasp a hard-earned victory using my own skills.

A furious voice rang out nearby. “That guy used to be my friend! He’s become no more than a puppet of the lich! I’ll send him off to the afterlife with my own hands!”

“Don’t try to do the impossible! Remember the guild’s announcement about the undead monsters! They inherit the powers they had when they were alive, so the guild ordered us to face them in pairs! Gardy, you’re letting your anger get to your head! You’ve been heading too far out!”

Adventurers who had died during dungeon expeditions had now returned to attack us as newly undead monsters under the influence of the lich’s power.

I shuddered. If the guild hadn’t given us a heads-up about this, we would all be toast right now. After all, there are some among these monsters who can use magic, even if they’re clumsy about it. I can really see why the guild resorted to working with a non-adventurer to investigate the monsters in the Easton Rock Mountain Range. It was that important.

“Shuya, buddy, don’t look away!” a woman warned. “Hey, Shuya! Are you listening to me?!”

When they had been alive, these monsters had been human. Not only that, but they had been living in Zenelaus up until just a short while ago. They could have become my comrades if they had stayed that way.

These were whole, former humans, unlike the zombies that were forcibly pieced together from the parts of various beings.

I’m scared. There’s a chance that I could become one of them. But even so, I must fight. I must protect Zenelaus.

I'm terrified...but I'm not alone.

I will fight for the sake of everyone, for all those who chose to call a nobody like me their comrade!

“Do not be lenient with them! They’re no longer human and are nothing more than monsters! The change is irreversible! Those things are the undead!”

And not only that...but whenever I listen to Eldred’s voice, for some reason, power seems to rush into me from the depths of my chest. I can do this.

A voice interrupted my thoughts. “Shuya! Can you hear me?!”

I gasped, refocusing. “Ah, I’m really sorry, Miss Nalita! I was concentrating on keeping my spell in check, and...!”

“Well, we’re in a deranged free-for-all, so I see how it’s somewhat inevitable. But! You’re banned from crawling into your own little world!”

“I-I’m so sorry!” I apologized profusely.

“I get how you feel, but we can’t act as a team if you are unable to pay attention to your surroundings, so make sure to stop! You got that?!”

“Y-Yes, you’re right. On that topic, this battle royale is a world apart from what we’ve experienced so far...”

Monsters and adventurers were completely jumbled together on the field. There was total anarchy. Howling nonsensical battle cries, zombies rushed towards us. Among them were former adventurers armed to the teeth...the undead. These were humans whose essences had been reshaped by the lich.

“Nalita! How’s Shuya doing?!”

“Zodd! Our pal Shuya is still fine! This fight brings me back to the first floor of Demon Land though! The higher floors of that dungeon were pretty much the same; those mediocre monsters gave us a workout since they swarmed like cockroaches! Don’t you agree?!”

“This isn’t the time for idle talk!” Zodd snapped. “We don’t know when the signal to retreat might appear! Judging by the look of things, returning to Zenelaus won’t be smooth sailing either, so save some energy for that!”

I now truly understood what Mister Zodd and the other adventurers had said about how all the previous fights had been child's play.

So...is this what it means to fight? I was deployed to the forefront of the battlefield... Right now, I am somehow managing to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Mister Zodd and Miss Nalita while borrowing Eldred's power!

"Um, Miss Nalita, you've been to Demon Land before?" I asked.

"I sure have! That's where we got our leader's magic sword, after all!"

I was confused. "But I heard that the old man had explored that dungeon by himself!"

"Well, our dear leader just so happened to leave us in the dust partway through and went off on his own! People are banned from entering that dungeon solo in the first place!"

"What's with all the chitchat?!" Zodd barked. "Can't you be serious for once, Nalita?!"

"Aw, little ol' me is just trying to loosen up our up-and-coming rookie's nervousness, you see!"

"That happy-go-lucky nonsense will get you six feet under! And as for you, Shuya, just focus on running away without stopping! Only think about surviving right now! Don't you dare think about aiming for glory in this battle! I'm afraid we don't have the leeway to protect you this time!"

A sharp yell rang out. "It's an elder lich!!!"

I had read all of the information from the guild as carefully as I could, barely sparing time to sleep. However, that couldn't stop the goosebumps rising on my skin at the moment I spotted that elder lich ahead of us.

In this world, elder liches were monsters that had the potential to evolve into liches. I felt a wave of chilling dread wash over my entire body. A single lich had been the mastermind who began this war. If *two* of those showed up...it would be hell on earth.

I heard savage laughter, followed by a yell of delight. "I chopped that thing's head clean off! See, elder lich?! A pansy like you is no obstacle for me, the great

Zodd! How was that, Shuya?! Are you shaking in awe?! *This* is my true power! If our leader is around, as well as our whole party, we're even more amazing, ya know!"

That voice belonged to Mister Zodd, who was ahead of me. I witnessed him slice off the elder lich's head, sending it flying. The scene burned into my eyes. He was painted red, dyed with the blood of his victim.

There was no rhyme or reason at all in the battleground anymore. In the heavens, layers upon layers of trails left by spells created by mages faded from view.

I was speechless. *Me? Saving everyone? What a stupid thought. This is the adventurer party of that famous Archflare. They're all powerhouses who could fight solo for three days and three nights on end in a dungeon.*

"Hey, Zodd. What do we do if our leader defeats the lich and becomes an S-class adventurer?"

"Good question! In that case, let's chug down drinks to our heart's content!" Zodd yelled back.

"How dull."

"What?! Why?!" I exclaimed.

"Shuya! Did you say something?" Miss Nalita asked.

"Ah, no! It's nothing!" I hastily replied.

"Shouldn't there be a grand showdown going on in Zenelaus, near Nemesis? How about you start heading there right now, Shuya?"

Eldred might call this dull, but I knew I was at my limit!

"Shuya. Do you wish for even more power?"

In my heart, I denied it.

Eldred's words were very tempting. However, after last time, I had thought about Denning's statements. He was right. This was *crazy*. I had the feeling that if I borrowed even more power, I wouldn't be able to control it.

Thus, the power I had right now was enough.

“Still, Zodd, the lich really did pass us by without caring, just like the guild had said! Was it really okay to just leave it like that?!”

“The lich is aiming for the treasures of the Adventurers’ Guild! The guild’s instructions are absolute!”

Miss Nalita paused to contemplate the matter. “What is its actual goal? I wonder...”

“Who knows?” Mister Zodd turned to me. “Hey, Shuya! You don’t look so good! Are you okay?”

“I-I can still keep going...” I said, a note of weakness in my voice.

“Shuya,” Eldred spoke slowly. “With your current power, you will soon reach your limit. Do you realize that?”

“I’d rather you go back to the city than push yourself too hard out here!” Zodd yelled.

“But...” I hesitated.

Ah... I’m out of breath already. Yikes.

I can’t go on anymore. Are they even human?! We’ve been moving around without stopping for nearly an hour now. This is way beyond the realm of just having good stamina!

I’ve been stretched thin this entire time... Is this from the difference in our levels of experience?

“Shuya! Do you have the leisure of doing that right now?! This place is filled with violent clashes! Fights should be a little less trying in the city; there are more places to run and hide. This is technically the front line of the battle, you know?!” Zodd shouted, before turning to another group of adventurers. “Hey, you guys over there don’t look so good either!”

“Someone was severely injured! The Bountiful Earth Titans adventurer party shall make their retreat back to the city! No hard feelings!”

A voice rang out, amplified and carried by magic. *“Roger that. I’ll cover you, so retreat immediately.”*

We, the members of Zylush, had been stationed at the forefront of the battle in the wilds. Our job was to take out as many zombies as possible here.

Despite that... Nearly one hour had passed since the confrontation had begun, and yet the death toll was far lower than expected. The reason for that was very clear.

There was a low hill made of earth standing out in the wilds before us. Standing atop it at a higher elevation than us was a single person, watching over the front lines.

“Zylush, good work on defeating that elder lich, but you’ve gone in too deep! Restrain yourselves! You’re staggering!”

Mister Zodd clicked his tongue. “Damn, that brat ended up saving me again!”

“Zodd, that boy really is remarkable after all! It’s not just us... Everyone stationed here has been able to survive so long because of him!”

“I *know* that very well!” Zodd howled.

“Looking good... We’ve polished off nearly all of them, but I spot a second wave incoming from a distance! Your jobs here are done! All adventurers, retreat and join the intracity battle as planned! Head to the guild branches you were assigned to!”

It was...Denning.

That guy was most of, if not *all* of, the reason why the front line had endured so well.

However, not everyone was agreeable to the idea of listening to him at first. Why would they want to listen to the orders of some unknown brat who wasn’t even an adventurer? What was his relationship with the Eye of the Crimson Lotus?

However, Denning had silenced all those questions by showing his prowess. Within only a short span of time, he had gained the respect of everyone fighting here.

That guy had shown that he knew the battlefield better than anyone else here

right now, but that wasn't all. In the midst of the battle, an unfamiliar adventurer had told me more about why they had been so quickly convinced.

"That dude is Piggi-Du! He's an external ally of the guild. That guy was the one who ran about and did everything he could to gather intel on the monsters. The only ones who don't know him are probably Zylush since you don't mingle much with the guild staff members! Ya hear that, Zodd?! Aren't you glad that you didn't end up picking a fight with him?"

After a moment of silence, Mister Zodd clicked his tongue slightly.

That man continued. "We would have been in particularly hot water if we weren't warned beforehand about the new undead, the lich's secret weapon. That dude was the one who obtained that info! After all, adventurers who died in the dungeons are among them too! Ha ha, you're completely blindsided by all this, it's written all over your face! Don't waste your breath swearing about it though! Time to get outta here!"

You must be kidding me, right? Denning? Infiltrating the wilds with guild staff members? He what?

Wait, Piggi-Du... Piggy Duke! He's just using his nickname from Kirsch Mage Institute!

"Shuya, don't you want to become someone like that kid? Don't you want even more strength?"

"I told you, I'm fine as I am!"

"I see," Eldred said at length.

Denning had warned me about Eldred's offers, but... *Eldred, brainwashing me? That's ridiculous. We've been together for a super long time.*

I inhaled sharply. A crimson ball of fire lifted off right above me, high into the sky.

The artillery fire sent into the sky by Denning was a signal telling everyone to retreat because we could no longer maintain the front. It was also a message telling us to then scatter ourselves within Zenelaus and eliminate the monsters there.

I had the full intention of retreating with everyone. However—

“Shuya. Over there, there seems to be one human who hasn’t gotten out in time... What will you do?”

“Zodd!” Nalita gasped. “I remember now!”

“What is it?! You’re so loud!” Zodd snapped.

“That boy! He’s Denning! I swear he is definitely from House Denning with that crest on his wand!”

“By Denning, you mean...” Zodd hesitated. “From Daryth?”

“Yes! That ducal house!”

Zodd was stunned. “Impossible! Why would House Denning help out Zenelaus in a war?! There’s no way that house would interfere with the battles of other countries!”

“You’re telling me! But if he’s from House Denning, it all clicks into place! Shuya’s bizarre awareness of him, as well as his ridiculous strength!”

“Shuya said that they were classmates, didn’t he?! I’ve never heard of any member of Denning enrolling in a scho—” Zodd’s words came to a halt. “No way, is he...?”

“The Dragon Slayer, Slowe Denning! Wasn’t that boy the exception?!”

“We’d save our breath by just asking Shuya,” Zodd declared. “Hey! Where did that guy go?”

The two B-class adventurers from Zylush looked for the boy. However, they weren’t the only ones flustered by Shuya’s disappearance.



“I mean, I *did* kind of learn how to be a commander on the battlefield...but I’m still the hopeless dropout from House Denning, you know?!” I yelled at myself in frustration.

Curse that Eye of the Crimson Lotus! How dare he say something so irresponsible!

Adventurers have solid teamwork, he said. They'll obey the orders of those affiliated with the guild with no questions, he said. To hell with that! He never told me that the adventurers would be so egocentric they wouldn't move with any sense of cohesion at all!

"Didn't I tell you that if I had to pick, I was better at anti-army spells?! Ugh, you don't know how much trouble I went through to get the adventurers to listen!" I wailed.

To drill in the fact that I was the adventurers' boss, I had strained myself. Covering their backs, supporting them again and again... At this point, I had probably saved dozens of adventurers that were looking death square in the eye with my spells.

I had already ordered these guys to retreat. The few hundred adventurers had been able to clear out the first wave of monsters, which had zombies making up the majority of their numbers.

On top of that, I had realized that if the fight had dragged on any longer, the monsters would soon gain an edge over them. *The fatigue among adventurers was significant, but the camaraderie of those guys was surprisingly strong. They hadn't tried to withdraw at all!* I thought with exasperation.

With Shuya blazing the trail, adventurers had started to compensate for their knocked-out comrades, and there was a great loss of efficiency in the fight. *Well, it seemed that Shuya had saved everyone he could though, regardless of whether he knew them or not.*

"Now then... It's much easier without the adventurers around! Just you wait, zombies! I will now smite you down with the hammer of judgment—"

Among the adventurers, the pair from Zylush were the last to retreat, and even they slowly fell back.

However, Shuya...was *nowhere to be found*.

What? I don't see him. He isn't there...is he? It seems like Zodd and Nalita are looking for someone too. Don't tell me... Are they looking for Shuya as well?!

I took a deep, deep, *deeeeeeeep* breath.

“Shuya! Where did you run off to?! You idiot!!! Did he actually fall for Eldred’s sweet talk or something?! He better not have!!!”

Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. *Calm down, me. Take it easy. I just lost track of Shuya’s location, that’s all. He can’t be dead; he has the Great Spirit of Fire with him. And he’s still sane, so far.*

A green arrow flew in my direction, aiming right for my head.

I clenched my teeth. “Where is he... Where *is* he? Tsk, you guys are pesky. I can see right through your spells, you know?”

The arrow came from a subordinate of the lich. I stood out like a sore thumb, so one of the superior zombies was targeting me with its spells. *That thing has the nerve to aim at me from so far away. But none of them are able to land a hit.*

Also, it wasn’t even my own spells defending me; I was using a magic item I had received from the Eye of the Crimson Lotus. I had known that the guild had secretly stashed away many top-class magic items, and I had demanded this one.

“...That idiot. I see where he is.”

I finally found Shuya. There was a head of red hair moving among the zombies. That guy was mowing down monster after monster as he frantically advanced. Was there something in the direction he was headed in? *Is there someone alive there? Was someone left behind on the war front?!*

“There’s no way they’re still alive. Surely your head isn’t so empty that you don’t know that much, Shuya!”

No. Perhaps that’s what makes him Shuya Newkern. He’s an outrageously good-natured person who wouldn’t even take his own life into consideration.

In contrast to the retreating adventures, that guy was headed in the opposite direction, right into the sea of zombies.

“All adventurers are prepared to lose their lives on the way. If they die, it’s their own responsibility, Shuya!”

I had been assigned to oversee the front of the battle. Just like Shuya, I had

also frantically done everything I could to protect the adventurers. I had promised the Eye of the Crimson Lotus that I would protect as many of them on the front lines as I could. But even then, there were still a considerable number of casualties.

This was the special city defense quest. Everyone present knew that they might meet their end here today. *I suppose they're doing all this to gain the magnificent rewards from the guild...no, to protect Zenelaus.*

Frustrated, I yelled, "They sure don't know when to give up! How many of them *are* there?!"

Zombies made their approach one after another, rushing forward like an avalanche.

I looked up with a start, having pinpointed where Shuya was. "Over there, huh?!"

But wait, that guy... A zombie is biting him! He was surrounded by elder zombies, the mere shadows of former mages. Those monsters were taking aim right at Shuya.

There was an inferno burning in my right hand, ice crystallizing in my left, and four additional pillars of ice above my head. The elder zombies were on high alert and responded in kind, generating a barrier because of my spells.

Such fools. Sorry, but the defense of the likes of you won't hinder me in any way.

With loud shrieks, the elder zombies toppled to the ground.

Shuya turned around and looked at me. We were nearly a hundred meters apart, but I forced my voice to reach him.

"Shuya! I ordered you to retreat! Don't act out of line!"

"D-Denning?! Why can I hear you?!"

"You moron! Keep moving! You'll drown in this sea of zombies in the blink of an eye!"

"There's someone up ahead!" Shuya insisted.

I could also hear Shuya's voice from this distance. Right now, Eldred was assisting that guy as he moved forward. Nearly everything Shuya wished for would come true, and that idiot didn't notice how odd that was. That guy didn't have a clue about how abnormal his actions and abilities were. A mere second-year of Kirsch Mage Institute shouldn't be able to survive in a battlefield where even veteran adventurers willingly chose retreat, and Eldred was the only reason why that was possible right now.

"There's no way they're alive!"

"We don't know for sure yet! They might need help!"

"Is this that weird voice talking to you again, Shuya?!"

Shuya was struck speechless by that jab for a moment before he replied, "Why would you care, Denning?! I'm going!"

"I'm Piggi-Du! The guild has ordered me to take command of this operation! You are obligated to follow my orders!"

"Not today, not any day! Who says you have the training to be a general in the first place?! You've never been on the battlefield before, right?! How do you even know the guild master?!"

"Oh, quit it! I'm from House Denning! You know that I've received training in most of these areas! Stop wasting time, Shuya, and come back! You might not be able to see from where you are, but the second wave is approaching and it has monsters that are much stronger than earlier! You wouldn't even be able to put up half a fight against them!"

"Oh, shut up! I won't know unless I try!"

I had spotted three-headed cerberus monsters as well as hydras with the heads of snakes inside the second wave. All the monsters there were zombies, resurrected puppets of the lich.

However, Shuya did not speak at all after that. *He should be able to hear my voice right now, but that rascal still...!*

"I told you to avoid relying too much on a power with unknown origins, didn't I?!" There was still no response. "That idiot! So he wants to ignore me, huh?!"

I jumped down from the small hill that I had made with an earth spell. *I wanted to conclude things by sending a grand welcome to the second wave by blasting them in the face with anti-army spells...but securing Shuya comes first! If he starts fighting with those monsters, it's very likely that he might draw out even more power from Eldred!*

I groaned in frustration. "This is why I hate dealing with that guy! Put yourself in my shoes for once! I'm sick and tired of cleaning up after your messes!"

By this point, most of the adventurers had already gone back to Zenelaus and continued fighting there. They would probably all go to their designated stations and team up with the guild staff members for their battles.

Damn it, I ended up having to accompany Shuya Newkern and now I have to fight at the front lines too! I swear he has a death wish!

The majority of the high-ranking adventures in Zenelaus were stationed at Nemesis, which was probably in the heat of battle right now. With the Eye of the Crimson Lotus blazing the trail, they would face the lich and the musketeer.

We had chosen this spot because fighting inside the familiar interior of Zenelaus would give us the home advantage, as opposed to the interior of the dungeon. A significant number of zombies had already entered Zenelaus, but if we defeated the lich, these zombies would vanish along with it.

I left the lich and Dreibach Steibelt to the Adventurers' Guild in the end. Even knowing that Zenelaus might lose, I still subjected them to the strongest enemies.

This was all to protect a certain idiot. It was because I had promised Alicia that I would protect Shuya Newkern, who was always eager to leap to his death.

Back at Kirsch, that guy had lived as a true noble. He had been my mental image of a great noble given flesh. And he didn't stop at that, as he had even saved Alicia from her solitude.

He had saved *me*. That was why I would save him. *That's all the reason I need!*

"That's..." I widened my eyes, spotting Shuya's comrades heading in his direction as well. "The pair from Zylush! They didn't run away either?!" I clenched my teeth and let out a curse. "Damn it! Birds of a feather flock

together!”

I pressed on into the swamp of zombies because Shuya was there. Shuya, who had gone off to become some stranger’s savior. He was an idiot, advancing on even though there was no certain proof that he could save whomever it was.

I had asked Zylush to fall back, and I had already told them that I would save Shuya, no matter what it took.

Those guys probably liked Shuya too. They thought of him as their comrade. Just like in the anime, they had said that Shuya was one of them.

You know, that’s pretty impressive, Shuya. You gained the recognition of those ruffians.

But you’re going to end up killing them. You’ll depend on Eldred’s power, go berserk, and burn Zenelaus to the ground. The Archflare will make it out alive, but those two won’t.

A torturous and unbearable future was waiting for Shuya with open arms, and I was the only one who knew about it.

“Shuya!” I screamed.

He had probably fought fiercely with everything he had, and there were piles and piles of zombies around him. Perhaps due to how intense the battle had been, even the zombies shrank back and kept their distance from him.

My eyes swept over it all. “I told you. I told you that the voice in your head would not always say the right thing. You were played for a fool.”

The person Shuya had looked for, the one who had been left behind, was nowhere to be seen. From what I could see, there were only zombies ahead.

However, the redhead wasn’t moving. Floating fireballs whooshed around him, and they targeted the zombies trying to land a hit on Shuya’s body. *That’s terrifying... So this is Eldred’s power, I see.*

“Throughout history, we can find many people who hear strange voices, but the ones who can hear the voices of spirits definitely take the cake. Look at you. You’re out of mana because you used too many spells. I bet you’re feeling like

you've been through the wringer. But hey, lucky you, the guild has prepared an abundant supply of healing potions. You can use as many of them as you want right now, all for the low price of nothing."

"Denning... I've never, *ever* asked you to save me," Shuya hissed through gritted teeth.

"The guild requested that I protect the adventurers, and I accepted. You are one, so you are a subject of my protection."

"I can get back by myself."

"You." I grabbed his arm. His body emitted a searing heat, leaving me stunned. *Is this guy really human? A human shouldn't have this high of a temperature.*

Using Shuya's body as a medium, Eldred's power was radiating out into the outside world. Adrenaline had probably numbed his senses when he had been in combat, but this power was too much for the boy, and it was slowly but surely gnawing at his body.

"Denning! Nobody has...begged you...to protect me!"

"Zylush chased after you earlier because you did something outrageous. Moments ago, I told them to return to Zenelaus. No thanks to your hotheaded actions, that man was bitten by a zombie, you know."

"Wait, Mister Zodd was bitten?!"

"He was on the brink of death, but there's plenty of holy water in the city. He will probably make it out alive."

"No way..." Shuya stood up, but he was unsteady on his feet.

"Shuya, why do you want to become stronger? For what purpose? You caused grief to your adventurer buddies, you made Alicia worry day and night... Is making yourself happy the only thing that matters to you?"

"No..." Shuya whimpered weakly. "I want to become...strong and...save everyone..."

"And who is this 'everyone'?! Everyone at Kirsch?! Or everyone here in Zenelaus?! Let me tell you what I think. I think you should put Alicia above

everyone else right now! She was the one who refused to leave until the last minute because she was *worried about you!*”

Shuya couldn’t come up with a response for a while. “No, I...”

“We’re going to move the front inside the city. Even if you have complaints about that, I’m the one who gets the final say as the amazing Piggi-Du, you hear that?”

With his eyes still downcast, Shuya nodded weakly.

Using wind spells, I blasted zombies out of our way and we raced down the shortest possible path back.

I could no longer spot any other adventurers. They were all inside Zenelaus now.

There were all kinds of zombie varieties, but they weren’t our only enemies. Taking advantage of this opportunity, non-zombified monsters—monsters from other dungeons—had also come out. That wasn’t good. If this dragged on, even stronger monsters might crawl out from the depths of the dungeons.

Shuya seemed to be deep in thought as he trudged after me with slightly uncertain steps. It seemed that he was very perturbed by the fact that he had caused trouble for his comrades.

After a long while, he spoke up. “Hey, Denning.”

“What?! As you can see, I’m not exactly on vacation at the moment, so keep quiet!”

“You often came up to me and lashed out at me back at school, right? Why did you do that?”

“Oh come on, why are you asking that *now*?!”

“Just tell me, okay?”

“You always looked as if you enjoyed every moment of your life, and that ticked me off. The end.”

“What’s with that?!” Shuya yelled. “You bullied me for such selfish reasons?!”

“Yeah, exactly. Unfair, isn’t it?”

Life was always unfair.

I was born into House Denning, and my future had already been decided for me. Shuya was the same. He was a noble who had ownership of family lands, and he was even the eldest son. His future was also a rigid construct.

In the anime, he had said that he hated that confinement, and that had been why he was so taken with the free-spirited Zenelaus.

“Denning, are you still going to fight?”

“Yeah. I’m planning on slamming them with a ginormous spell or something to wrap things up here, you see.”

Shuya hesitated for a moment. “I’ll stay too. I’ll also fight here.”

Whoa. He’s like a worn-out rag right now, but he’s serious. He isn’t lying about anything. A guy who can act for the sake of other people.

...He’s completely different from me.

I give up. I have to approve of him. He’s an amazing guy. I’m serious.

I grabbed Shuya’s shoulder.

I had never seen his face up close like this before. His eyes lit up with a passion so hot that I might get burned if I stared at them for too long. They were sincere and determined, and they churned with his emotions.

“Don’t forget that your comrades, like that pair from Zylush, are waiting for you in the city. You really stressed them out with what you did, so hurry up and tell them that you’re safe. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“But...”

“Didn’t I say it clearly enough? You’re in the way.”

He turned his back to me, making his way to the city. The determination in his spine seemed to declare that he could still go on.

I climbed up onto the hill. I saw the endless blanket of zombies making their way across the lands, and Shuya, walking in the opposite direction towards Zenelaus.

“Hey, you!” I shouted. I paused for a second and cringed before I spoke again. “I take back what I said before. You’re an amazing guy.”

“Wha—”

“Listen up. I’m only going to say this once because I happen to have a functioning sense of embarrassment.”

We had been at odds with each other the whole time I was here in Zenelaus. I hadn’t been able to forgive him for what he had done. He had brought Alicia here and tossed her aside, which had made me livid. He had given in to the honeyed words of Eldred and had let them get to his head, thinking that he was much stronger now. This guy had grated on my nerves.

“Until only a little while ago, you were just another student at Kirsch Mage Institute, but you still managed to save many adventurers. Nobody can dispute that. I’ll be frank, that shook me. Unlike me, you haven’t received full-on combat training. Despite all that, you were able to gain the trust of the adventurers, and not even because of your status as a noble. That’s why I’ll take back what I said a few days ago. You’re an amazing guy.”

He looked back at me, utterly baffled. I turned away from him and used my spells to efficiently eliminate the zombies.

Part of why the death toll had been shockingly low was, of course, my support. However, this guy also had a part in it, for he had used Eldred’s power to save them. I had watched over everything from above, so I had known better than anyone else just how much effort Shuya had put in.

“One last thing before you go. A warning. Shuya, look at your right hand. You’re suffering from the effects of mana-deficiency syndrome, so you shouldn’t be able to use magic anymore... But you’re still able to cast spells, aren’t you?”

Shuya paused as the realization started to hit him. “Oh.”

“Is it all *your* power? Anyone who knew you back at Kirsch would have doubts. Just how much are you planning on leaning on the something or someone that’s giving power to you?”

“That’s...”

In the anime, nobody had ever questioned Shuya's newfound abilities. Everyone around him lifted him onto a pedestal of praise, and this guy had been used as a commodity until he had ruined it all.

It should change with this though. Surely, after all this, he'll control himself and stop drawing out more power from Eldred.

I inhaled. "Now, then."

Before me, those zombies still continued to approach with no end in sight.

Shuya. I hope you listen to those words and change your mind about how you're going to live your life.

"O wind, assemble, *Hurricane*."

I'm trusting you, okay, Shuya?



"Zodd... Are you okay?" Nalita asked anxiously.

"Perfectly fine. I wouldn't kick the bucket just because some undead guy bit me," Zodd declared.

The pair was in the northeastern part of Zenelaus, inside the second branch office of the Adventurers' Guild. This had been the combat area assigned to Zylush after they finished their battle in the wilds.

These adventurer party members, with the exception of their leader the Archflare, had mowed down the zombies loitering the streets from their spot in the guild office branch. Inside the city, adventurers with prowess in close-range combat scattered about, taking turns to face the enemies.

Right now, Zylush was off duty. The guild staff members had provided potions to them, and piles of empty bottles were now scattered about the room.

Shuya hung his head. "I did something really stupid. I am so sorry about earlier..."

Zodd waved the matter off. "I had a laughing *fit* when I heard that you mistook a zombie for some slowpoke! You don't have to be so stressed about it."

“But because of me, you...”

“It’s fine. I finally know why our leader invited you to our party. What he said about how we would remember what we had forgotten along the way when we watch you. Hey now! How much longer are you planning on getting your panties in a bunch?! Actually, you know, there’s something more important right now. I want to ask you something.”

“You can ask me anything.”

“That brat who’s from the same country as you... The rumors say he’s a Dragon Slayer. Are they serious?”

Shuya sighed. “They sure are.”

“Huh, so it *is* true! Hey, Nalita! You remembered correctly! Our guild master sure had the wildest card saved up his sleeve!”

To Shuya, the fact that of all people, *Denning* had shown approval of him had been astonishing. After the incident with the mercenary at school, Shuya had heard a lot of things about him from Alicia. Like about his past as the Prodigy of Wind from House Denning, and how the child beloved by all the people in his lands suddenly warped after a certain day.

And...she had also talked about how, lately, that guy seemed to have returned to his previous, glorious self.

“The zombies just keep coming, though. Leader... I hope he’s not unexpectedly dead or something.”

“Zodd! Don’t say something so crazy! There’s no way someone as powerful as him would lose,” Nalita insisted.

“But, ya know...” Zodd spotted a burly man running down the road. “Hm? That’s the Iron Arm. Why is he heading this way? That guy’s supposed to be stationed at...Nemesis, right?”

The man was yelling something. He didn’t seem to make any sense and his words were a scrambled mess, but... “Curse the Eye of the Crimson Lotus! That guy deceived us all! He never told us about *that*!”

The guild had announced that this was a trial, and they had promised that the

slayer of the lich would become an S-class adventurer. The Iron Arm had been one of the many A-class adventurers summoned to Zenelaus by the possibility of this reward.

“What the heck happened?! You guys aren’t supposed to be here!” Zodd shouted.

“Ah, you’re Zylush’s Zodd! You guys should make a run for it! It isn’t the lich! There’s a much bigger and scarier fish out there! Run away from this city!”

“Is our leader, the Archflare, alive and kicking?!”

“The Archflare’s fine, but he won’t hold out for long! Listen up! If you guys care about staying alive, you must run from this city! I’ve warned you, so no hard feelings!”

With a large sledgehammer in his hands, the Iron Arm dashed down the monster-filled road. His abilities were clearly of a higher rank than an average member of Zylush, yet he still fled.

After the Iron Arm’s words rang out, a clamor broke out inside the building. All the adventurers shared the same thought: *A man who came here to become an S-class adventurer is actually running away. The lich hasn’t been defeated? How much longer must we fight?*

“Hey, Zodd...” Nalita hesitated. “What do you think about that?”

“The leader ordered us to stay away. There’s no way in hell we’d budge from our post.”

“But the Iron Arm said that even our leader won’t last long... Hey, don’t you think this is all taking a little too long? Something’s not right. What happened to all the other high-ranking adventurers?”

A veil of gloom draped over Nalita’s face.

The guild staff members had seemed very busy inside the building, and Nalita had the feeling there was more to all this.

Come to think of it, the guild had been acting strangely from the very beginning. They had controlled the flow of information so that nothing got out of the city. However, the glow of money had dazzled her into blindness, so

Nalita had never given it a second thought.

The guild had announced that because the lich had taken over a dungeon, Zenelaus's pride was on the line. They would then defeat the lich and regain control.

But was that really the case?

Zodd's face also gradually soured as the questions came pouring into his mind.

Why had the lich hunt been chosen as the trial for ascending into S-class? Traditionally, these adventurers would be selected due to their achievements during some sort of incident, but there had never been a precedent where the requirements for S-class were announced beforehand.

What in the world was happening at Nemesis?

"I..." Shuya hardened his resolve. "I'll go."

Zodd showed his disapproval. "Shuya, the Archflare is a veteran adventurer. He hasn't fallen so low that you have to worry about him."

"Shuya, I'm also worried about our leader, but..." Nalita trailed off.

"I can sense the presence of something vile in the air. That man will most likely die. However, Shuya... If you head there, I, the great Eldred, would lower myself to save him."

There was an unsettling atmosphere inside the guild office. Earlier, when Shuya had gone to get additional holy water from the guild staff members, he had accidentally overheard them whispering that maybe it was better to run away.

Nemesis was a danger zone. If he went there, he might die. Even still, Shuya was dead set on what he would do next.

"Do you know what you're walking into, Shuya? It's a battleground where an adventurer stronger than me turned around and ran the hell away," Zodd warned.

"I *am* going. The old man is my comrade, after all."

There were certain words that Shuya would never forget, ones that he kept close to his heart.

The Archflare told me, an admirer of adventurers, that I can stay in this city for as long as I want. He treated me with kindness and consideration as if I were a member of his family. My skills are half-baked at best, but he still approved of me and said that I'm an adventurer. That's why I will go.

Zodd grinned. "Shuya... You're the best, ya know?"

Shuya blinked. "Huh?"

"Right. Let's go, Shuya. Our leader is surprisingly quite a lonely guy, you see."

Zodd roughly scratched his head. In all honesty, Shuya's words and actions were so *young*. Too young and naive.

The Archflare, their leader, would most likely die. Zodd also had that ominous feeling in his gut.

However, his experience told him that going to save their leader was the wrong choice. They were an adventurer party and comrades, but adventurers always placed one person above all else, and that was themselves.

The work of an adventurer was risky, and he had come to terms with that. If Zodd ever fell into grave danger in a dungeon, he wouldn't ask his comrades for help. That was the limit of what "comrades" meant to adventurers.

However, after hearing Shuya's words, Zodd had a change of heart.

Shuya was still puzzled. "Um, you're kind of saying the opposite from earlier..."

"We feel the same way as you do. We're only here today because our leader saved us." Nalita nodded.

Zodd mulled over his choice of words before he spoke again. "If our leader ends up dying, I would have regrets. So, let's go."

Even if we know that we are walking right into hell, was the unspoken thought of all three.

The pair from Zylush marched forward, together with the red-haired boy who

would go on to become the anime world's savior.



Large chunks of rubble and crumpled buildings blocked their path.

Zenelaus was a completely different city now. An unimaginably intense clash of titans must have happened, for there were areas in the city where even the terrain was completely unrecognizable.

And as for the adventurers who were supposed to be fighting in front of Nemesis...

Zodd's eyes widened in shock. "The hell?! No way! You must be kidding me! That's the younger of the Cleaver Brothers, that pair of famous A-class adventurers!"

Nalita couldn't control her shock either. "Are they all being controlled by the lich?!"

High-ranking adventurers, who even had the total destruction of dungeons under their belts, had been revived as the undead and now attacked Zylush.

"They're long dead, but they've only recently been reborn, so they aren't able to use their power to the fullest!"

"But Zodd, are we really able to fight them?! Just yesterday, we were together as—"

"We don't exactly have a choice! If you just stand there doing nothing, we're the ones who are going to be toast!"

The familiar, everyday life that lasted until yesterday was now a distant memory. As the three progressed through the streets, they finally understood what kind of perilous cliff edge this city was dangling from.

However, the members of Zylush pressed on in order to find the Archflare. They clung to their one-way ticket towards the even larger-scale battleground and rushed there without looking back.

"Zodd, the monsters are falling back! Are they leading us somewhere? Is it a trap?!"

"Who knows?! We can only take the bait; our leader is on the other side of all of these things!"

Interlude: The Other Battle

With sparkles in her eyes, Charlotte watched the large-scale adventurer party in action. They had protected a great number of refugees all the way here, ever since the group's departure from Zenelaus.

"All right! What's the motto of the Armed Convoy?! Chant it!" a man yelled.

"We must make sure that our dear customers are unharmed by all means! But these are some very extreme circumstances we are facing, Captain Zoroark! These stupid monsters are flowing out of the dungeons like there's no tomorrow, and—" The second man let out a yelp of shock. "When did that two-headed ogre get so close?! It's gone completely bonkers!"

"Captain! If we kill that monster, the dungeon might self-destruct—"

"Ya moron!" the captain snapped. "That thing's already the lich's puppet! Even if the ogre dies, the Dual Heads dungeon would remain intact! And quit complaining, will ya?! The Armed Convoy's reputation is based on the fact that we stick around until the end of any job. There isn't a single failure in our entire record! Do ya know why y'all are wearing equipment much more high-grade than ya deserve at yer level?! That's because we always escort our customers properly, *every single time*! At any rate, report back to me once all of our customers have finished crossing Great Galland Bridge!"

The industrial Galland City was a place where countless chimneys climbed towards the skies. It was the city that supplied all kinds of weapons and equipment to the entirety of the Freedom Union, and it was famous for being the only city where one could travel to and from Zenelaus.

On the side of Galland City that faced Zenelaus, there was a colossal rift carved into the wilderness, and the structure that crossed that gap was called the Great Galland Bridge.

The Armed Convoy was currently escorting a few dozen carriages to Galland City, and Alicia and Charlotte were among the passengers. The agitated two-

headed ogre, a middle-layer boss from the A-rank dungeon called Dual Heads, was hot on their heels. Thankfully, the pair managed to make it across the Great Galland Bridge with the convoy at the last possible moment and arrived at a safe zone.

“We are the Armed Convoy! Do not let any of these cretins pass this bridge!” the captain ordered.

“Captain Zoroark! What do we do about that crazed dual ogre?!”

“I’ll face it and show them! I’ve had enough of my heart racing like crazy whenever we go past its den, ya see!”

A large group of adventurers was lying in wait on the bridge, and they forced the incoming monsters to fall off the sides, down into the rift, one after another.

These adventurers were under a contract with the landlord of Galland City, a wealthy merchant himself. However, the monsters lured here by the Armed Convoy were too big of a herd for them to deal with.

“Captain, we’ve sighted reinforcements coming from Galland City! It seems that our buddy Harrie, who went ahead to inform them of our emergency, arrived in one piece! You were right on with your choice, Captain! Harrie’s a huge worrywart, so I’m sure that he blew our situation out of proportion when he reported it!”

“Don’t keep yer hopes up! Right now, all the aces are in Zenelaus, so there aren’t many left for us! Listen up, y’all! Don’t forget that we were directly nominated by the Eye of the Crimson Lotus as the guards for this final escort trip!”

To these adventurers, this was nothing out of the ordinary. It was for this precise reason that the Dustour Empire considered Zenelaus’s adventurers as the biggest obstacle to their goal of bringing the continent together under the Dustour flag.

Behind the Armed Convoy, adventurers from Galland City who had come in response to the request for aid appeared, each one heading to the other side of the bridge.

“Hey! Miss Charlotte, why did you get off the carriage?! We need to take refuge in the city as soon as possible!” Alicia exclaimed.

“Lady Alicia! We can’t just run away by ourselves while everyone is still fighting here!”

“Don’t say such nonsense! Miss Charlotte, you’re a hack at magic!”

“Huh?! What are you saying?! I’m not a hack in any way! I’ll prove it to you right now, with this wand I picked up in Zenelaus!”

Charlotte had lived with all these people over the past few days as they journeyed together to evacuate. The adventurers of Galland City were urging her to find shelter immediately, but she just couldn’t leave these people behind and escape by herself.

“Let’s go, Lady Alicia! We’re going to cross the bridge too!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You aren’t even an adventurer, remember?! You’re supposed to be protected, not the one protecting others!”

“But they’re struggling! At this rate...”

Due to Alicia’s desperate pleas, Charlotte couldn’t move forward from her spot. She looked down at the extraordinary being she held in her arms.

Even while monsters had attacked more than several dozen carriages, this pet...no, this Great Spirit hadn’t helped out at all. It seemed that this little one wouldn’t save her, even during such a crisis...

Charlotte bit her lip. “But at this rate...!”

Suddenly, Charlotte felt something from above. Somebody had given her a light pat on the head as they began to cross the bridge with a languid but certain gait.

This brief interaction had been the trigger of it all: the moment that decided the fate of the two-headed monster from the A-class dungeon Dual Heads, which was assaulting the Armed Convoy.

“C-Captain! Weren’t all the powerhouse adventurers supposed to be in

Zenelaus?! And what in the world is that sword?! It almost looks like the Archflare's Flamberge!"

"Keep this between you and me, but I actually heard that an outrageously strong adventurer had come to Galland a while ago!" the captain yelled.

Galland City was an important industrial hub to the Freedom Union that supplied weapons and equipment to Zenelaus. However, due to the Eye of the Crimson Lotus systematically gathering anyone and everyone with fighting potential in the country, Galland's own military capabilities had plummeted.

However, nobody could reproach him for doing so. If the Freedom Union was truly able to defeat one of the Three Musketeers, and even if a location as critical as Galland City was sacrificed as a result, it would still be a net gain.

The wealthy merchants of the Freedom Union were very shrewd at balancing their profits and losses. Even to these stingy misers, losing Galland City seemed to be an acceptable price to pay in exchange for the head of the Living Dead.

"Everyone, support that man! With that fellow as our main firepower, we'll annihilate the monsters here together! And Gried, don't try to compete with that man! Leave the two-headed ogre to him!"

Charlotte gasped. "Lady Alicia! Why is Mister Silva here?!"

"I have no clue! I don't know why, but nothing can change the fact that he's here! More importantly, Miss Charlotte, did you see that?!"

Charlotte hesitated, taken aback. "Um, Lady Alicia, what are you referring to?"

"Oh god, this is bad. This is *really* bad. Why... That man... How is this real...?" Alicia mumbled in disbelief.

There was a man across the way, on the other side of a rift so vast that it could just as easily be considered a parting of the earth itself. He was trading blow for blow with the two-headed dual ogre all by himself.

The man wasn't a mage, but it almost seemed as if he could bend magic to his will. Just like what had happened back then, on a certain day in her memory.

"Wh-What's wrong? Well, I mean, of course I'm pretty surprised that Mister

Silva is here, of all places, but... I only had the thought that he's a man who really keeps his promises."

"Him being here is shocking, but that's not it! Wait, Miss Charlotte, what do you mean by 'promises'?"

"Um, I guess you could say that Master Slowe kind of called him here..."

Nearly a week ago, Silva had arrived in Galland City, the place closest to Zenelaus. Having decided that he would traverse the wilderness on his own merits and without bodyguards, he had headed to the Adventurers' Guild to buy a map. That had been when the guild staff members had recognized him and passed on a message from the young duke staying in Zenelaus.

The message had been an order that the man was to defend the Great Galland Bridge at all costs.

Slowe had knowledge of a future where Galland City would fall into ruin, and thus, he had called for this man.

"Oh... Huh..." Alicia made a groan of realization. "So *that's* how it is!"

"Lady Alicia? Um, your expression has been doing some impressive twists and turns for a while now..."

"Miss Charlotte, I've been thinking for a while that you're kind of oblivious, but this is too much! Look at *that*! Shouldn't you react a bit more?!"

Unlike Charlotte, who was only surprised at Silva being there, Alicia was trembling. She was the only one who had realized the gravity of the situation.

"The sword! Look at that thing in his hands! Isn't that the Mystical Sword of Daryth? Isn't the penalty for taking it out of the country *death*?!"

Chapter 5: Eldred, the Great Spirit of Fire

“Shuya, do you know how to do anything besides mope?! No amount of worrying is going to help Nalita wake up!” Zodd snapped.

“But Miss Nalita’s body is getting cold so quickly!”

“That undead just now was an adventurer who was famous for using poison-coated weapons. Nalita was grazed by one of them, so she’s only under a temporary deathlike state! If we get her to drink the antidote in stock at the Adventurers’ Guild within half a day, she’ll be back up and kicking in no time!”

I knew that. I *knew* that well.

But my wand hand wouldn’t stop shaking. Since Miss Nalita had been struck because of me, because *I* had dragged her down. Even though I gripped her hand tight, she was frighteningly cold, and her complexion was just as chilling.

“Hey, Shuya, these monsters are no laughing matter! Even someone like me can’t deal with what we’re facing all by myself! So you better get a grip and stand up now!”

“I’m sorry, I...I still can’t cast any...”

“For all your big talk before you left the guild building, you’re pretty useless when it actually matters! But, well, that’s what it’s like to be a novice... I never expected you to follow it up with anything!!!” Zodd roared as he swung down his arm against a monster. “And that makes fifty! I’ve gone on many dungeon expeditions, but this might be the first time I’ve been in such a pinch!”

“Damn it all... Of all the times, why is my magic acting up now?” I gritted my teeth in frustration.

We had headed towards Nemesis, and we were welcomed by monsters so tough that they had practically come from an entirely different world compared to the ones I had faced in the wilds.

According to Mister Zodd, producing strong zombies required strong raw

materials. Thus, deceased A-class adventurers were apparently prime zombie-making fodder.

The lich had turned the A-class adventurer casualties from this intracity battle into monsters.

We had almost arrived at Nemesis when we ran into another group of undead. They had focused their attacks on me. Miss Nalita had taken an attack in my stead, and she...had collapsed.

“Eldred...” I mumbled. “Normally, you’d save me in times like this, so why...?”

After I had made the decision to head to Nemesis, I could no longer hear Eldred’s voice. I didn’t have him covering for me anymore, and the force behind my spells had decreased. Up until now, he had always aided me at just the right time, making sure that I stayed alive, but...

We had many comrades back in the fight outside the city. Everyone had helped each other along so that we could all make it out alive. However, we were the only ones heading back to Nemesis under such circumstances. And now, unable to cast magic, I was powerless.

“Please carry Miss Nalita and get out of here! If it’s only the two of you, you should be able to break past this circle of enemies!”

“Don’t say something so silly! Aren’t we comrades?!”

“I don’t want to be a burden!”

“Don’t make me laugh in the middle of such a fight! Was there any day when you *weren’t* a burden to us?! Your inability to cast spells is just temporary! You’re probably just half-scared to death, that’s all! Doesn’t that happen to mages sometimes? On top of that, if I keep kicking up a ruckus around here, someone will notice and come help eventually!”

“But we haven’t seen anybody else for a long time! There were so many adventurers, and yet...”

“We have no choice but to believe that someone will come! Start yelling, Shuya! If you’re lucky, our leader might realize we’re here!”

I couldn’t use magic, and because of that, Mister Zodd had to fight the

monsters by himself. It was all my fault.

“Let’s go save our leader,” I had said. I shouldn’t have made such an irresponsible suggestion while being blind to how helpless I was. In the end, I was just dead weight.

The circle of monsters gradually surrounded us and began to close in. It was all over. These things planned on tormenting us to death.

An undead monster with vacant eyes hurled a knife at me. It had probably used that knife when it had still been alive. I watched, motionless, as the blade headed my way. Without Eldred’s power, I couldn’t do anything on the battlefield. I was a useless, worthless thing with delusions of infallibility because of a strange power that I had borrowed.

The sudden embrace of death would treat everyone equally, and that thought had seemed alluring to me. Not only that, but if I had died under the hands of a simple monster and not the lich, I wouldn’t end up becoming something terrible like those undead monsters, so I...

My eyes widened. “Ah... Ah...”

“Why the hell...do you look as if...it’s all already over...?”

“Ah...” I could only whimper, stutter, then howl. “Aaah... AAAH!!!”

No way. Please, no. Why?!

My mind is blank. I don’t understand. I don’t want to understand. Mister Zodd took that knife for me and he’s crumpled on the ground. His blood is flowing out... It’s even splashing on my face.

It’s my fault. All because I welcomed death. It’s all because I’m weak that...

In my stead, Mister Zodd...

I couldn’t stop the whimpers from flowing out of my mouth. The keens, dragging out from my throat like a wretched scream.

I can’t do this anymore. Eldred, please, save me. Weren’t you supposed to be on my side no matter what...? If I don’t have you, something pathetic like me is just going to...

Maybe it's my fault? Because I thought that I didn't need any more power than this? If that's the case, I was wrong. I'm sorry. I was wrong about everything. I'll apologize as many times as you want, so please... I now know that I can't do anything without you, so...

As I continued to hang my head, I heard the voices of monsters all around me. It wasn't their jeers, however. They were shrieking out in pain. And it was so, so hot. I saw monsters on all sides of me enveloped in flames. *Eldred, is that you? Have you come back for me?* I had thought that, but no.

It wasn't Eldred's voice, which only echoed in my head, but loud, firm words that I could hear with my ears instead. The monsters all burned away into nothing. As the voice interrupted everything, I saw the silhouette of a certain person entering the fray, and I was struck speechless.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Was this a dream? But he was *there*. He was still alive! I was safe now. A peerless A-class adventurer who could even rival an S-class one had cremated an undead A-class adventurer like it was a walk in the park. Mowing down even more monsters in his way, he came towards me.

With this, everyone would be saved. I thought that, but my mouth wouldn't form words.

Before my eyes, the old man, Archflare, was...



While Shuya and the other adventurers had taken part in a free-for-all where the lines between friend and foe had been blurred—that is, at the same time as the undead horde had attacked Zenelaus—the lich had arrived at the city without a sound, right at the hunting grounds where A-class adventurers had been lying in wait with bated breath.

“There it is! That lich has the nerve to be floating above the ground!”

“I see the dullahan over there too. That miasma shrouding it... It's cursed, huh.”

“Everyone, follow the plan and take down the lich! That dullahan is likely its subordinate! I, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, will face that one!”

If one of these adventurers could kill the floating lich, a ticket to becoming an S-class adventurer would be in their hands. As a result, not one of them had paid a sliver of attention to the dullahan that had appeared in the plaza. They only had eyes for the lich.

“Hey, you asshole! You just tried to murder me!”

“N-No! It wasn’t me! The lich was controlling me! Please believe me!”

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus’s decision to start the war with the monsters had all begun from a chance encounter. He had seized a soldier from the Dustour Empire who had been based in Zenelaus, and from this interrogation, he had learned about a deplorable scheme in the works. It was a plan where a soldier of the empire would hide in a dungeon and attack Zenelaus when the time was ripe.

He had laughed off the idea with derision, for what could one man do? But once the guild master had heard the identity of this man in question, he had frozen in shock. The enemy soldier dispatched to the Freedom Union had been one of the Three Musketeers, Dreibach Steibelt.

That man’s very existence was taboo. Dreibach Steibelt was said to have been born in the Laboratory, an S-rank dungeon in the north. The dungeon was rumored to be a treasure trove, but it was one that even high-ranking adventurers would avoid like the plague.

“Sorry mate, but the order is to kill all humans controlled by the lich! You only have your own heart’s weakness to blame, for it gave an opening that allowed the lich’s spell to work on you!”

“Even among liches, this particular one is a necromancer. What a nightmare... Everyone, be careful! Avoid that thing’s spells no matter what!”

The Adventurers’ Guild had several dozen successful lich hunts under their belt so far. Thus, the adventurers present had assumed that a few A-class adventurers would be sufficient to deal with the average lich.

However, this lich was peculiar—an oddity. It was a heretic mage obsessed

with apparitions.

The A-class adventurers were seasoned warhorses, and with the bait of an S-class promotion dangling on a stick before them, their high morale helped to push them forward. With several dozen such adventurers here, in fact, they did actually succeed at dragging the lich down from its glide in the heavens.

A man interrupted a pair of bickering adventurers. “Is this really the time to be fighting among yourselves? All of you, get a grip!”

“It’s you, Archflare! Y-You really saved me there! Hey, you! I’ll show you the consequences of daring to kill me!”

“It’s only common sense to off someone before they turn into an undead monster! You’re an A-class, shouldn’t you know at least that much?! Still, Archflare, that lich is paying an unhealthy amount of attention to your Flamberge, isn’t it? We’ll position ourselves so you’re the center of our attack!”

At that point, they had been a hair’s breadth away from defeating the lich, which had descended to the earth.

However, they were thwarted in their attempt. The miasma-affected dullahan had swung down its sword once, which somehow was enough to slice apart all the attacks with the potential to hit the lich.

Nobody had even known when that monster had come so close to their vicinity.

This dullahan had been the monster the Eye of the Crimson Lotus had announced that he would take on. Once again, the dullahan leaped towards the guild master, who was armed with his battle-ax.

The adventurers were at a loss for words. That monster had been fighting the adventurer hero wielding the colossal battle-ax as if it were an extension of his own hand...yet that dullahan still had the strength to interfere with their battle with the lich! With that, the adventurers focused only on the lich began to realize just how strange their hero’s battle was turning out to be.

“That thing actually managed to stop the blow from our guild master’s battle-ax... This can’t be real... The battle-ax is a Sylpheed!”

“Don’t forget our orders! Our job is to deal with the lich!” the Archflare announced.

“But that’s the *problem*, Archflare. If we approach the lich, that dullahan gets in our way! If we want that lich’s head, don’t we need to defeat the dullahan first?!”

“Are you saying that we should face that dullahan ourselves? Are you nuts?”

Nobody was eager to take that first step forward.

The ground shook as the battle-ax slammed against it with each swing. Yet, that dullahan was able to bear the full brunt of its force head-on and stop any further attacks. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus’s weapon had a reputation for overwhelming countless monsters with one crushing blow, but the dullahan didn’t seem to have any dread towards it.

Any A-class-tier adventurer could understand the extent of the Eye of the Crimson Lotus’s strength. The man was an adventurer who had cleared dungeon floors with a lightning speed that nobody could match, forcing him to fight all by himself. After he’d risen to S-class and had obtained his weapon from the oracles, he had become a hero of adventurers who would receive direct requests from major countries.

Right now, such a man was being pushed back by *one* single dullahan.

“The guild didn’t say anything about a dullahan being here. What the hell is going on?!”

“I’m stepping down! Earning the title of S-class sounds brilliant, but we’re all going to die at this rate! And where the hell did the guild staff members go? There were loads of them earlier, but now they’re nowhere to be seen! Did the Adventurers’ Guild conspire together with the monsters and deceive us all?!”

These words were the truth. The A-class adventurers gathered here were nothing more than bait to enable the guild master to fight with the dullahan, and that was all.

On top of that, these A-class adventurers were oblivious to an even more chilling truth. That lich was exceptional among dungeon masters. The dungeon under its control had been banned from exploration by Hulbert, the northern

Adventurers' Guild headquarters. It was also the monster directly responsible for the birth of the musketeer Dreibach Steibelt.

“The Adventurers' Guild should go to hell! Those guys knew everything and kept us in the dark!!!”

There were already corpses of high-ranking adventurers scattered about the streets of their capital. One by one, the assembled elite warriors had been killed and were then revived on the spot as undead monsters.

The remaining A-class adventurers, humans each with exceptional power of their own right, wore clear expressions of dread on their faces and whispered the same lines to each other.

This is a nightmare.

Nobody could object to that statement. It was impossible to refute.

“The monsters from the wilds are gathering too! What are the people fighting outside dallying around for?!”

The fight between the Eye of the Crimson Lotus and the dullahan continued to drag on.

At first, the two had seemed to be on equal footing, but over time it seemed that the dullahan was gradually gaining an edge.

Even to these experienced adventurers, the dullahan's power was clearly a cut above the rest. It didn't even have any semblance of swordsmanship. That thing simply lashed out as it pleased.

It roared and howled long, monosyllabic battle cries with a distorted voice. It was as though it loathed everything in this world and was expressing this contempt with all its being.

The dullahan's howls were hot and scorched its audience's skin with stinging pain. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus couldn't even get one hit in.

“You've got to be kidding me... The Eye of the Crimson Lotus is being overwhelmed!”

The distorted howl bordered on a screech as it rang out once more.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus had unwavering faith in himself. He was a hero. The cream of the crop of adventurers had gathered here to kill the lich. Using the prospect of becoming an S-class adventurer as leverage, he had assembled an impressive group of A-class adventurers.

However, from the corners of his eyes, the guild master saw these adventurers running away one after another. With this view in the background, the guild master realized his inevitable defeat.

The reason was simple. In terms of pure power, the dullahan's sword surpassed Sylpheed.

The lich's curse had the power to change a human into a monster, and it was said that humans blessed with a lich's power could become strong enough to even crush boulders in their hands. However, this fellow before the guild master was even more absurd than the tales.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus let out a hiss of effort at yet another exchange of blows. The force of the impact between his battle-ax and the sword caused his feet to lift off the ground, and he could no longer stop his momentum.

Inertia forced the guild master's body to bounce off the ground like a ball and he crashed into a stone pillar.

Blood flooded his mouth.

He hadn't felt this vexed in a long time, long enough for him to forget what it felt like...but now he remembered.

He had faced the dullahan head-on, tactless like a bull, and he was taught a lesson about the rift between their physical strength.

"Guild master, are you all right?!"

It took him a while before he could reply. "Archflare. You still haven't run away? Hurry, you must escape..."

"Are you insane? Do you hear yourself? Do you know what you're saying?!"

“We have lost. There is no need to fight any”—he coughed—“longer with the lich!”

“I won’t give up,” the Archflare declared with confidence. “I still haven’t learned exactly what this fight means for all of us, after all.”

Now that the Eye of the Crimson Lotus had announced it, it could be said that Zenelaus’s fall was set in stone.

The guild master watched the Archflare’s back as the man faced the lich and the dullahan.

He thought back to his earlier fight. There was one simple reason for his defeat: Dreibach Steibelt’s abilities were just that extraordinary.

However, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus’s only available option had been to confront the musketeer himself. If he’d announced his presence, all-out war was inevitable. If he wanted to nip the seed of misfortune in the bud, his only choice would be to secretly deal with the enemy within the confines of Zenelaus.

Was my choice truly the right one? At this point, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus no longer knew the answer to that question.

It took the guild master a while to find his voice again. “Archflare... If the Adventurers’ Guild...loses you...it will be a grave loss... Among all the A-class adventurers here...you’re about the only one who has the potential to become S-class...”

The once-copious A-class adventurers were no longer anywhere to be seen, leaving Archflare as the last one standing. Some had met an unfortunate end. Others had escaped. A third group now loomed as shadows of their former selves as the undead.

But the Archflare persisted, pointing his sword towards the enemy he sought to slay.

The lich raised a finger at the Archflare and prepared to strike him with a spell. A projectile of ice, which would tear a clean hole through a body upon impact. However, it did not hit the man and instead flung off into the distance.

At this point, the adventurers remaining in the heart of Zenelaus could be counted on one hand. Who in the world had the lich aimed for?

The Archflare realized that the lich's attack was meant for somebody not in the immediate vicinity. He turned and then roared as he spotted the intended target. "You hopeless fools! I *told* you to stay away!" This man was one of the very few who had managed to wound the lich, something many of the A-class adventurers couldn't even do. The color drained from the Archflare's face rapidly as he broke into a sprint.

He had realized that the lich's targets had been members of his own adventurer party, Zylush. Zodd and Nalita, as well as Shuya, who had been behind the pair. He couldn't stop himself from rushing there because *his adventurer party comrades* were in an area packed with monsters. The Archflare charged into the swarm of monsters to save his party members.

The lich guffawed as it watched the spectacle, ridicule clear in its voice.

All of the monsters here were the lich's puppets. To it, the Flamberge was the only weapon with the possibility of striking a fatal blow. From the very beginning, the lich hadn't seemed to give attention to any of the adventurers other than the Archflare.

"Are you guys there?! You are, aren't you?!"

To him, his adventurer party members were family with whom he could feel at ease. As an adventurer, any day could be his last, but he was able to gain one thing: these comrades, the only friends he had. In fact, he was willing to entrust them with everything he had saved up from his adventurer career if he ever kicked the bucket in a dungeon.

The man had only associated himself with people whom he could trust with all his heart. Therefore, he single-mindedly raced towards them without regard for his stamina, his face pale as a ghost.

He finally found them. His older comrades in a dead faint, and the young man who was overtaken by terror.

"Good... All of you are alive."

Even as the Archflare spoke to him, Shuya could do nothing but stare dumbly

at the man who appeared before him. It would have been better if he had fainted, just like Zodd and Nalita. If he had, he wouldn't have had to see *this*.

Mirroring his actions from a while ago, the man Shuya admired placed a hand onto the boy's head. "I am so...glad that...you all are safe."

"Ah... Aaah..." Shuya's breaths were shaky.

To save Shuya from the assault of a monster, his adventurer party leader had taken a blow in his stead.

Of course, the lich couldn't give up an opening when its enemy bared his vulnerable back. Shuya could only watch wide-eyed the entire time as ice crept up his leader's feet, slowly overtaking the man's entire form.

"Tell me, Shuya... Do you want more power?"

Shuya screamed until his throat was hoarse.

This time, he didn't hesitate. There was no way he could say no.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

Unforgivable.

He invited me to become one of his own. We fought together countless times. If I was ever plagued by my thoughts, he would accompany me the entire night and listen to me. Whenever I said that I wasn't powerful enough, he would train with me.

He taught me what I should live for. He told me that I'm fine just as I am, even though I'm nothing but pathetic.

Living as an adventurer was a very attractive option. However, nothing could change the fact that I, Shuya Newkern, was a noble. I was born as a noble of Daryth, a major country, and duty came with that status. Even if I became a soldier for the country, I would have to return to the barren Newkern lands eventually.

But the Archflare taught me that my time in Zenelaus would still be invaluable to me, even if that was the case. He even let me join his adventurer party! Yeah, I know that I'm inadequate. I can't even scratch the surface of their abilities in

comparison. But they still welcomed me with open arms. They approved of me.

I choked out an unintelligible sob.

The Archflare had treasured his Flamberge immensely, but that sword had been tossed aside and the old man was lying atop a heap of rubble.

My throat squeezed out an excruciating sound, somewhere between a gasp and a whimper.

It was my fault. All of it. It was because of me that everyone in Zylush and the old man were...

It was all because I was powerless!

Someone's voice seemed to overlap with my own. "AaaAAaaah!!!"



Denning had mentioned this. He had said that this was the first sign. Gradually, I would lose control of my body, and there was a chance that I would lose my sense of self according to him.

However, I wasn't scared.

"Aaah!!!" The howl that escaped my lips was a combination of two voices and only increased in volume and force.

I had a bad feeling about this. I had a premonition that something irreversibly *horrible* would happen in the future if this continued.

But...this power won't stop.

I probably knew that this was an invitation by a devil from the start. I mean, what I managed to do was crazy! With one thought, I was able to summon hundreds of floating balls of fire and make them rain down as I pleased.

But I thought that I must have that power. I needed a power that would let a mere mage like me fight on even footing with that lich!!!

My scream continued on, without any pause for breath as the overlapping voice followed mine.

It felt as if something was being stolen away from me. But I pressed on. I continued to resist so that I could protect the Archflare.

Somewhere along the way, the dullahan shrouded in miasma approached, and I felt my body heat up as if it were on fire.

The adventurer who had hightailed it out of here had mentioned that the sinister armored warrior was peerless. He was right. I could feel a deep, burning hatred from inside its armor, a murky grudge so deep that it would curse everything it saw.

It felt even more dangerous than that black dragon that had attacked Kirsch Mage Institute. It was probably a perfectly normal reaction to run away immediately.

But I couldn't stop. Eldred's power wouldn't stop.

A hearty but wicked cackle rang out. "Good. Very good, Shuya."

My wand had already flown off somewhere. I couldn't feel my body at all. I didn't even know how I was fighting.

"Lich!" There was a chuckle that was not my own. "Lich! Lich! Liiich!!!"

Denning, I admired you.

When you slew that dragon, you saved everyone. I wanted to become someone like you. That was why I came to Zenelaus. I made Alicia go through so many dangerous things, but I'm still here.

Just like Eldred had said, I managed to take one step forward in my life, away from my set path.

"Denning! I'm an adventurer!!!"

Just like how you started your plan to lose weight, Denning, I wanted to change too.

That was why I came to Zenelaus.

...That was why I entrusted Alicia to you.

"Liiich! Are you *that* worried about your pride and joy? The Dragon Rider who can take command of one of those beasts?! How strange, since you're the one who created that monster!"

The lich continued to croon curses dripping with malice. I drove it into a corner.

It was almost as if I had turned into someone else. After all, flames moved in whatever ways I wanted them to. I could even say that...I had become the element of fire itself.

The lich's wand tapped the ground hard. The power of darkness gushed forth, and a squirming black *thing* tried to engulf my body, but...

"I didn't manage to finish off the previous Dragon Rider, but this time, I will send him into the underworld!" The other voice laughed.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus was looking at me. He looked astonished, with a gaze that told me he felt he was looking at something freakish.

Please stop. Please don't look at me like that.

“You should celebrate, Shuya! I’ll give you my power! Everything I have!”

...No. This wasn’t my voice. *What is this? What the hell is this?!*



Something very peculiar was going on in front of the Eye of the Crimson Lotus.

“What *is* this...?”

A youth was fighting against a monster that even A-class adventurers ran away from with their tails tucked between their legs. The lich had led them all around by the nose and caused the majority of them to flee after their defeat, but the youth was able to pressure that monster.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus knew how powerful it was and thus couldn’t process this ridiculous scene before him.

It got even more surreal. The dullahan tried to interfere with the battle, but the lich acted in such a way that seemed to warn the other monster against approaching.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus took note of the tone and words of the youth, and sometimes, the young man’s words had hints of something ancient. That led the guild master to one natural conclusion.

“Don’t come near me,” the man hissed at the redhead.

The youth cocked an eyebrow. “What instills such fear in you?”

“You are no child. Such a thing is impossible... You are the Great Spirit of Fire, Eldred.”

“Well, well. You’re a bright one.”

“Where did you even come from? No. What is your goal for coming here?”

“I only seek conflict, nothing more. I was lured here by a strong presence.”

The voice that rang out was hoarse and gritty, out of place on a young boy. And then, the red-haired youth, who was now one with the power of fire itself, began to jeer.

The lich kept its guard up and distanced itself from Shuya. It seemed as if it

was looking for an opening.

The guild master stifled a sigh. “What a headache. To think that we even had such a monstrosity hiding in Zenelaus on top of everything else...”

He pitied the youth, for an extraordinary being was obsessed with the boy.

The Great Spirit was a desolate relic of a mage whom the Country of Sorcery pursued...the mage that achieved immortality. The guild master was sure that the infamous Eldred hadn't simply come to save Zenelaus from its plight.

“Meaningless chatter aside, are you not going to fight? There is a pitiful monster over there waiting for you, seeking salvation from its foe. Are you just going to stand there? It's been corrupted by the lich's affection. It no longer has any free will left, and it will probably continue to fight until it razes Zenelaus to the ground like a stubborn child with his mind set on granting his own wish.” The boy shook his head with something between amusement and mocking wistfulness, then chuckled. “Heartbreaking, I must say.”

The dullahan perceived Eldred's now-boyish form as an enemy and adopted an offensive stance with its sword drawn. Next to the monster, the lich stared down at the Eye of the Crimson Lotus with maroon eyes from under the hood of its robe.

However, at this point, none of the A-class adventurers gathered by the Eye of the Crimson Lotus were left standing in the area. There were those who had died, those who had been transformed into undead monsters, and ones who had escaped. The ones who were dead were lucky in a way because they didn't have to share the soul-crushing despair of the guild master.

He had already finished grading his enemy's abilities. The conclusion was brutal. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus just couldn't win against that dullahan.

“My, my. Your spirit is already broken, I see. The hero of the adventurers is surprisingly insignificant, despite your title. However, it's nothing to be anguished about. It is impossible for a mere human to defeat a Dragon Rider in the first place. Why don't you just sit back and watch? I shall take care of the rest.” He chuckled. “Shuya, are you not entertained? I will now show you what a real fight looks like.”

One of the Three Musketeers would soon enter combat with Eldred, and Zenelaus would probably be left in ruins as a result. With time, there probably wouldn't be a single trace left of this plaza, and nobody would know what had happened here.

My name will probably go down in history as one of the most terrible guild masters.

If it's possible, I want to stop them. But there's the lich, the musketeer, and even Eldred, who is thrilled at the prospect of a worthy opponent... They're all fearsome enemies.

There's too much to consider. I just can't think straight.

His meltdown was why the guild master didn't have the leisure of pondering why the red-haired youth suddenly collapsed.

A magic circle had appeared below the possessed Shuya's feet. Lit by the pale blue light source underneath him, Eldred could only heave rapid breaths in and out of the novice adventurer's body.

"The fight has only gotten started, Mister Adventurer Hero."

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus was stiff as a statue until the voice addressed him. The owner of the voice was roughly ten steps behind him. With that, the guild master finally realized just who had bound Eldred in place.

It was the Dragon Slayer of House Denning, that the country of Daryth was currently making a strenuous effort to track.

The boy who had become the man of the hour overnight wiped the sweat between his brows. He was the third son of House Denning, the one who had fallen from grace and had plenty of rumors about him. Right now, however, he looked nothing like one who could be called the Fallen Wind, and he was pointing his wand directly at Eldred.

"He was careless about his surroundings because he was too delirious from excitement. And that brought about his downfall. If that hadn't been the case, I definitely wouldn't have been able to stop the powerful Great Spirit of Fire in

his tracks.”

“Slowe Denning, what did you do to that *thing*...that Eldred?”

“I didn’t only aim for Eldred. My control is more limited, but I managed to lock down the fiends over there too.”

The bindings had taken on the form of chains. Three of them dangled from a void in the sky. Dull, ashen fetters coiled around their enemies, with one on the lich and two on the dullahan.

The man’s eyes widened. “Wait, is that...?”

One thing had come to mind as the Eye of the Crimson Lotus watched this scene unfold. Nemesis possessed a closely guarded secret trump card—a certain magic item discovered in one of the dungeons under Zenelaus’s management. It had a rather complicated history, and no matter how high the offered prices were, Nemesis had turned all of the offers down. It was a relic that had been rejected for use in this war because there were no mages around who could operate it.

“I am surprised that you managed to convince a staff member to loan you the guild’s secret treasure. On top of that, you probably didn’t even know if you could actually use it, did you?”

“Nobody was left in Nemesis, actually... I heard what had happened from one of the guild staff members I ran into on the way. They said you told everyone to run away immediately if things began to tilt in the favor of the enemy, aye? You even had a backup plan in case of defeat. You made a snap decision for people to retreat if the worst-case scenario played out. I can really see how a run-of-the-mill adventurer managed to become the guild master of Zenelaus.”

“Why didn’t you fall back? You should have been able to clearly see that things are not going as planned over here, even from afar. All of those A-class adventurers who were turned into undead by the lich must have gotten in your way too.”

“Seems like turning humans into monsters is the specialty of the Laboratory’s dungeon master, huh.”

“Slowe Denning, answer my question! Why did you come here?!”

The youth shrugged. “Well, unfortunately for me, I just couldn’t leave that guy alone.”

The red-haired youth was still writhing in agony, floating above the magic circle on the ground that overflowed with pale blue light. He glared daggers at Slowe Denning, but it seemed that due to his magical restraints, he couldn’t even speak a word.

“You’re not a mage, so you might not recognize it, but that magic circle’s one of the highest-grade circles. It can return curses right back to their casters. With this, Eldred will have his hands tied for a while. At the very least, we’ve managed to buy ourselves some precious time.”

“There’s no point in dragging it out! The Adventurers’ Guild has already lost!”

“Well then, what would you do if I said that I found a way to win? Oh, sorry, looks like I don’t have the time to explain.”

Slowe Denning’s face contorted with what was probably pain. The armored warrior had managed to break one of the chains dangling from the skies, which was part of the aforementioned magic item. Since Slowe had been binding the dullahan with outlandish strength, the consequences of the monster breaking out were easy to imagine.

“That dullahan isn’t normal. Leave, Denning. I am at least able to buy enough time for you to run away from this battlefield.”

“Hey! Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“You belong to Daryth. Return to your country and prepare for war. Surely you understand the situation from all this devastation... Zenelaus has lost, and to a single human. If you don’t start to prepare now, you will lose *everything*. The power of the Three Musketeers has exceeded even my expectations.”

“Wait, are you saying that... Are you actually, truly admitting defeat, from the bottom of your heart?”

Their main enemy was the dungeon master of the Laboratory, a place so dangerous that the northern Adventurers’ Guild had banned adventurers from entry. Beside it was one of the best warriors the Dustour Empire had to offer, molded by that very lich.

The guild master sank into silence. He had amassed the A-class adventurers scattered around the Freedom Union and organized them into a military faction. However, even he, the most powerful fighter of the Freedom Union at present, hadn't been able to fight on even ground with the musketeer during their clash.

He had miscalculated the capabilities of the man known as the Living Dead, as well as the lich that the adventurers weren't able to take care of. The cherry on top of the cake was the appearance of Eldred, who had secretly been coexisting within a young adventurer.

It was a hopeless collection of monstrous enemies who were anything but ordinary. So...what nonsense was Slowe Denning saying?

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus finally spoke up with conviction. "We have lost. It's over."

"And so you're going to sacrifice yourself and make me go back to Daryth. Is that the plan? Rather selfish of you, don't you think?"

The guild master didn't have a reply.

"Too bad for you, but I refuse. I can't leave that guy behind while he's possessed by Eldred."

"So you *did* know who the host of Eldred was..."

"Yeah, I did. I've known for a long time that Shuya Newkern was the one."

"It pains me to say this, but...that boy is beyond saving. I'm sure you saw the fight with the musketeer earlier. His consciousness has completely been taken over, and his previous self is surely gone. Without exception, all beings who have entertained the desires of Eldred have met a tragic end. Surely you know this too. His previous host met a spectacular and brutal end in Daryth."

Slowe Denning was incredulous. "Whoa, you sure are talkative right now. Are you possibly thinking of something too good to be true?"

"Indeed, I am. Considering the power of Eldred...he might be able to kill both the lich and the musketeer at once."

"Throw that idea right in the trash. Sorry, but I'm not going to let you do that."

I owe that guy. The fact that he doesn't realize it ticks me off to no end, but it's a debt that I can never repay, not even if I save his life a million times."

"I do not know what kind of relationship you two have, but...one's life is much more valuable than a debt of gratitude."

"Unfortunately, I feel differently. Plus, you said that Shuya no longer has free will, didn't you? I wonder about that... If all of his consciousness were truly gone, my spell wouldn't have been enough to shackle the Great Spirit to his spot. If Eldred didn't have someone obstructing him from within, I wouldn't have been able to stop him."

"...Nothing changes the fact that his future will be a road of misfortune."

Legend said that Eldred would slowly approach the human he deemed as his host and earn their trust. It was all for the sake of manifesting himself into this world once again. He would gradually provide his power to this human host and seize control of their body bit by bit without the host ever taking notice. And when an enemy worthy of Eldred's might showed itself, he would completely take over his host and indulge himself in a banquet of atrocities.

"I won't force you to follow my plans," Slowe said. "I thought it would be quite reassuring if I had your help, but since that's not the case, please just watch out for any changes in Shuya from there. If possible, it would make my day if you talked to him. You know, you were Shuya's idol for a long time."

"Slowe Denning...you are making the wrong choice. I'm saying that victory is impossible."

The Dragon Slayer born in Daryth, also known as the Fallen Wind of House Denning, walked towards the still-shackled monster.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus didn't understand. The red-haired youth gritted his teeth so loudly that you could hear it. He was drilling a gaze that could kill into the back of Slowe Denning, the one who had restricted his freedom. Was Slowe saying that this young man could still be saved, even in such a state? And was he going to fight that monstrosity which even all of Zenelaus had lost against?

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus couldn't understand. He didn't even *want* to understand.

Even I feel this much terror against them, and yet he's still striding forward, he thought numbly.

"Ah, right. One last thing. I have something to say to you, overlord of Zenelaus."

The guild master's spirit was already broken. He had learned that he had no chance of winning against Dreibach Steibelt, one of Dustour's Three Musketeers. He had also deceived many adventurers and led them to their deaths. Many A-class adventurers had been transformed into mere husks by the lich. All of the blame fell on his shoulders, for he had failed to gauge the ability of his enemies.

"I overheard the adventurers talking earlier. They said that they tried super hard at the special quest this time, so they were sure that they would receive great rewards from the guild. They're still drooling about how much money they'll receive after the fight. Isn't that hilarious, considering that their guild master has already given up on everything?"

That is probably the case, the man thought. *I did announce handsome compensation for all those that contributed to the defeat of the lich. But the door to that future where they would receive their prize shut long ago and crumbled into dust.*

"After I came to this city, I couldn't help but think one thing: adventurers really are a bunch of fools. You're all nincompoops who won't even think about the future, not even one day ahead of you. You probably also suffered a lot of pain because of that, Eye of the Crimson Lotus. Bringing these people together and fighting as one must have been such a chore. On top of that, these idiots don't doubt your victory at all. Everyone is waiting for you to somehow defeat the lich in the end and announce their glorious triumph. You seem oblivious to this, so I'll tell you this one important thing."

Zenelaus was going to be destroyed. Nothing would be spared by the musketeer and the lich.

"Adventurer Graham. You aren't alone."

Thoughts raced through the guild master's mind. *A myriad of monsters. A wandering suit of armor that had terrorized the continent. The clan of that vampire which had occupied a castle.*

I defeated them all without a single blemish marring my record.

People sang my praises in every nation, boasting that there was no monster that could match me.

I had even been given an offer to become a Royal Knight by the famous queen of Daryth.

However, I never doubted my refusal.

All of my experiences in my dungeon expeditions taught me what needed to change so we could extend the life span of adventurers. They're always stuck in a balancing act between life and death. Even if that extension was an insignificant amount, it was worthwhile.

I had realized that my life's mission was to reform the Adventurers' Guild, and thus, I could live for nothing else.

"And because you're still around, Shuya hasn't given up either."

With a start, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus realized something. That youth, who had been screaming as Eldred took control of his body... That red-haired boy, who was still resisting Eldred's influence... That novice adventurer, who had always stared at the guild master with stars in his eyes...

If Shuya has any awareness of what's going on right now...what would this scene look like in his eyes?

"Could you tell me one thing?" the guild master said slowly. "Do you really think that he can return to normal?"

"From what I know about that guy, he's someone who never knows when to give up." Slowe Denning continued on. "Even if he couldn't... I'll *definitely* find something to do about it."

His opponent was a Great Spirit. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus didn't know how Denning could declare that with such confidence. However, the guild master could feel the conviction behind those words. And thus, he thought that

he, too, wanted to believe.

“If that’s the case...I mustn’t show him such a pathetic sight,” he muttered ruefully.

That wasn’t all, as he had also remembered something important. *I was the one who made the decision to fight and change the inevitable after learning of Dreibach Steibelt’s plans. Nobody ordered me to do so. I made that decision myself.*

If I had defeated Dreibach Steibelt, I would have prevented the war. I thought that I could fight against fate all by myself. I could’ve secretly nipped it all in the bud without anybody ever learning of it.

He continued. “One thing completely slipped my mind. I know an important detail about what lies ahead of this fight.”

The ring Sylpheed instantly bloomed and his beloved partner, the battle-ax, pierced the earth.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus had steeled his resolve. With a grim determination to do or die trying, he fixed his sharp gaze on the world. “How many seconds do you need, Slowe Denning?”

I’ll admit it: I cannot win against that thing. However, I want to resist, just a little. After all, I may now know that I can’t win alone, but it seems that I have a very heartening ally in this young man.

“As many as you can. While you buy time, I’ll negotiate with Eldred.”

“I promise that I’ll expend every effort possible to do so.”

“Wait, no questions? Like how I’ll do it? I kept quiet about Eldred’s presence the whole time... Is the word ‘anger’ not in your vocabulary or something?”

“Of course I’m curious, but it looks like our enemy isn’t willing to wait around while we chat.”

He was indeed intrigued about what Slowe Denning was planning. However, the more time wasted by the guild master meant more of the adventurers who were still fighting in various places in Zenelaus would be lost to the underworld.

Besides, he had already gained sufficient rest to press on once more.

“I will put my faith in you, Wandless Master.”

He wouldn't prod deeply into Slowe Denning's affairs. He knew that the Prodigy of Wind was a Master of Wandless Spells who didn't need incantations.

Those chains he had created were more effective when they were linked to the movements of their target, and they required several layers of simultaneous, continuous incantations to uphold their binds. A mage qualified to use the relic would need an unparalleled ability in magic, and thus, it had lacked a suitable wielder. However, even after using it all this time, the youth hadn't opened his mouth even once to chant anything.

The young man had probably hidden this ability all his life. The guild master was honestly impressed by the fact that he had been able to.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus spoke once again. “That isn't all. A novice adventurer, Shuya Newkern, is suppressing the Great Spirit right now. As the guild master of Zenelaus, I simply cannot give up before him.”

“You...know his name?”

“I try to memorize all the names of our newcomers and their abilities. I've seen many adventurers who ended up dying quickly after they just began their journeys, after all. Now, as for his secret... Let's keep it between the two of us.”

Gripping the battle-ax, the guild master stood up. Sylpheed was said to be a living weapon, and it thrummed as it matched the pulse of its wielder.

However, this time, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus was going to take it a step further. When he had gained Sylpheed after he had become an S-class adventurer, he had sealed one of his abilities thanks to obtaining this Seed of a Hero. He couldn't control this power that earned his moniker, and because of it, he had always gone alone whenever he explored the lower levels of dungeons.

It was an ability that affected not only his enemies but also his allies. It was a power that could ignite everything in his sight. Unless he was alone, he couldn't ever use his true strength.

However, it probably wouldn't be a problem here. The guild master took off the eye patch that restrained his Eye of the Crimson Lotus, and he allowed the cursed power to manifest.

“Zenelaus would fall into ruin, but lich...” he hissed. “I won’t let the likes of you all destroy it.”

Slowe had watched everything unfold before him and he sighed. The young man was finally at his limit. With that, the chains binding the lich and the armored warrior came apart, melting away into nothing.



I heard a long, deafening, and distorted howl and I felt the ground shake beneath my feet.

The battle unfolding before my eyes was the clash of two of the strongest titans in the north and the south. The man wielding Sylpheed unleashed all of his power in the true definition of the phrase; it was a priceless spectacle that no amount of money could buy a ticket to.

For at least several moments, I couldn’t move from my spot as I watched.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus was pushing back both the lich and the dullahan. He used his cursed eye to block their attacks as he brandished his battle-ax. He was now using the grotesque power that had famously led to the defeat of that wandering armored warrior. He had claimed that he would never use it again, but the man had probably been incited to do so once more by Shuya’s fight.

Even while Eldred had controlled Shuya’s body, the young man had still fought to protect his comrades. Shuya had tried so hard, and his valiant effort had moved the Eye of the Crimson Lotus.

The man took up arms and fired himself up again. The guild master had clearly been one of the people at the top of the pyramid of strength in the anime, the strongest adventurer who had still died in the battle of Zenelaus.

“But...” I whispered.

Nevertheless, I concluded that he wouldn’t last long. The Three Musketeers were still one step above the Eye of the Crimson Lotus. Even when Shuya had fought them in his awakened form in the anime, he had needed the help of his allies to defeat Dreibach and Bardot, who was on par with the former.

“Well, well, I’m sure you know what I’m trying to say...Eldred,” I drawled as I turned my attention to the Great Spirit.

He cackled back. “Well, give me a good reason why I should lend my power to a kid, the Master of Wandless Spells.”

A wavering heat haze emitted from Shuya’s body. No matter how I looked at him, he looked like a normal Shuya, but appearances were deceiving. The redhead was possessed by Eldred, whose real form was sealed off somewhere in the world even right at this moment.

“I must say, that man is rather impressive. Even if I consider the fact that he’s fully drawing on the power of his curse, pushing back the lich and the Dragon Rider is not an easy feat. His determination is admirable. I can see why the World Tree gave him the Seed of a Hero, its oracle. Well then, kid, let me ask you again. Why must I lend you my power?”

He was looking down on me. Eldred existed on a plane that was staggeringly higher than mine, and in his eyes, I was nothing more than one of the insignificant masses.

But I do have one advantage. I know why he controls humans and seeks juggernauts in combat.

“The Dragon Rider is the final evolution of dullahan-type monsters... Don’t they happen to be an enemy you couldn’t win against when you were alive?”

“At this point, kid, I’ll no longer question anything that comes out of your mouth. I won’t ask how you knew of my existence and how you even managed to figure out my goals.” Eldred shook his head slowly. “However, that thing is different. It isn’t the specimen I fought. For starters, that thing over there is a former human; it’s not a pure Dragon Rider. I’d only fight it if it becomes a monster in the truest sense of the word. Right now, that before us is nothing more than the Living Dead: half-human, half-fiend.”

“But Eldred, aren’t you itching like crazy to fight that thing? Wasn’t that why you borrowed Shuya’s body and made an appearance? You knew the possible consequences and manifested yourself here despite the risks of your host dying in this place.”

I mustn't let this drag out any longer. I knew that the Eye of the Crimson Lotus was eating away at his own life force in his battle.

“It is a futile effort. I will not lend you my power. Indeed, you have quite a remarkable talent, and I can see why you have the favor of Altanger, but you do not fulfill the requirements, kid. Unless you have something like Shuya’s crystal ball—”

“Eldred, I do have a weapon that can manifest your power.”

“Well now.” A raised eyebrow. “In that case, tell me what it is.”

“That old man’s Flamberge is the same as the crystal ball, isn’t it? They’re both artifacts you made when you were alive.”

Eldred paused. “Perhaps it might be wiser to kill you right now.”

“In the first place, the Archflare’s interest in Shuya wasn’t some coincidence. *You* were the one who arranged for them to be drawn towards each other. You did all that just to drag Shuya out into the battlefield, didn’t you?”

There was a sharp inhale. It was the first time that Eldred had displayed such a clear crack in his composure.

In the anime, the Archflare had mentioned how his intuition grew sharper after he began using Flamberge. And that was identical to Eldred’s *modus operandi* with Shuya when he addressed Shuya with his own voice.

“Besides, you’re not blind to the truth either. Shuya can’t win against that, but *I* can. If I have your power to back me up, my victory will be set in stone.”

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus was fighting, choosing to put his faith in me and trading blows with the dullahan Dreibach Steibelt. As for the lich, it was making a frantic effort to pin down the adventurer hero, almost like a parent protecting its child.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus was most likely stronger than me. However, that was only if my individual power was taken into account.

I called out the name of the former hero, who in the anime went on to save the world with Shuya. “Team up with me and you’ll be able to unleash your full power... Eldred, the Blaze Lord.”



I couldn't let my guard down, not even for one moment. I was facing a monster that had sent many A-class adventurers to their graves. The lich was a mage, and I was at a disadvantage against that class.

Terror seized my whole body. My opponent was a behemoth, but I knew I couldn't withdraw from this fight, no matter what. I had promised Slowe Denning that I would buy him as much time as I could.

All things considered, I'm actually in high spirits. Up until now, I've always fought alone, but now I have someone to fall back on. A comrade with power that matches my own.

A garbled voice wretched out of the lich. "Y...YoU ARe—"

I barked out a laugh. "What impressive power! It seems that his abilities are from another dimension compared to what I expected from mages!"

"—IN mY WAaaY!!!"

I held nothing back. I gave it everything I had. In close quarters, I stopped the blow of the dullahan's sword. However, I had more than one enemy.

The power of my cursed eye and the lich's spell canceled each other out. Realizing that things weren't going in my favor, I took one step aside. A sword pierced the ground where I had been standing with an astounding amount of physical strength behind it. Cracks appeared at the point of impact and spread out across the area, causing a stone pillar in the distance to crumble. What kind of ridiculous power did that strike have? The very act of thinking about it seemed to bring me one step closer to death's door.

"IN My WaaAY!!!"

"Lich, it seems that you're very concerned about that youth! Indeed, you should know the extent of Eldred's strength!"

"YoU aRE ALsO CUrSed!"

"Yes, I am! That's why they call me the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, you see!"

When I had defeated the wandering suit of armor, I had known that it would probably be the last time I could use that power. Using it ate away at my body,

and I wouldn't be able to live a long life. However, this fight was worth shaving a little more off my limited life span.

Keeping both the lich and the dullahan busy for a long time would be impossible. I didn't even have a brief respite to catch my breath. I was investing everything into this battle; my life up until now, and everything I had left.

I took a step forward, swinging my battle-ax down and landing a strike against the dullahan's shoulder. However, it only put the dullahan off-balance, and nothing more.

"AAAaaaAAA!!!" the dullahan roared.

"Living Dead! I'm telling you, I won't let you go! I am your opponent!"

The musketeer was no longer interested in me, but *him*. It was clear that his gaze was fixed on Slowe Denning.

I couldn't turn around to check on the youth. However, I could sense a torrent of raging mana behind me. Somehow or other, it seemed that he had managed to succeed at steadily drawing out power from Eldred.

I want to look and see what he's doing, but my enemy wouldn't pass up on any lapses of attention on my side, even a rapid blink of an eye.

"OuT OF mY WAY!!!"

Suddenly, my left arm was encased in ice. It would probably end up being useless for the rest of my life as a result. I gritted my teeth in reaction to the intense agony. "Lich, I wouldn't mind sacrificing one arm to you! This fight is meaningful enough that it's just a trivial matter!"

No matter what, I will never, ever let them take even one step forward towards him.

Then, I felt a wave of heat against my back. A wall of flames surged forward and brushed right past me, towards the dullahan. I had seen this technique many times; it was the power of Flamberge, the Archflare's weapon.

I finally spotted the youth, and a colossal tower of flames coiled around the sword in his hand.

"Kill them along with me, Slowe Denning!!!" I screamed.



Sensing a critical threat, the lich charged forward to attack me, but the Eye of the Crimson Lotus stopped its advance with his battle-ax.

The black miasma enveloping the dullahan's body had thickened to an alarming density. Dreibach Steibelt knocked down the Eye of the Crimson Lotus with his blade, and...the guild master was yelling at me to kill the musketeer along with himself.

I smiled contritely. "I have to admire him. Kill the others without caring about his own life, huh?"

Not many of the man's actions had been revealed in the anime, but I was sure that he had done the same thing as he was now: throwing away his life to fight for the sake of Zenelaus.

But you know what, Eye of the Crimson Lotus? I want absolutely nothing to do with such a future.

"You're surpassing my expectations, kid. I never thought you would be able to manipulate my power so skillfully..."

"I'm only asking them for help, that's all. What surprised me though was the fact that the spirits adore you to an unexpected degree, Eldred."

"What nonsense are you..."

The inferno surging out from Flamberge was talking to me. It was the voice of the Great Spirit of Fire, Eldred, the extraordinary being that had possessed Shuya.

At the same time, the fire spirits before my eyes were flying around in giddy excitement. Seeing that their lord was on a roll, they joined in and were delighted along with him. Usually, the fire spirits were a quiet bunch, but they were now thrilled and excited.

"It can't be... You can see them?"

"We don't really have time for small talk. That guy over there looks like he's nearly at his limit."

I finally understand why Eldred only killed the lich in the anime. That question

bugged me for a long time.

Eldred was a calamity personified that saw combat as the only worthy thing in the world, but it turned out that he shared my thoughts when he laid his eyes on the dullahan exhaling miasma.

There was still enough heart left to rouse in the Great Spirit. This little fact was enough to brighten up my mood slightly.

I was connected to Eldred, and I realized the truth. My enemy was *also* a victim.

“There is a man cursed by a monster over there. Can you see him, Eldred? I want you to show him mercy. He’s just like the being you tried to protect when you were alive, isn’t he?”

The musketeer Dreibach Steibelt had a cursed past, just like Shuya. In the anime, Eldred had liberated him, and he became an antagonist who would frequently give advice to Shuya, who had suffered from much anguish during the war.

In the end, I never got to speak with him, but I feel the same way as Eldred does.

“You insolent kid. You’ve been talking as if you know everything.”

“The tower of flames gushing out of Flamberge is your avatar, isn’t it? You must be boiling over with rage for it to burn wild like this.”

The decorative details on Flamberge peeled off onto the ground. It returned to its rightful form: a weapon made specifically to cut away monsters and evil.

“After I held Flamberge in my hands, I also gained the ability to see through that monster and understand him well. So this is what it feels like to synchronize, huh? Thanks to that, I now know just how many curses that guy is bearing...”

“If you see things that clearly, I shall speak no further on the matter.”

A long time ago, far more of the land had been the territory of monsters than in the present day. Everyone else ended up living as hermits in hiding, locked up in their abodes and fearing the outdoors.

However, there was one lone exception. A man who had fought on tirelessly to protect his kin.

“But kid, do you understand what you are asking? If you wish to save that man, a measly amount of power wouldn’t be up for the task.”

“I’m fully aware of that. Therefore, give me everything you have.”

“Do you have the resolve to do it? If you fail to control it—” Eldred stopped suddenly. **“Here he comes!”**

“I’ve long braced myself for the consequences! Now listen to me, Eye of the Crimson Lotus, and move out of the way!!!”

Dreibach Steibelt. Earlier, you didn’t kill Shuya. You had countless chances to do so, but you chose not to.

In the anime, you had said that Shuya, cursed by Eldred, was a pitiful being just like you were. Then, you had appeared before him as he despaired after he had regained his true memories of destroying Zenelaus. You had guided him onto the path that led him to become a true savior of the world.

And now, you are charging right at me.

“Central Core Ignition,” I chanted.

After the Archflare had lost everything in the anime, he had wielded this very power. Shuya’s master had taken over the torch from the deceased Eye of the Crimson Lotus and had ascended into becoming an S-class adventurer himself.

I summoned and crafted a greater blast of flames than the Archflare had at the time. I swung the sword before me.

My right arm was burning to a crisp, but I didn’t care. To me, the chance to synchronize with Eldred himself was a once-in-a-lifetime miracle, so there was no way I could waste this golden opportunity!

“Let’s end this, Living Dead!”



The ebony flames rushed straight forward from my sword. It thrust through the dullahan's heart and raced even farther, until...

...it arrived at the lich, the mastermind of it all, who was hidden behind multiple layers of barriers.

“AAAaaaAAA!!!”

One day, I had a dream.

The dream centered around the man whom I somehow always ended up noticing nearby, and the man whom I hated more than anyone else at Kirsch.

That guy always showed off his dazzling righteousness to me without a thought, and...he just didn't sit well with me.

“AaaAAAAaAaAAAA!!!”

But as the story slowly unfolded, I gradually learned more about him. I learned about his past; a dark shadow erased from his memory that lurked on the other side of his smiles. I got to know the identity of the voice that served as a pillar of support in his heart. I saw a future where Shuya Newkern would confront the many sins he had committed, mingle with many friends and foes, and eventually save the world.

“HOW dARe yOU!!!”

And then, I learned everything that waited for me in that same future, down the path where I had cast away my life as a member of House Denning.

My peaceful life at Kirsch Mage Institute, with the only family I had, would fall apart. There would be a war of epic proportions with people on the other side of the continent, and many would perish.

In the beginning, after I learned all this, I had planned on becoming a person worthy of being by Charlotte's side for her sake. At the same time, I had also wanted to regain everything I had lost after I had become the blackhearted Piggy Duke. To accomplish that, I needed to change myself.

I mean, think about it. There's a limit to how obese one can get!

But in the end...I realized that unless I took measures to deal with the arduous future waiting for the anime protagonist, the world I wanted would simply remain a dream. That was why I came to Zenelaus.

The lich's voice gradually weakened into a crackle. "CuRSe yOU..."

Then, at last, I came to a decision. I would approach one of the key players in the story in Zenelaus: Eldred.

The Great Spirit was persistently attempting to reach out to me from inside Shuya's crystal ball. His might incinerated the lich, bit by bit.

The lich was the monster that brought forth Dreibach Steibelt, the pride of the Dustour Empire. It was the dungeon master that had consumed many S-class adventurers in its dungeon, the Laboratory, and now it was at death's door.

"Oink..." I breathed weakly.

Even a monster as strong as a lich wouldn't be able to put up a fight against Eldred, huh? But wait, if I remember correctly, Dustour's Nanatrij wasn't able to fully kill this lich either... Wait, no, that wasn't the case. She left it as it is because she wanted Dreibach's cursed power or something like that.

Howling and scattering its resentment into the air, the lich faded away. I watched the whole process from the beginning to the end.

The lich wasn't the only thing that went under purification, however. The armor concealing Dreibach Steibelt also started to disappear, and slowly and steadily, he transformed and regained the vestiges of his former human form. His hair was void of color, white like chalk as an effect of receiving the curse of a monster, and his face was impassive, one that would rarely express colorful emotions.

I watched as the man returned to his human form and collapsed onto the ground. I breathed out feebly, letting out a snort once again.

I wondered whether the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, the Archflare, and Shuya were still alive. Right now, I didn't have the means to check. Using Flamberge at full throttle had taken everything out of me. Like Dreibach, I was just another collapsed body on the ground, and I didn't even have the energy to budge a

single inch.

Jeez... Thinking about it, the guild master of this city is an outrageously reckless guy. He tried to do the impossible and lock down those two by himself... Even I would have reservations about doing that. Actually, it's impossible. I would never be able to. I had my hands full just with the lich.

Staying still, I basked in the silence. The city had always been lively, but now I had made a new discovery that it could be this quiet.

That thought didn't last long because, in the next moment, I could hear shouts of joy. The source was rather far off. Many small voices echoed through the streets, and the yells overlapped with each other.

"Those zombies disappeared! We did it!"

"We won! It's our victory!"

If the lich was exterminated, puppets created from its power would also disappear along with it.

"But, well...I can't call this 'problem solved' yet." I sighed.

"What's this fire?! Put it out!"

"It's not working! It won't go out! This fire isn't a regular flame. It's fueled by magic! Extinguish it with water spells!"

From what people were yelling now, I could tell that Zenelaus was burning down. The one thing that I had been dreading had become reality.

However, this was different from the anime. These flames weren't berserk like in the show, but instead were restrained fires that I had produced. I could put these out after I had a short break and recovered my strength. It was a little too much for me right now though. I needed to rest just a tad more.

It would probably cause some injuries, but please forgive me. The city might be singed juuust a little bit, but it's a lost cause to demand compensation from me. I'm dirt poor! So much so that I asked the guild to pay for my cost of living in this city.

But... I sighed internally. I suppose it's asking too much to change all of the predetermined events, huh...

I finally broke out of my thoughts, mumbling to myself, “I might finally be able to have an appetite again.”

In Zenelaus, my diet had consisted solely of field rations made for adventurers. These things were dry, crumbly, and tasted awful, but they were handy because I could gulp them down in one bite. And now I wouldn’t need to rely on those things anymore.

What do I eat first? Ah, but I need to nurse my stomach back to normal before going wild. In that case, something easy to digest is the obvious choice. I’ll slowly train it to eat like normal, step by step. Nothing beats daydreaming about food! It cheers me right up. Even in this kind of hellish landscape, it fills me with the willpower to live on.

“The flames are vanishing!”

My eyes widened. “Huh? *No way.*”

Even in my wildest dreams, even with my knowledge, I couldn’t have expected that to happen. *The flames vanishing? That’s crazy. Those are Eldred’s, and it’s absurd for someone else to erase them. What is going on?* I wanted to stand up and see for myself what was happening, but I couldn’t pick myself up. My whole body was limp. During my struggles, I could still hear people talking about it. *Is someone interfering with Eldred’s abilities?*

But who? My mind whirled. Someone who could obstruct Eldred’s power...the Great Spirit of Wind, maybe? No, they left together with Charlotte. They’ve probably met up with Silva in Galland by this time. I also don’t think that Great Spirit would go out of their way to provoke Eldred into a fight. In that case... Wait. Wait.

There was one theory that I couldn’t think about because the implications were... But...

A girl’s voice chimed out. “Wha— Hey, what is with this mess?! One of the major sites of the south is in shreds!”

I was speechless.

Regardless of what I wished for, reality always loved shoving big, fat surprises in my face.

The voice continued on as its owner approached, sounding miffed. “Where are you, Dreibach? I’m pretty sure I didn’t order you to attack the city, did I?!”

In Zenelaus, the foulest hell I had experienced so far, I heard a voice so lighthearted that it sounded like it should have belonged to a completely different story.

Final Chapter: The Dungeon City, Zenelaus

The girl sighed. “This is clear insubordination. Of all the things, you just *had* to go out there and completely ruin my strategy!”

She was standing amidst the corpses of monsters and humans in the rubble, but she continued to speak in a ridiculously cheerful tone. I felt that her voice was a jarring mismatch in this hellish landscape.

“Hm, that’s strange... That child over there has blacked out, and I don’t sense the lich anywhere... And that thing usually releases that nauseating miasma which should double when this child is vulnerable, but it’s not there at all... Maybe that really *does* mean it’s dead.” She giggled. “Lame!”

The only person who should have been able to call off those flames was their summoner. *But from what I can tell from that earlier shout, the impossible is happening. Someone is overwriting Eldred’s power with their own.*

Only mages on a level far surpassing mine could achieve that.

The girl continued to talk aloud to herself. “If that’s the case, that begs the question of how the lich was killed, but...this blaze answers it all. The culprit is Eldred, for sure. The lich sure ran out of luck when it ran into *that* thing... Now that leads to another question: who’s his host? There’s a guy in a dead faint over there with...red hair? Nah, I can tell with one look that he’s lousy! He could only defeat Dreibach in his *dreams*. Which means...”

Well, I’ll admit it, I’ve been beat. A certain someone with a mind brighter than the sun has nearly dug up the whole truth.

“The one who curried favor with Eldred and offed the lich must be the one over...”

I couldn’t mistake that voice for anyone else. It was definitely *her*.

But from what I knew, this wasn’t an event planned by fate. After all, she would never choose to come to the southern half of the continent.

If her absence from the Dustour Empire was noticed, the numerous rebel factions in the north would come together and start an uprising. That was why she *couldn't* be in Zenelaus.

But in truth, she was the only candidate that came to mind when I thought about who could possibly tamper with Eldred's skills.

Step by step, an enigmatic being approached me.

The mood shifted with a snap, and my heart raced, slamming into my chest. I was terrified. *Me!*

"My my. You were strong enough to defeat my favorite, but you're scared of *me?*"

Nanatrij, the Great Spirit of Darkness. She was the final boss in the anime and never stepped out into the spotlight until the very last arc. There was no way anyone could have anticipated her to appear near the opening of the story's timeline!

"Don't ignore me. I'll kill you." There was a dangerous edge to her voice. "Someone of my level can easily tell the difference between someone actually out cold and someone trying to play me for a fool."

I'm not brain-dead; I know you can...

Punching a hole through my expectations, the founding mother of the Dustour Empire was there before me. The girl who had thrown away her humanity looked directly down at me from above and our eyes met. Her eyes were pitch-black, so dark that I might be sucked in just from looking at them.



It seems that...it's futile to try and deceive her.

"My deepest apologies, but I'm dead tired. I've been through the wringer due to an intense duel that only ended moments ago, you see."

"That sounds about right. You defeated that lich, after all."

The girl before me was a human who had refused to remain as one. In that aspect, she was similar to Eldred, but they were completely different at the core.

I couldn't move my body at all, but I made my best effort to put on a brave front before the being that even caused spirits to tremble in fear.

"I'm totally spent right now. Only a depraved person would cast a spell on me in this state, don't you agree?"

"No way. You actually managed to endure all that without an ounce of strength left in your body. What kind of ghastly training did it take to produce someone like *you*?"

"Well... The education I've received ever since I was a child was not so dissimilar to brainwashing."

"Is that how it is? The rumors don't seem to be far off from the truth, then. Daryth's House Denning *is* said to be a sadistic and savage household."

"You saw right through me. You know exactly who I am."

"And right back at you, Dragon Slayer of Daryth. But now that I've seen you up close, I have learned so many things about you."

"You don't say. So, what did you figure out, exactly?"

"You can see spirits." The tone of her voice made it clear it was not a question.

Stunned speechless, it took me a while to fish out a reply. "You've got me there."

I really didn't know how to react.

There was a world only visible to me, and my father had demanded that I take this secret to my grave at all costs, yet she uncovered it easily, without breaking

a sweat. I had no idea how she had figured it out either. *I suppose this is what it feels like to face someone completely out of my league.*

“Pleas for my life would probably fall on deaf ears, huh,” I mused.

“As if I could make any other choice. What do you think I am, an idiot? I learned that a human with the ability to see spirits belongs to a hostile country. If I don’t kill them immediately, there’d only be a disaster down the line. On top of that, my target is in such a weakened state and this is an opportunity that will never present itself to me again. Tell me, do you think I could pass it up?”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t.”

“Right? And on top of that, if the news of that child losing to someone from the south gets out... Ah, it’s no use looking to that adventurer for help. I’ve put him to sleep with a spell so he shouldn’t rouse for a long while.”

I stilled. With resignation in my heart, I closed my eyes. *So she plans on covering it all up by burying everyone along with the truth, huh?*

There were still many adventurers left in Zenelaus. However, they probably couldn’t put up a fight against her. Nanatrij’s strength was equal to that of the Three Musketeers, after all.

“Before I kill you though, I would like to ask you one thing. Why’d you only kill the lich and save that child? I’m pretty sure it isn’t the case, but did you realize that he has a death wish?”

“When I borrowed Eldred’s power, I saw the truth for myself,” I muttered slowly. “All the blame fell on the lich.”

“I see. That makes sense, since Fire Grandpa seemed like he despised what the lich did so badly... At one glance, Eldred looks like a battle junkie with several screws loose, but he’s surprisingly levelheaded. That reminds me, I promised that child that I’d kill the lich and release him from its control after the war was over, but...” She shook her head. “He actually went ahead and tried to get the guild master of Zenelaus to kill him instead! It seems that punishment is in order after we get back.”

Oh...so that’s why the musketeer disobeyed orders and came to this city.

It's too late though. Learning all this now won't change my fate. In other words, my journey ends here, huh?

But I don't have many regrets, to tell the truth. After all, I tried really, really hard, didn't I?

No Face, who had snuck into Kirsch Mage Institute. Sepith Pendragon, who had taken aim at Alicia in Yoram. Sekhmet, the black dragon which had come to Kirsch to snatch the princess of Huzak away. And it was the same in Huzak too.

I had always toed the thin line between life and death... I did a pretty good job, didn't I?

Ah, but... If I were allowed to make one last wish, I wanted to bid farewell to her.

“Hm? Oh, Dreibach, you've recovered already? Huh? You want to deal the fatal blow or something? I don't really mind, but... H-Hey! Ow, ow ow! Stop pulling my arm! What's with you all of a sudden?! Hey, wait! Are you listening to me?!”

Huh? What's going on? Why is she suddenly squawking like that?!

I cracked open my eyes. Yep, Nanatrij is still there. What is she looking at— Wait, seriously?

There was a human there who looked somewhat world-weary. It was Dreibach Steibelt, the man who had been cursed by the lich and was transformed into a monster. In the end, I never got to exchange even a single word with him. However, the intellectual gleam in his eyes was identical to the popular anime character I knew.

“I know, I *know*! It would have been impossible for me to only dispel the curse without consequences! And I was only threatening him a little just now! Killing these guys here would start a war, and I don't have any plans of doing that! But wait a minute, *you're* the one who betrayed *me* first! After Rooney reported in, I ordered you to come back, but you ignored me completely and did whatever you wanted! Ugh!”

Dreibach began walking off to who-knows-where, and Nanatrij ran to keep up

with him, her large witch's hat bouncing as she did.

"Yeah, I know! I'm not blind; I know *that thing* has this guy's back! Hear me out though. Sure, Altanger's scent is around, but they aren't actually *here*! There's no way that thing would bother to save humans!" She turned to look over her shoulder. "Slowe Denning, you should be grateful! You owe me one for this!"

And just like that, she was gone. Running after the musketeer, she disappeared off into the city, which was on the brink of total devastation.

So...it looks like I've been saved?

"Well damn." I sighed.

Hey, Great Spirit of Wind, I'll be honest. I never thought there would be a day when you would actually be useful.

Though, uh, technically...it was just your scent that was useful, but still.



I gulped.

Oh no, oh no no no no, I wailed internally.

The day had finally come.

I was back in my homeland, Daryth, and in the capital no less.

There was an assembly of people in the audience room of the royal castle that I had fled from so long ago. Her Majesty, the queen, was on the throne, with two people by her side. Princess Carina looked troubled, and the current gray-haired Guardian Knight had an unreadable expression on his face. To top it all off, there was a neat row of Royal Knights standing behind me.

You could cut the tension in here with a knife, I swear! And, uh...I can feel the bloodlust and a thousand eye-daggers stabbing into my back right now. This is totally not okay.

"I was looking forward to meeting you. Raise your head."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

I was sweating from head to toe. I felt just about as intimidated as when I had

that confrontation with Nanatrij.

Her Majesty had remained silent for a long time, so I could only focus on lowering my head and kneeling with all of my heart.

But what do I do? I broke my promise with Princess Carina, and I even ordered Silva to bring the Mystical Sword out of the country! In cases like this, should I prostrate myself on the ground instead?

Well, at this point, just thinking about it won't change anything. I'll wait for the final verdict. That's the only thing I can do.

"I admit, I had a difficult time trying to decide how I should begin this conversation. Should I praise you, or should I admonish you? That decision weighed on my mind until the last moment, but..." The queen trailed off. "I see that you have lost a tremendous amount of weight."

"That is...because I went on a diet," I said carefully.

"You must have traveled quite a road of thorns for you to have cast away the burden on your body."

"I happen to have lived a considerably inexcusable lifestyle, so I believe that I was getting my just deserts."

A quiet roar of hushed whispers broke out in the room. It seemed that my new, lean figure was more startling than my return. Well, I practically only ate those gross adventurer field rations in Zenelaus, so I wasn't surprised. But now, I was a healthy little Slowe, in both mind and body.

"Are the people behind you the reason for your unease?"

I hesitated. "I...also think that this is the retribution I deserve."

"I am sure that you knew this would be the outcome if you made a move on the Mystical Sword. That artifact represents their dreams, their aspirations. However, from what I can tell, you seem to have reflected on your actions, but have no regrets about your choices."

I couldn't come up with a reply to that.

She chuckled. "A lot has happened during my absence. A fugitive infiltrated the mage school, a Royal Knight had a change of heart, a spy of the empire was

active in Huzak, and even a black dragon appeared in Kirsch. My, how dreadful. This country has been in a much more precarious state than I thought. And, if you were not present, I have the feeling we would have been on the path to a rather anarchic future instead.”

“You think too highly of me...”

“Indeed, you broke your promise with my daughter Carina and took the Mystical Sword out of this country without permission. However, thinking back on it now, those are trifling matters. There isn’t a single person here who wishes to punish you, you see.”

My mind was drawing a blank. “Huh?”

“Many have come before me and pleaded for leniency when considering the judgment for your actions. Even at this very moment, the masses have gathered outside just to get a single glance at you. So for me to punish you after all you have done...” The queen shook her head. “The very thought of it is absurd. From what I’ve heard, you also had a good reason for traveling with the Mystical Sword. It was a necessary measure, I am sure of it. After all, it helped save Galland City in the Freedom Union.”

Just like I had thought, it was difficult to keep everything that had happened fully under wraps. The official story of the incident in Zenelaus was that everything had been the lich’s fault. Apparently, Nanatrij had taken it upon herself to send a message to the wealthy merchants of the Freedom Union, threatening that they shouldn’t divulge the truth if they valued their lives. Quaking in their boots, they had decided to feign ignorance about the whole thing.

As for the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, who was also in the know, he had promised that the majority of the information wouldn’t leave the privacy of his mind.

“Moving on, it took me a long time to figure out the manner in which I should express my will to you. However, now that I see who you are in the present, my mind is set.”

From the looks of things, despite everyone’s silence...the queen seems like she knows what I did in Zenelaus. Now, the question is how much she knows...

That reminds me. Ugh, Shuya! I'm in a super tight spot right now, but that guy's having the time of his life at school...

The reconstructed Kirsch Mage Institute had reopened only last week. Apparently, a bunch of the facilities had changed and I was dying to see them for myself, but I had been singled out and summoned to the capital.

I heaved a sigh inwardly. *Please, let me go back to my heart's home of respite as soon as possible!*

"There are probably those who would have objections to my opinion. I also do not imagine that my wish coincides with what you truly yearn for. Thus, consider this as a proposal."

My thoughts went to the Guardian Knight standing next to the queen. Sir Delfrey, the Moonlit Guardian Knight, looked down at me from his elevated station.

It had been a while since I last saw him. *Ah, right, we haven't met since that incident, have we?*

"There will be many hardships lying in wait in my child's future, and—"

Back then, I had still been referred to as the Prodigy of Wind. A very beautiful woman had held my hand at a ball and had led me out onto a balcony. There, two people had been waiting for me. One was a girl who had looked around my age, and the other was a household name in this country, Sir Rudolf Delfrey, also known as the Moonlit Guardian Knight and the strongest man alive. That had been the moment I realized *who exactly* had been holding my hand.

"Would you please become my daughter's Guardian Knight?"

The queen of my country's words had a discernible weight behind them. It wasn't a reenactment of that past encounter. This time, it wasn't a joke.

Afterword

I want to take about a week off and go off on a vacation somewhere. I want to enjoy my time and be free from work and other people. Without a single worry in my mind, I'd devote all my time to sleeping and having fun. I want to become a free-spirited person like that. I really do!

Now, as for why such a thought popped up in my head... You see, a friend of mine has decided that they'll be taking administrative leave from their job to spend a few years living overseas.

And thus, I am *sooo* jealous.

Of course, I know that there are many obstacles in the way of doing something like this, like your company trying to stop you. But still, how do I put this... My friend is heading towards a brilliant new future. They're so excited about it, and they are clearly relishing taking their life into their own hands.

And, well, I am *veeery* envious indeed!

Their ability to take initiative was a real eye-opener for me, and thanks to them, my writing has been like a house on fire, with words gushing forth in spades. I also took up hookah as a new hobby, and with all of this inspiration, I somehow managed to finish volume five of *Piggy Duke*.

But of course, one thing fires my motivation up more than anything else: the manga edition of *Piggy Duke*! The web novel edition, which I haven't updated in a while (life has been super busy...), has also been getting way more hits than normal, so I am in heaven.

I hope you continue to enjoy both editions of the *Piggy Duke* series, meaning this light novel format as well as the manga!

Rhythm Aida

(Published June 19, 2018)

An anime-style illustration featuring two young girls. The girl on the left has long, flowing blonde hair with small cat ears on top, blue eyes, and a pinkish-red blush. She is wearing a blue dress with a white collar and a long, light-colored cape. The girl on the right has blonde hair in pigtails, purple eyes, and a similar blush. She is wearing a white dress with a red collar and a long, light-colored cape. They are both looking towards the viewer. In the background is a large, circular, blue-toned diagram with various lines and text, including the phrase "the wind strange" repeated several times. A large red number "5" is positioned in the upper right area of the diagram.

5

Reincarnated
as the **Piggy Duke**

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



**“Let’s go,
Lady Alicia!”**

Charlotte Lily Huzak

The princess of the once-great but now destroyed kingdom of Huzak. Currently Slowe’s retainer, a far cry from her former royal position.

**“D-Don’t
be ridiculous!
You aren’t even
an adventurer,
remember?!”**

Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista

The second princess of Cirquista, the Metropolis of Water. Slowe’s former fiancée.



**“Let’s go,
Shuya.”**

Nalita

An adventurer and member of Zylush. A bubbly thief obsessed with raking in cash.

**“Shuya...
You’re the best,
ya know?”**


Zodd

Second-in-command of Zylush. Ends up taking care of Shuya, his guild’s newcomer.

**“I’m staying
and fighting
with everyone!”**

Shuya Newkern

A hot-blooded fortune-teller and a fire mage. Slove considers Shuya to be his rival.



I continued to observe him, day after day. He was so fun to watch that it was enough to make me forget about my current situation. This was Kirsch Mage Institute, a place where nobles mingled, and yet I had found a noble who completely deviated from the norm.

**“Charlotte,
can you believe it?
There’s someone
more foolish than me at
this school!”**

Slowe Denning

The protagonist who reincarnated into the world of his favorite anime. The third son of House Denning, and a problem student at Kirsch Mage Institute. At least, he used to be...?

**“Hey, don’t
ignore me!
The
headmaster’s
watching,
Mister
Chubby.”**

The Dragon Slayer, born in Daryth and nicknamed the Fallen Wind of House Denning, walked towards the formidable monster.

“The fight is just getting started, Mister Adventurer Hero.”



Translator's Notes

Welcome back to this latest edition of Weird Trivia. I'm Zihan, the translator for *Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke*! I'd like to share some background about some of the more obscure terms we had to localize, so let's jump right into it!

Prologue: A Mysterious Power

Bou ni furu ("to swing onto a pole")

In the prologue, Shuya comments on how he had wasted a once-in-a-lifetime chance to probe into the empire's plans while he was in Huzak. Here, he uses the phrase *bou ni furu* ("to swing onto a pole") to describe someone losing everything they amassed or wasting an opportunity right before them.

In the Edo period, many street merchants didn't have a fixed shop location and instead chose to carry their goods around on a *tenbinbou*, a carrying pole. Literally translated as a "scale pole" since they resembled a weighing scale, merchants would carry fruits and vegetables in baskets hung from both ends of the pole. This kind of business was referred to as *botefuri*, which can be roughly translated as "pole swingers." The complete phrase *bou ni furu* refers to when these *botefuri* have sold all the goods on their poles. When everything sold out, they no longer had anything on their hands, and therefore they had lost everything.

There are several theories as to why the saying has such a negative connotation, even though it refers to someone having a successful day of sales. One of them is that this saying alludes to just how little profit these *botefuri* can earn. Since they carried all their goods on their person, these street merchants didn't need to invest a lot of money early on to set up a shop. However, this meant that their trade volume was minimal. When these merchants replenished their stock from wholesale stores or producers, they could only buy

small amounts, and their suppliers' wholesale prices were very high. Thus, even if these merchants sold everything they had on hand, they wouldn't make much profit despite all their hard work. In the end, their efforts bore little fruit and were nearly a waste of time, and the saying *bou ni furu* came to be.

Kanashibari

When Shuya first sees Dreibach, he froze as if he were paralyzed. The specific word used here is *kanashibari*, literally “gold binding.” The term has several meanings but most often refers to either sleep paralysis or someone being tied up and unable to move. It is said to have originated from Buddhist terminology, referring to one of the rituals in Vajrayana Buddhism. The deity Acala is said to have a rope that can bind “wicked” gods. The *kanashibari no hou* ritual borrowed the divine influence of Acala and made enemies and burglars (and, in extension, their worldly desires) completely unable to move as if they had been shackled by invisible chains. In Japan, this term for sleep paralysis is typically associated with ghosts and paranormal activities, and sometimes even aliens! It's often used in all kinds of horror stories.

Chapter 2: What Must Be Done

Hone wo oru (“to break a bone”)

When Slowe says that dealing with the lich wasn’t a simple matter in the least, he uses a phrase derived from the saying *hone wo oru* (“to break a bone”). The term is also used in the literal sense. A broken bone is a serious injury that causes a lot of pain and suffering, and thus the term was later used in Japanese to refer to an extremely tedious task, requiring a lot of effort and suffering.

A cock-and-bull story

Slowe says that he thought the idea of the Living Dead and the lich taking down a country all by themselves was one of these. The original term here is *mayutsubamono*, or a “saliva-to-eyebrow tale.” There is a superstition that if someone rubbed spit on their eyebrow, they could avoid being bewitched by foxes and tanuki (Japanese raccoon dogs) in disguise. In the Edo period, the saying “smear saliva on your eyebrow” became a warning to be cautious of deception. Later on, in the Meiji period, the term’s definition expanded to refer to suspicious things or people as well. Nowadays, it is used to describe things that ought to be treated with caution or that have dubious validity.

Sly foxes

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus calls the Freedom Union merchants a bunch of sly foxes. The term used here is *umisen yamasen* (“sea one thousand, mountain one thousand”), which negatively refers to cunning people who have become particularly crafty after years of experience. In ancient Chinese folklore, legend says that snakes that have lived a thousand years in the sea and another thousand in the mountains would turn into dragons. This was originally a positive phrase, describing how someone has become praiseworthy after years of experience. However, the meaning slowly twisted over time and began to refer to how a person becomes sly after learning all there is to learn about the world.

Otennba (“tomboy”)

Slowe says that Alicia’s actions can’t be laughed off as too impulsive or acting out on a rebellious spirit, using the word *otennba*. It is most often used to refer to lively girls who can’t sit still, are very active, and lack modesty and bashfulness, though it can refer to anyone regardless of gender. There are several theories about where this term came from, but the most popular idea is that it comes from the Dutch word *ontembaar*, which means “untamable” or “indomitable.” While some dispute this theory, there are actually many words in Japanese derived from Dutch. One such example is *ponzu* sauce, which comes from the Dutch *pons* (a word no longer in use), which is a punch of a beverage made from fruit juices.

Hurling an eye

Zodd glares hard at Slowe during a confrontation with Shuya. The term used here can literally be translated as “hurling an eye.” It alludes to how someone throws their gaze at someone else with the force of a bullet, not unlike the English phrase “shooting daggers.” This term is actually slang used by delinquent youths in the Kanto region, which shows just what kind of image Slowe has of Zodd!

Everyday occurrence

Slowe says that scuffles between adventurers were an everyday occurrence in Zenelaus. The term used here is *nichijou sahanji* (“things like everyday tea and food”), and it helps describe something as common as the tea and food that people have every day.

To put someone in their place

Zodd tells Shuya to put Slowe in his place and knock the other youth down a few pegs. The original term used here is a version of *hitoawa fukaseru* (“to make someone breathe out bubbles/foam”). It means to give someone a nasty surprise and fluster them. The term’s origin is rather nasty; it refers to how a

person would foam at the mouth and be in great pain while being strangled.

Interlude: The Oddball Noble

***Saji wo nageru* (“to toss away the spoon”)**

Slowe mentions that even his own family gave up on him. The Japanese term used was *saji wo nageru* (“to toss away the spoon”), or giving up on something because it’s hopeless. The spoon refers to the medicinal spoons used by doctors in the Edo period to dispense prescriptions. In that era, doctors made their own medicine (instead of relying on pharmacists like today), and most illnesses were treated with these prescriptions. So, this saying refers to when a doctor couldn’t make the right medicine to cure a disease and would throw away their medicinal spoon in frustration, deciding that there was no possible treatment.

Chapter 5: Eldred, the Great Spirit of Fire

Tedama ni toru (“taking someone as one’s beanbag ball”)

The lich led everyone around by the nose, and the term used here was *tedama ni toru* (“taking someone as one’s beanbag ball”). A *tedama* is a small beanbag ball toy used in juggling games. The saying comes from how acrobats and jugglers have complete mastery over these balls, toying around as they please, and today implies that someone has full control over someone else.

Final Chapter: The Dungeon City, Zenelaus

Tanuki neiri (“a tanuki falling asleep”)

Nanatrij says that she can easily tell when someone is feigning sleep, and the phrase she uses is *tanuki neiri* (“a tanuki falling asleep”). Tanuki are easily frightened and can faint when they are surprised. People thought that these tanuki looked as if they were pretending to be asleep to deceive people, which led to this phrase.

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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!
Volume 5

by Rhythm Aida

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