

I Surrendered

My Sword as a New Life Mage

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Shin Kouduki

Art
necomi



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1

When he came to, he had collapsed onto his back.

He thought about the clear blue sky, stretching out above him as far as he could see; it seemed close enough for him to reach out and touch. It was a beautiful, sunny day. He had the offhand thought that he should actually reach for the sky—only to discover that for some reason, he couldn't move his arm.

As he pondered why this could be, he heard someone speak.

"Impressive, human."

He turned to face the source of the sound and found an enormous mountain. No, not a mountain—but something so gigantic that it looked like one. It was then that it all came back to him—what he had just been doing, and how he had ended up in this position.

"I see that I've won."

"Yes. You have managed not to lose any limbs, while I am...in this state. It certainly seems that you have bested me."

The voice wasn't coming from the giant thing that he was looking at. Some distance away from where it lay sprawled out on its front sat something smaller, as if it had been placed there as an afterthought. *That* was the source of the voice.

The thing that he'd first thought was a mountain was a body. That smaller thing was its head. Though it was smaller, it was by no means *small*; it still dwarfed the man.

He sighed as he took in the sight. "I must confess, I don't feel much like I've won...given that you're still alive. And how are you still able to talk?"

"I am a dragon, after all, and among the most powerful of dragons at that. It would take far more than this to kill me instantly. And I am not using my vocal cords to speak. I would rather not go to the trouble of doing so."

It was a *dragon*. Not an imitation or some impostor, but one of the few of the marvels that genuinely existed. An object of fear and awe to any who saw it soaring in the sky above, an emblem of destruction and despair. It was only natural, then, that such a creature would still be alive after its head was cut off.

“This is the problem with you supernatural beings. You defy reason at every turn. What kind of creature refuses to die once you chop off its head?”

“I could say the same of you. No human should be able to lay a scratch on me, let alone kill me. It defies all reason that even I am no match for you.”

“Which is why I challenged you in the first place. I had to know if I had trained my swordsmanship enough.”

Dragons wrought destruction on humans, but that was only incidental to his decision to battle one. He had simply wanted to try his hand against this dragon in particular, who was known as the dragon of dragons, the ultimate evil—some even called it a god.

His long-trained skill with the sword had earned him the title of the strongest swordsman in the world, and he took pride in it, but could he truly pass as the strongest in the end? Had he truly reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship?

The purpose of this battle had been to answer those questions once and for all.

“The verdict is in,” said the dragon. “Your ability reached our level long ago. I commend you for training yourself to such a high level as a human.”

“So...I have finally reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship.”

“Yes, I can attest to that. You have absolutely reached it. Otherwise, you would not have been able to kill me.”

As soon as he heard those words, he felt it had all been worthwhile.

This was what he had devoted his entire life to. He had thought of nothing but the sword, and everything he had done had been to train his skills. He had no regrets. How could he? He had put his whole self into making his dream come true, and he had succeeded. There was no way he could regret any of it.

“Thus, let me commend you once more. You have done well.”

“I honestly don’t care about killing you as an end unto itself.”

“Hmm... So your motivation to kill me was simply to prove yourself. I suppose that is precisely why you were able to reach this level. I, too, am satisfied with this outcome. However...” The dragon’s tone shifted as it went on, taking on an air of mystery befitting a being called divine. “While I may be satisfied, my honor will not permit me to leave it at that. Therefore, I must ask you one thing: is there anything that you wish for?”

“I’m not sure I understand... I killed you, and you’re asking what I want? Are you a masochist, or perhaps asking in bad faith so that when I answer, you can tell me it was nothing more than an idle question?”

“As I just told you, my honor requires this. I bear the title of god, after all. I cannot very well take my own satisfaction and give nothing in return.”

“I see your point...but I have nothing more to wish for, after reaching the pinnacle of swordsmanship. Even if I did, it would mean nothing, seeing as I could die at any moment.”

It was inevitable. That was why he couldn’t move his arm. He had defeated everything in his way, in the most literal sense. It was only right that this would mark the end of his life, and he regretted nothing, not even his death.

“I could breathe life back into your body if you wished...but I doubt that you wish for that.”

“Not particularly. I’ve fulfilled my wish. There is nothing left that I haven’t...”

Just then, something flickered into the back of his mind.

There was one thing left that he’d wanted to do. His family was long lost to him, and he had never had a friend or lover, so it had nothing to do with other people. Rather, it was an envy he had once felt, or an aspiration.

Magic.

While it was said to be long gone from this world, he had wanted to use magic. His only regret was that he had never been able to.

The reason he had never voiced that wish, though, was that it would have meant nothing. Although he had wanted to try magic, he had chosen the path

of the sword. Even if he could continue this life, he would not seek out that new path.

It would be another story if I could be reincarnated or something, though...

That wish would amount to nothing, so he had nothing more to ask for. He resolved to let his life come to a peaceful end, his heart fulfilled. As he tried to tell the dragon his answer, he realized he couldn't anymore. It was too late. His life was on the verge of fading away.

He knew the dragon would understand from the satisfied look on his face, though.

"Hmph... So that is your wish," said the dragon. "Very well. By my divine power, I will see that it is granted."

He sensed that the dragon was speaking to him, but the words no longer registered in his mind. Then and there, he quietly slipped away, closing the curtains on a life well lived.

2

He woke up from a terribly long dream.

It was about a man. He'd aspired to be the best he could possibly be with the sword, and his determination had brought him to the level of a master, then to that of a god. Once he had finally reached where he wanted to be, he'd died with a smile.

"Hmm..." As Soma reflected on the dream he'd just woken up from—no, the memory of his past life—he looked up at the ceiling he had seen many times before and nodded.

It all made sense, now that he'd remembered. He'd noticed that a feeling of being out of place sometimes came over him.

He'd been reborn. Maybe reincarnated. Whichever word he used, it meant the same thing—the thing that had happened to Soma. It would have sounded absurd to anyone else, but that didn't make it any less true. He wasn't mistaken, and he wasn't delusional. Soma knew that he had been reincarnated.

"Not that that matters," he said to himself, dropping the train of thought. After all, he'd *remembered*; it wasn't like he'd stumbled on some shocking new discovery. It felt more like he was just being reminded of something in the background that he hadn't been paying attention to. And although he hadn't been paying attention, his past life had formed the basis of his mindset and actions in this life.

Remembering didn't change anything for him, so it didn't matter.

What *did* matter to him was that it was his sixth birthday. This was the day he'd been waiting for ever since he learned what it meant. Compared to that, he couldn't care less about his past life.

"Time to get up, then..."

Soma looked away from the ceiling and toward the window. The sun was already in the sky. The servants in the mansion were most likely on the move,

and the same went for his family. That meant there was no need to wait any longer.

“All right...” Soma popped upright, pushed the comforter out of the way, and stepped down from his bed. As he stretched his arms out, he thought of what was to come, and a smile crept across his face.

“I wonder what Skills I’ll end up having, and what I’ll be able to learn...”

As he thought about the Skill Assessment that lay ahead of him, he walked out of his needlessly big room, steps light with excitement.

From the standpoint of Soma’s past life, this would have seemed to be a completely different world. There were a number of reasons to conclude that was the case, but the biggest difference was the existence of Skills.

Put simply, Skills were a way of conceptualizing talent. That may not have been technically accurate, but they were definitely something along those lines. Essentially, if you knew somebody’s Skills, you knew what they could do and what they were good at. Usually, though, there was no way to know your own Skills, let alone other people’s. To find out your Skills, you had to have them looked at by someone with the Skill Assessment Skill.

It was also possible to identify your Skills using a particular magical tool, but that method wasn’t recommended. It wasn’t that there were side effects; rather, being assessed by someone with Skill Assessment had a bonus effect: it worked not only on the present but on the future. Basically, you could see not only your current Skills, but the ones you had the potential to learn later on. This was one of the reasons that Skills were known as a conceptualization of talent.

In short, the Skill Assessment told you what you could do right now and what you would later become able to do.

The system may have seemed restrictive, but few people regarded it in a negative way. Of course, some did, but nevertheless, everyone knew it was just part of how the world worked, and knowing your Skills gave you a path to aim for. You didn’t have to know your own Skills to use them, but the vast majority of people were grateful to have an assessor recommend their ideal path in life

so they didn't waste their time, uncertain where exactly their talents lay.

Naturally, then, it was considered best to find out your Skills as early as possible. That was just common sense, since if you were trying to become a knight, for example, and later found out you had no potential to learn a Skill that was necessary for that role, you would have wasted all the time leading up to that point. Considering that you wouldn't have tried in the first place if you'd known, there was no such thing as learning your Skills too soon.

However, six was the earliest age at which you could undergo a Skill Assessment. There was a reason for this, of course: it was impossible to determine someone's future before that age. This had been confirmed by studies showing that the results of a Skill Assessment on the same person could differ drastically between birth and four years old. Most people's futures stabilized around four years old, usually five at the latest—but six was considered the best age to assess at, just to be safe.

That was why Soma was scheduled to undergo his Skill Assessment on his sixth birthday. And undergoing your Skill Assessment was the same thing as determining your future.

Only rare individuals had the right assortment of Skills to choose between multiple paths. Most people only had one or two Skills. If you had five, you were gifted, and if you had ten or more, you would be considered a genius.

Normally, it was nothing to worry about. There were some who dreaded their Skill Assessments, but needless to say, Soma had been looking forward to it for a long time.

It wasn't that he expected to have a lot of talents simply because he'd been reincarnated into this world. It was just that it didn't matter to Soma what Skills he had, so he could look forward to learning what they were as though he were a spectator of his own life.

He hadn't given up on his future. The opposite, in fact: he'd already decided what his goal would be, regardless of what Skills he learned that he had.

While you did have to undergo a Skill Assessment to find out what Skills you could learn, there were a few exceptions. These were called Basic Skills. There were six Basic Skills related to fighting, such as Swordsmanship and

Spearmanship, and then there was the Sorcery Skill necessary to use magic. A majority of people could learn them, although most of them could only reach the lowest rank of the Skill, which was Low-Grade. It was rare to find someone who couldn't learn Sorcery and one of the fighting Skills at the very least. As for the gifted people and geniuses mentioned before, these Skills would not even be included in their list, because it was considered obvious that they would be able to learn them.

That meant there was no need for Soma to be afraid that he couldn't learn those Skills. And Soma wanted to be a sorcerer. That meant using magic. That was why he didn't care what else he could learn.

That was what Soma had really been looking forward to: on this day, he could finally start working toward becoming a mage. So the possibility never crossed his mind that he wouldn't be able to.

"Huh?" A dumbfounded voice echoed through the room.

It had come from Soma's mouth, and the look on his face was much the same. Dumbfounded. Baffled. Shocked.

With a mix of all those emotions on his face, Soma looked at his mother in front of him and repeated the question he had just asked.

"What did you say just now, mother?"

He knew she wasn't the type to joke at a time like this, but he still hoped it was a joke.

His mother averted her eyes, slowly let out a breath, and then looked straight back at Soma. "I'll repeat myself. According to your Skill Assessment, you are unable to learn any Skill, including fighting Skills and Sorcery. You have no talent for anything at all."

Her face remained grave as she told him the news.



3

To Sophia Neumond, her son, Soma, was the very definition of genius.

Sophia was a duchess, and someone of her standing had opportunities to meet a wide variety of people—virtuous and wicked, ordinary and prodigious. Raised as the daughter of a duke, she had studied magic at the royal academy, fought her way through countless battles, and finally earned the reputation of the strongest sorceress in the world. And out of all the people she had known over the course of her life, her son was by far the most talented.

It wasn't merely because he was her son that she thought so; however, it was only because she had raised him from birth that she had had the opportunity to notice his extraordinary intuition.

The first thing that she had noticed when he was an infant was that he never cried at night. In fact, looking back, he had never cried once in his young life, except for right after he was born.

Raising Soma's younger sister Lina had thrown his unusual traits into relief. Unlike Soma, Lina cried constantly, day and night. Nobody in their wildest dreams would have expected to see a child of one year soothing his crying baby sister...but that was what happened. And not just once or twice, but almost any time Sophia had her hands full. After she'd gotten used to it, she found that whenever she was busy, she'd end up asking Soma to comfort Lina, which in hindsight made it seem that she had quickly ceased to think it unusual that she should depend upon her son's help.

Even that was child's play in comparison to what came next, though—what came after his education began.

If a child went into education before their Skill Assessment, it was normal to teach them only the basics, since depending on the results of their Assessment, some lessons could be rendered useless after the fact. In fact, some children received no education at all, even after their Assessments. There were academies, but only children nine and older could attend them, and the tuition

was far from cheap. Some people would decide whether or not to attend school based on their Skills, so it was not unusual to meet adults who had never gone to school.

But Sophia's "normal" was that of a duchess—or really, of any noble. If anything, it would have been unthinkable *not* to put Soma into education. It was normal to hire a home tutor to teach him.

Regardless, she would not teach him anything that could end up being unusable. He would learn a broad, shallow, and safe base of knowledge.

Usually, a child would start education no earlier than five, and this was something mostly done by biased parents who thought they saw a glimpse of talent in their child. Soma, though, had started at four. It seemed clearly too young, and everyone who heard about it assumed Sophia had a serious case of parental bias.

Sophia herself may not have gone so far if she had been the only one who'd thought so highly of her son, but she wasn't. Her husband Klaus Neumond agreed.

Although he was also Soma's parent, only those who didn't know Klaus would ever have called him biased. He was impartial and strict. Anyone who knew Klaus would know that he would never let personal feelings cloud his judgment.

And Klaus, the man known as the strongest swordsman in the world, acknowledged Soma's talent. Given that, nobody could doubt that Soma really was a prodigy.

Soma, for his part, lived up to his parents' expectations. He may have even gone too far with it, since he completed the entire basic course—which usually took three years at the elementary level—in less than half a year. And those three years were typical for other children only if the course were pared down a bit, excluding all subjects that required practical skill, such as fighting and sorcery.

It was plain to see that Soma was talented. Even so, the Neumonds had hesitated to have his Skills assessed for fear of limiting his potential. Of course, the earlier he had his Assessment, the earlier he could begin the rest of his life—but the Skill Assessment process was still not completely understood, and

Sophia would have kicked herself if rushing into it too early had meant closing off paths that could have opened later. That was why they'd waited with bated breath for Soma's sixth birthday.

And on that day...

"After all that time, *this* is what we get... Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable."

Sophia sighed as she thought back on her son—no, she could no longer call him her son—who had left the room wearing a stunned look.

She cast her gaze on the piece of paper in her hands. It was a valuable and high-quality sheet of pure white paper—she'd spared no expense on the item that would reveal her son's future. It would not have been out of place in a valuable sorcery manual.

Yet despite the trouble she'd gone to in order to procure the paper itself, only one short line was written on it.

Sanctified Vessel: Proof of complete and total development. This soul can grow no further.

That was Soma's Skill. That was all he would have, now and forever. No Swordsmanship, Spearmanship, Archery, Martial Arts, or even Sorcery—this one vague Skill represented all of Soma's talent.

While its name was grandiose, it meant nothing. Sophia only had to compare it to one of her own Skills to tell.

Sorcery (Special-Grade): Talent for sorcery. Magic acquisition boosted greatly. Spell activation boosted greatly. Mana expenditure reduced greatly. Growth bonus to intelligence and mana.

Usually, Skills explicitly listed their effects. The fact that this Skill had none listed meant that it had no effect.

Sophia had known that Skills like this existed, but she had never imagined

Soma would have one, let alone that it would be his only Skill.

She wished she could tell him it was a mistake. She wished someone would tell her it was fake. But the one who had conducted Soma's Skill Assessment was the Neumond family's very own Skill Assessor and a friend of Sophia's. The woman would never lie about such a thing...which meant that this result was authentic.

Sophia had known it was the truth from the start, of course, which was precisely why she'd decided not to tell Soma. She'd thought it would be better for him to think he had no Skills at all than to know that he had just one meaningless Skill.

Even then...she wished someone—anyone—would tell her the Assessment was wrong.

It wasn't even the fact that Soma wasn't a prodigy after all. It was that she and Klaus had made an error in judgment. That wouldn't be the end of it either. If the Neumonds had been a normal family, Soma could still have made something of himself. Skills were not necessary to live; there were many jobs that could be done without Skills. Not every talent would necessarily be embodied in a Skill either. It was possible to swing a sword without the Swordsmanship Skill, and there were people with good memories who didn't have the Instant Memory Skill. It would have been possible to take this result to mean that Soma's talents were like that.

The Neumonds, however, were not only a ducal family but the foremost of the four major ducal families. And Soma carried Sophia and Klaus's blood. It was impermissible for someone like him to have no talents, not even a Basic Skill.

A conversation Sophia had once had with Soma flashed through her mind. She had asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. Of course, when she asked, she hadn't known for certain whether he could learn the Skills he wanted...

"I want to use magic."

"Oh, that should be no problem. I'll be sure to teach you myself."

They would never again be able to smile together like that.

The future they had pictured would never come to pass.

But that was the least of her concerns.

“If I’d known it would come to this, I would never have wanted this heritage and status...”

Grieving would change nothing. It was too late.

Sophia let out another deep sigh as she thought of what was to come.

4

Sunlight filtered through the trees as Soma walked alone through the forest. His family's needlessly large mansion was already out of sight, but he knew it was still there behind him. There was no trace of anyone else around, which was to be expected, since he had slipped away without telling anyone. He wasn't actually supposed to be here, since he wasn't allowed outside the premises of the mansion. It was dangerous outside, and he had no need to go out unless he were training a Skill—or so the reasoning went.

That didn't stop Soma, though, and he continued deeper into the forest.

The forest that stretched out from behind the mansion was called the Devils' Woods and was known to be an especially dangerous place. It didn't bother Soma, since he had walked this path many times before.

"Hmm... So I have no talent. Not that that really matters, I suppose," he muttered, ending the train of thought.

He wasn't bottling up his feelings, and he wasn't in denial. That was how he genuinely felt deep down. Soma had understood that all of his talents that the adults around him talked up were really a result of his memories and experience from his past life. It may have been disappointing to everyone who'd thought he was a prodigy, but he had begun life with an unusual advantage, so he didn't care that he didn't have any Skills.

There was just one reason that he'd been dismayed when his mother told him he had no talents: if he had no Skills, that meant he couldn't use magic.

And Soma wanted to use magic. That had been his one unchanging goal ever since he had been born into this world and learned about magic. It was only natural that he would be dismayed after being told it was impossible.

So he'd left his room feeling disappointed...but if he had been the type to give up then and there, he would never have reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship in his past life. Soma had instantly recovered and started

thinking of possible solutions...which was when he'd hit on something that just might work.

That was why he had come here: to test out his idea. And, well, to be completely honest, he had a lot of other things to think about, such as how he would be treated going forward.

He knew things wouldn't be the same as they had been, at least. He didn't know exactly what kind of family he was part of, or even what his surname was, but he could get an idea based on the size of their mansion. He guessed his parents had a good reason not to tell him and would eventually, when the right time came.

Considering the current situation, though, he thought he was at risk of being disowned. And he was probably right to think so. It was just a guess based on his mother's attitude, but that was plenty of evidence to go off.

Even if it wasn't a problem for Soma, it would be a problem for his family that he couldn't learn any Skills, whether it had to do with the way this world worked, the way the nation worked, or something else altogether. He also knew this could change his relationship with his mother, but worrying about it would make no difference.

He had something more important to do.

Letting go of his concerns, he delved deeper into the Devils' Woods, which felt almost tranquil despite their name.

It had been about ten minutes since he entered the forest. When he spotted a particular tree, Soma paused, approached it, and stood in front of it.

"Hmm... I think this will do."

It was a large, thick tree. Not even an adult could have wrapped their arms all the way around, let alone Soma. It would have taken two, maybe even three people.

He gave it a tap with the wooden stick he'd brought along to test it with. Naturally, the tree didn't budge. If someone wanted to chop it down, it *could* have been possible, but they would have had to bring an iron sword...which is

to say, it was impossible for all intents and purposes. Even if it were possible, only someone with the right kind of talent—someone with a Skill—would have been able to do it.

As he thought back on what was common sense in this world, Soma muttered to himself...

“Is that really so?”

Having a Skill was synonymous with having talent, but that didn’t mean someone without a Skill was necessarily talentless. For example, someone without the Swordsmanship Skill could swing a sword...and there were even records of people without the Skill winning in duels against people who did have it. But such cases were mainly used as cautionary tales so people didn’t get too cocky. Those were only exceptions.

“Well, they may be exceptions...but that still means it’s possible without the Skill.”

It was possible to outperform someone with a Skill, even if you didn’t have it yourself.

So how large was the gap? What was the upper limit for someone without a Skill?

It was possible for someone without Swordsmanship to swing a sword, and even to win against someone with the Skill—so maybe, just maybe, it was possible to use magic without Sorcery.

And he was here to test that theory.

The large tree stood before his eyes.

Even if he’d had the Swordsmanship Skill, it would have been impossible for him even to scratch it with the stick in his hand, let alone cut it down. And even within the same Skill, there were different grades. The Skill’s effect would depend on its grade. From lowest to highest, they were Low, Middle, High, and Special. The results could be completely different, even when using the same weapon, if the Skill’s grade were higher.

Even if it were normally impossible, someone with High-Grade...no, Special-

Grade Swordsmanship may have been able to chop this tree down with a stick. And if that were true, then if Soma, who had no Skills, could cut down this tree with only a stick...

That meant there was a chance that he could use magic without any Skills.

Soma slowly let out a breath as he thought his idea through, then let his hand fall.

In an instant, Soma had already stepped forward and swung his makeshift sword.

This had been one of Soma's special techniques in his past life. In fact, it was a technique he had only practiced in his past life. The sole reason that he could wield a sword without thinking about it was that his previous body had known how. While Soma had done the bare minimum of training in this world, he hadn't done much with swords. His mind may have remembered, but his body couldn't match up.

However...

That would only be if he were an ordinary person.

The strongest swordsman in the world disregarded all common sense.

So what if his body was different? His soul remembered having reached the pinnacle.

If Soma decided to unleash his sword, then it would hit its mark without fail.

In his mind's eye, he saw the secrets he had once learned from an old master.

The teachings that he had taken up for himself and polished to perfection—

“Hah!”

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic*
Blessing Absolute Severance *Gift of Discernment: Original*
Style Emulation / Iron-Cutting Sword

With a sharp breath, he swung his arm, and the stick ended up exactly where he'd expected it to.

Despite there being a giant tree in the middle of its arc.

Coming out of the swing, Soma maintained his awareness as a slight smile spread across his face.

"I see," he muttered. As if in response to his words, a grating sound became audible. The top section of the tree had begun to slide off the trunk along the arc drawn by Soma's stick.

Soma had succeeded in cutting down the tree with only a wooden stick. That wasn't why he was smiling, however. It was because it proved his theory right.

"If I can do that...then maybe I can use magic too."

Soma had accomplished something without any Skills that would normally be impossible even with a Skill. That meant the same might be possible when it came to magic. That was all Soma wanted to know. He had settled on this testing method because swordplay was his specialty, so it would be the easiest talent to use as proof. It may have been next to impossible, but if it was possible at all, that was enough.

"Now I just have to find out how to use magic... I'll just have to research and test things out."

He just had to do the same thing he had in his past life—work single-mindedly toward his goal. That wouldn't be possible for the time being, though.

"Well...I knew that going in."

At last, the top section of the tree gave its final groan and collapsed to the forest floor. Soma watched it and nodded—while noticing his field of view begin to tilt. Almost as if pulled down by the tree, he collapsed to the ground next to it.

†

She was some distance away when she heard the sound. A sound she'd never heard before...that she shouldn't have heard. Her shoulders reflexively jumped.

"What was that sound? It couldn't be... Not here..."

If there was a sound, that meant there was something nearby that had caused it. But these were the Devils' Woods. It may have been an arbitrary name...but it should have at least kept people from the other side from venturing in.

Why would someone go out of their way to cross the border?

"Don't tell me... Is it happening?"

Her first thought was to let the others know, but then she remembered her own circumstances. She didn't have to wonder what would happen if the village found out... She knew it wouldn't be good.

"I can't just leave them... But wait, I don't even know for sure if..."

It could have been nothing more than a tree falling down on its own...but that would have been a bit too convenient.

"I guess I should just go look... If I actually find someone, I should just be able to play it off..."

It was half out of desperation. She hadn't come here with any particular goal in mind. This was the only place she could come, since she had nowhere else to go. She had the thought that they might kill her if they found her, but decided that was a risk she was willing to take.

Steadfast in her resolve, she made her way to where the sound came from...

Which was where she found the giant chopped-down tree and the boy on the ground next to it.

5

“Urgh... I wish I hadn’t done that,” Soma groaned as he lay alone in bed, regret in his heart.

He was thinking about how he’d really messed up this time, which was to be expected, since he’d been bedbound for the past three days since he snuck out of the mansion. He hadn’t been able to move from where he lay.

His parents hadn’t grounded him, though. It was his own decision not to get out of bed.

Why? Because whenever he tried to move, excruciating pain shot through his entire body. He couldn’t move even if he wanted to, which he didn’t.

And that wasn’t because he was injured either. This was the price he had to pay for overworking his muscles.

He was just really, really sore.

“Ugh... I didn’t know muscles could get *this* sore...” he muttered gravely.

It wasn’t as serious as he made it sound, though. He had just taken the soreness he’d experienced decades ago in his past life too lightly. He was reaping what he’d sown.

He’d used a technique from the strongest swordsman in the world, after all. It was a miracle that the pain wasn’t worse. He could have easily lost a limb or two.

The pain would go away in time, but he couldn’t do anything until it lessened...

“Hmm?”

As he wondered how he would pass the time, Soma heard a knock on the door. A voice he knew well came from the other side.

“Soma? It’s Camilla. Can I come in?”

“Yes, come right in.”

Once he gave permission to enter, someone appeared outside the door. Someone he knew very well, of course. Her eyes were black, as was her hip-length hair, which swayed as she peeked in with a concerned face. It was the family Skill Assessor, Camilla. Since she was a friend of his mother’s, she must have been at least in her early or mid twenties, but she looked much younger than that.

No, “young” wasn’t the right word... She looked like a child.

That was because she was incredibly short. She was taller than Soma, at least, but she looked no older than ten. Nobody would recognize her as a grown woman at first glance.

“Considering your mannerisms, too, it would be unusual if someone *did* think so...”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“I was just talking to myself to pass the time... Pay it no mind.”

“Oh... Whatever, then.” Camilla shrugged and stared at Soma.

After a few seconds of searching for what to say, she let out a small sigh. “You look relatively all right. Anything wrong?”

“Well... You already know that I’m sore everywhere. Other than that, I just don’t have anything to do, I suppose.”

“Well, I hate to say it, but I can’t think of anything to do about that. It’d be hard for you to even read a book.”

“It isn’t a big deal. I’m just glad you come to see me every day.”

Camilla’s face clouded as soon as he said so, probably because she’d picked up on the further implication of his words.

His mother, Sophia, hadn’t come to visit since the first day.

Soma himself hadn’t been thinking about that when he said it. He’d meant no more than what he said. It was only when he saw Camilla’s face that he realized how his words could be taken.

He would only dig the hole deeper if he tried to explain himself now, though, so Soma decided to change the subject.

“But now that I’m thinking about it... What if you gave me an assignment?”

“An assignment? Now?”

“Yes, that would be more tutor-like of you.”

Camilla was indeed Soma’s home tutor.

She was the family Skill Assessor first and foremost, though. There was little reason for her to be his tutor on top of that, and in fact, she hadn’t been—until three days ago.

It was on that day that she ended up as his tutor, for some reason.

It was understandable in the sense that no other tutor was suitable for Soma anymore. He was no longer worth it. That was the family’s judgment, not a personal opinion.

Soma still didn’t know what kind of family he was in, but based on his prior education, he had a general idea. That made it even harder to understand why Camilla—the Skill Assessor—was his new tutor.

He had been informed of the new arrangement without any explanation...but frankly, he didn’t really care.

“You’re right, but to be honest, I don’t really know how far along you are in your education, so I have no clue what assignment I’d give...”

“That shouldn’t be an issue. The only thing I’m interested in is magic, and I haven’t learned any as of yet.”

In the end, that was what it all came down to. Everything else was trivial. After all, it was for precisely that reason that he’d tried to replicate a sword technique from his past life and ended up in this state.

“Magic, you say... But—”

“It can be anything, really. I’m starving for information on magic.”

He’d known exactly what Camilla was about to say, which was why he interrupted her.

He wasn't about to give up just because he couldn't learn the Skill. Soma had already chopped down a giant tree despite not even having Low-Grade Swordsmanship. That meant there was a chance he could learn at least one spell, even without the Skill.

But Soma wasn't about to tell all that to Camilla. He knew, and that was enough. All that was left was to put forth his best effort toward his goal of using magic.

Camilla, perhaps sensing Soma's strong feelings, forced a smile in resignation. "All right. I'll do my job as a tutor and give you an assignment on magic, then."

"Yes!"

"I'm not very good at magic myself, though. I need some time to look into it, so I'll give you the assignment tomorrow."

"Understood. I'll be looking forward to tomorrow."

Needless to say, he said that from the heart.

This was his chance to finally come into contact with information on magic. How could he not look forward to it?

What assignment would he receive, and what would he learn from it?

A smile crept across Soma's face as he thought about the possibilities.

6

Camilla Hennefeld let out a small sigh as she looked down at the smiling boy, thinking she may have made a hasty promise.

It wasn't that she didn't think she could give him an assignment about magic. If that were enough to discourage her, she wouldn't have taken the job of home tutor when her friend Sophia asked her to, though she would have kicked herself for turning it down.

There was another reason.

"I'll think good and hard about it, so be patient. Don't get ahead of yourself."

"Well, I would have been patient regardless, but I couldn't do anything right now, even if I wanted to."

"That's what you'd think...but most people wouldn't end up so sore in the first place."

"Mm... That's certainly true."

Camilla sighed in both amazement and exasperation as she looked at Soma, whose face all but said, "I didn't think of that." And that was exactly the same reason she had sighed before.

She had mentioned his terrible soreness...but soreness itself was rare, especially for someone with a fighting Skill. It was as good as nonexistent for such people. It was simple—they literally had no way to overwork their muscles to the point of soreness, as long as they took action suitable to their Skill. Skills also strengthened the body itself.

That only went for people with Skills, though, of course. There weren't actually many people with fighting Skills in the first place. The majority of people were capable of learning Low-Grade fighting Skills, but there was little need to. Occasionally, those people would end up sore, if they had to run away from a monster with all their might, for example.

Because of its location and for a few other reasons, this kingdom was almost completely free of monsters and bandits—but *almost* was the key word, and there were always people who had to go to other countries for business and the like. That was the kind of situation in which they might end up sore, so it wasn't unheard of, although it was unusual.

Even that only meant an ordinary amount of pain, though. Camilla had never heard of someone so sore that pain would shoot through their whole body whenever they moved.

"Speaking of which, what did you even do to get that sore? You must have done something stupid."

"Hmm... It was nothing big, really. I just did what I felt I needed to do."

"What you needed to do, huh..."

It was probably the truth. Camilla could tell from his face that Soma himself thought so, at least. She could also tell that he had no intention of telling her what he'd done.

"So, what exactly did you do?"

"It's a secret."

That was exactly what she'd expected him to say, and she could tell he was trying to mislead her based on his feigned air of only having just remembered. He had actually been carefully choosing the timing of his answer.

The result, though, was that Camilla's prediction had been spot on.

"Even though I'm your tutor?"

"*Because* you're my tutor. I'm not in the habit of gleefully sharing what caused my current disgrace."

"Hmm..."

He was being honest, but that was exactly why Camilla couldn't help having the thought...

What would have become of Soma if she hadn't done the Skill Assessment?

If Camilla hadn't done it, someone else would have, so she wasn't thinking

about it in that sense. She was thinking about what it would have been like if he had been born to a different family—a poor family in the village.

Why would she think such a thing? Because not everyone could actually undergo a Skill Assessment. The reason was simple: it cost money. More money than an average household could drop at a moment's notice.

It was worth the price, of course, but some would say that it was worthless if you didn't have any especially good Skills...and the majority of people didn't. Camilla was of the opinion that it was still worthwhile because you could avoid going down the wrong path, but that only mattered to people like her who valued making every day count.

It wasn't uncommon for those in the lower class to elect not to undergo a Skill Assessment, and that probably would have been the kind of environment in which Soma could have developed his talents to the fullest.

People without Skills couldn't measure up to those with Skills. That was common sense in this world, a law of nature in a way. Any attempts to challenge it would be in vain.

Of course, there were real examples of people without Skills winning in fights against those with Skills, but those were cautionary tales. People didn't tell them to encourage hard work—they told them to illustrate the futility of spending your whole life training just to come out equal to a Low-Grade Skill. Low-Grade was the bare minimum, the lowest level possible to become a soldier. It was far from top notch.

That was why, if someone was in a position to have a Skill Assessment done, it wouldn't encourage them to put in futile effort toward developing talents they didn't have. If they did try, they would be stopped.

For example, if they couldn't learn any Skills at all.

But...that was what gave Camilla this thought.

Even if he'd done the hardest possible training, it shouldn't have made him as sore as he was. It was impossible for any normal person. Their brakes would kick in at some point, no matter how hard they tried.

So what did it mean that it was possible for Soma? If nobody were there to

stop him, how far could he have gone? Low-Grade? Middle-Grade? Or even...?

Really, there was no need to suffer from soreness in the first place. It could be relieved with magic, which was usually necessary.

It was only hearsay, but apparently Soma's pain was truly severe. It would have driven an adult to madness, let alone a child, according to the doctor.

So how was Soma able to withstand it?

To be honest, she hadn't had much contact with Soma. She lived in the same mansion, so she saw his face at times, but they barely spoke.

She had heard about him from Sophia, though, so she knew a good deal about him, although she had to confess that at first, she hadn't really believed what she heard. She'd assumed it was Sophia's bias toward her child, or that she was exaggerating.

So, to Camilla, Soma was nothing more than a young boy with an odd manner of speaking.

The image she had of Soma now was mostly based on what she'd seen with her own eyes over the past three days...but it made her think, *What a shame*.

Camilla was a tutor, and one the Neumond family had hired. She had no choice but to reprimand Soma if he tried to push himself too hard. That was only a normal response if you considered the high likelihood that his efforts would be in vain, though.

"I guess I was just being selfish, wanting to see how far he could go..." Camilla mouthed to herself. As she thought, *It's really too bad*, she let out a small sigh.

7

“I’m back in business!” Soma shouted, standing on top of his bed.

Counting from that fateful day, it had been seven days.

After a whole week, he had finally been released from his soreness.

To be specific, he still felt some pain, but it wasn’t so severe that he couldn’t move, so it was good enough to call it a release.

And Soma did intend to start moving today.

“All right, then.”

Even if he was up and moving, though, the most he could do at the moment was ask questions. He’d already read all the books in the mansion that he was capable of, so there was nothing left that he could do.

There was only one person he could ask those questions at the moment, but the sun had just risen, so the time for studying was yet ahead of him.

Which meant...

“I suppose I’ll get my daily routine out of the way first.”

He’d probably gotten rather rusty, considering that he’d been bedridden for the last week, so this was a good chance to assess his current condition.

Soma nodded in response to his own words and snuck out of his room.

†

Camilla walked alone under the light of the morning sun. She was in the back garden, where people rarely strayed, but she didn’t have any sinister plans up her sleeve. She just wanted a change of pace and to do a bit of training.

Camilla had a career as a Skill Assessor because she had the extremely rare Skill, Skill Assessment. Because it was so useful, the country half-forced people with the Skill to work as Skill Assessors, although they were treated so well that almost nobody turned down the invitation, even if they could.

Camilla, though, was more inclined toward combat. She had the Axemanship Skill, and whenever she had free time, she would train or exercise.

And the reason she was looking for a change of pace was because of the other job she currently held...

“Oh?”

“Huh?”

An inane sound escaped Camilla when she stepped into the forest and immediately saw someone else.

Since this was a place people rarely visited, as mentioned before, she was surprised to see anyone else at all...but more than that, she was surprised to see someone who shouldn't have been there.

“Oh, Ms. Hennefeld. What a coincidence.”

“Yeah, it sure is a coincidence...but why are you here?”

She couldn't mistake this person a head shorter than her, nor could she mistake his peculiar formality of speech. It was the source of Camilla's current worries: Soma.

“What other than my daily routine? I suppose it's been a while, though, seeing as I've been stuck to my bed for the past week.”

“Daily? You've been coming here? I thought Sophia told you not to...”

“She did tell me that. I don't recall agreeing, though, so I don't believe it concerns me.”

“You little...”

What he said was unreasonable, but his confident tone made her feel like she was the one who was mistaken here. Of course, she wasn't, but it was Sophia's job to make him listen. It had nothing to do with Camilla.

Or did it? She was the one currently in charge of communicating that kind of thing to Soma...

“Well, no big deal. It's not as dangerous here as they say, anyway.”

Camilla had come here on occasion for training, and she hadn't spotted any

beasts in years. It wasn't anything to worry about. That said, there were no really safe places in this world to begin with, which was probably why Sophia forbade him from going outside...

"Speaking of which, didn't she say not to go out at all?"

"She did tell me that—"

"But you didn't agree. You're shaping up to be trouble, aren't you?"

Camilla didn't mean to be a nag. Sophia had her way of thinking, and Camilla had hers. And since everything fell onto Camilla's shoulders, she figured it was okay to act according to her own judgment.

So all Camilla did was shrug. It wasn't worth the effort of making a big deal of it.

"Anyway, I doubt the people at the mansion are as lax as me. How did you get out?"

"I just hid, of course."

"I guess security isn't *that* tight, but still..."

It shouldn't be so loose that a six-year-old could sneak out.

Apparently, she had to rethink her evaluation of Soma.

"And you're just telling me everything now that I found you?"

"Well, you're my teacher. And there shouldn't be a problem with me talking to you...right?"

"Yeah, that's for sure."

He was right. But just as Camilla barely knew anything about Soma, he shouldn't have known much about her. Not enough to make that judgment call, at least.

Was it a child's naive insight? Camilla thought about it and decided no. He must have some kind of evidence for his judgment. She could tell that much from his eyes, child though he was.

She really had to rethink her evaluation of him.

“Anyway, I was just about to go train. Want to come with me?”

She invited him not only because she wanted to observe him but because she’d noticed the stick he was holding. She could tell from instinct and experience that it wasn’t just for play. A few minutes ago, she would have chalked that thought up to her imagination, but she knew better now.

“If you don’t mind.”

“I do want to see your ‘routine,’ as you call it.”

Soma agreed, and the corners of Camilla’s mouth turned up slightly. What she had just said was the truth. Every time she spoke to this child, he piqued her curiosity.

Was it an illusion borne of the worldliness that only children seem to give off? Or something else? She’d been slightly regretting that she’d taken the job as a home tutor, but this was shaping up to be more fun than she’d expected.

And then, thirty minutes after she thought that...

Camilla was left speechless, staring up at the sky.

8

To jump directly to the point, what happened was nowhere near anything she expected.

But that should be obvious—who would expect to find herself staring speechlessly up at the sky?

“Ms. Hennefeld, I think you’re holding back far too much. I understand you called it light sparring, but this is less than light.”

She looked in the direction of the dissatisfied voice to see Soma looking down at her, pouting slightly.

What surprised Camilla more than anything, though, was that he was neither gloating nor condescending to her. That meant what he had said was genuine.

But it would be irresponsible not to hold back. That was a given when she was an adult and he was a child. The alternative hadn’t even occurred to her as an option.

The result, though, was this: her lying flat on the ground, looking unsightly. So Camilla accepted it and stood up with a smile.

“Ha ha, sorry... But you haven’t moved in a while, and you’re still a bit sore, right?”

“Mm, that’s certainly true, but even so...”

“All right, my bad.”

She was genuinely sorry. It was true that she had been thinking he must still be sore, and that that was part of the reason she’d held back. But she only said it so carelessly—no, with feigned carelessness—out of stubbornness and vanity.

“Okay, let’s do some proper sparring, then.”

“Please, let’s.”

She had felt almost charmed when she first saw Soma’s imposing stance a few

minutes ago, but now it was different. She looked back at him with determination, abandoning all else, because she knew it would be necessary.

What had brought them to this point in the first place was Camilla casually suggesting a sparring session. This was after she'd found out that Soma's daily routine was swinging a stick and had noticed that he had some talent for it.

She had honestly planned to just have some fun with it...but there was a difficult-to-bridge gap in their weapons, builds, and Skills.

The difference between their weapons was the most obvious. Camilla wielded a sharp axe larger than her own body. She was a short woman, of course, but the axe was plenty large even considering that, and it could have easily killed someone. On the other hand, Soma wielded a stick that he had probably just picked up off the ground. It wouldn't take a genius to predict what would happen if they faced off.

Apart from that, their difference in build was plain to see—and as for Skills, Soma had none, whereas Camilla had High-Grade Axemanship. Never mind an adult and a child—they were like an elephant and an ant.

High-Grade was a realm beyond first-class that only those who were commonly referred to as geniuses could reach. Even in academies that attracted all kinds of talents, there may only have been one person with a High-Grade Skill in each year.

That was why it was normal that Camilla held back. She had put her full attention into holding back...which had led to this.

Camilla wasn't arrogant enough to think of it as a fluke, but at the same time, she had her pride. As someone with a High-Grade Skill, she wouldn't let herself lose next time.

She forgot that he was a kid with a stick, or that he was still sore, or that he had no Skills, and she looked at him as an equal fighter.

Therefore...she put her full force into her attack, not caring whether or not it killed him.

Axemanship (High-Grade) *Martial Arts* Supernatural

Phenomenon / Mind's Eye: Full Swing

Her axe immediately met resistance. The sensation told her she'd slashed something, so she jumped back.

"Ngh..."

As she heard a grunt, she saw the axe slash the air in front of her. A second later, though, she had already taken half a step back, pulled her axe out of the ground, and readied it once again.

Axemanship (High-Grade) *Martial Arts* Supernatural Phenomenon / Mind's Eye: Full Swing

She stepped in before taking another breath. A high-pitched sound rang out.

"Hah!"

"Ugh..."

The question of why a stick colliding with an axe would make that sound crossed her mind, but she left it behind as she readied her next slash. The only question on her mind now was the best move to make next. The sound of her slashing attack echoed through the clearing.

Axemanship (High-Grade) *Martial Arts* Supernatural Phenomenon *War Cry* Wild Dance: Great Slash

Once, three times, eight times... By the time they got to double digits, she no longer even had time to think. Her arms moved without her thinking. As though she were a spectator to the match, she watched herself fight, and she noticed...

She was only able to keep this up because of their difference in reach.

It was simple. The length of her arms, her legs, and her weapon gave Camilla an advantage. Camilla could reach where Soma couldn't, and where Soma needed three steps, Camilla only needed one. It was because of that that they

seemed evenly matched.

It was undeniable. Her instincts and reason told her so. The boy in front of her was a match for her, or even beginning to surpass her. He was getting faster, more precise. And her moves were starting to clearly lag behind. She didn't have the time to think about what it meant, but it was clear that they only seemed evenly matched because of her advantages.

If even one of those were to be taken out of the equation...

"Ah!"

Just then, one of her advantages was removed. She was speechless.

What Soma did was simple: he moved faster than Camilla, which negated the reach of her longer legs.

That was enough.

"I have you!"

"Crap!"

She was half a step behind. She swung her arm in a last-ditch effort, but it was too late—

"Ah!"

Just then, the stick slipped out of Soma's hand. He watched its trajectory in disbelief...and Camilla was in disbelief too.

She'd been prepared to be knocked down, dodged, and blocked, even prepared for the possibility that she simply might not make it in time...but she'd never expected her opponent to lose his weapon.

She clumsily swung at the air, and the momentum threw her off balance, sending her toppling over.

Right onto Soma.

"Mgh..."

"Geh!"

An unladylike sound escaped her, but luckily, the only one there to hear it was

a kid.

With that random thought crossing her mind, Camilla turned a glare toward the crushed Soma.

“Now, you...”

“Yeah, that was my mistake. Apologies.”

“Your arm kind of stopped in the middle there. Was that because you’re sore?”

“Something like that. I definitely lost focus.”

“Your fault for fighting before you’re better... Well, I’m one to talk, since I agreed.”

Camilla let out a quiet sigh of relief. If Soma hadn’t done that just now, it would have been over for her, which would have been pathetic for a number of reasons, even if she herself accepted the loss. As a tutor, and even more so as someone with High-Grade Axemanship, she couldn’t let anyone know she’d lost a real fight to someone without any Skills at all.

“Ngh... I think I’m getting warmed up again, though.”

“Good to hear. No more sparring for me, though.”

“Why not?!”

“I just wanted a quick break. I have to get back.”

It was the truth...but she was mostly quitting while she was ahead.

“Mm... It’s unfair of you to quit while you’re ahead, but I suppose if you have to work...”

“Sorry.”

Soma had an obvious look of disappointment, but he knew exactly what Camilla was going to do for her work, so he couldn’t say anything.

And he was right not to, since being his tutor was what Camilla needed a break from.

“I’m going to win next time.”

“If there is a next time.”

So Camilla said, but she had no intention of doing this again. There was no reason to, knowing that she would lose. Maybe it seemed immature, but she wasn't planning to lose face in front of her pupil any more than she already had. If she had been younger, she might not have understood. She may have been frustrated enough by the loss to retrain herself.

She had no plans to do that now, though. She knew her limits, and most of all...now that she was confident Sophia hadn't been exaggerating in the slightest, she wanted to teach this boy whatever she could more than she wanted to be his rival.

“I must be getting old, thinking like this.”

“What did you say?”

“Just talking to myself.”

“I see... Anyway, would you mind getting off of me? You're quite heavy.”

“Oh? Looks like the first thing I have to teach you is how to treat a lady.”

“Too heavy! You're crushing me!”

“I'm not *that* heavy!”

She smiled slightly despite her angry tone.

It wasn't that she hadn't wanted to tutor him before, but it had been more out of a sense of duty, and she hadn't felt that her personality was compatible with the role...but it didn't seem like that would be a problem anymore.

Camilla's smile grew at the thought.

9

After Camilla had left for work, Soma lay sprawled out on his back.

It wasn't that he was tired. He was disappointed in himself for losing focus at the last moment, just when he'd thought he had it.

He'd let his guard down for a moment, which wouldn't have been a problem for his past self, but Soma was far from perfect condition now. He wasn't used to swinging a sword in this body.

That had been his first chance to spar, not counting his practice swinging. Over the course of the fight, he'd gradually gotten used to it...and then he'd let his guard down and lost because of it. He was ashamed of himself.

"I could make a number of excuses, but they would mean nothing. I have a long way to go...don't you agree?"

A tree behind him rustled slightly as soon as he finished his sentence, although it went quiet right after. Soma waited a moment, but there was no further reaction.

It was obvious to Soma that there was no point in trying to hide anymore, but it seemed that the other one here thought there was...

"Just so you're aware, I know you're there, so there's no point in hiding."

"H-How did you know...?"

A girl he'd seen before peeked out from behind a tree.

She had red hair and eyes and looked about the same age as Soma, so it was safe to call her a child. Her upturned eyes gave her a strong-willed look, but that impression was weakened by her apparent nervousness.



Her nervousness was probably a result of what she'd indicated just now—she hadn't thought she'd been noticed. However...

"Hmm... That's a good question. All I can say is, I just knew."

"B-But, that other person didn't notice me..."

"Ms. Hennefeld? Well, she doesn't think that anybody comes here. I imagine she wasn't paying enough attention."

"So...the difference is that you know I come here?"

"Indeed."

She gave him a look like she wasn't convinced, but he couldn't help that; what he'd said was the truth. It was only the truth in the sense that it was what Soma thought, though. Really, it had just been a coincidence that he'd noticed her. That was what had made him lose focus during his sparring session with Camilla.

The only reason he had been able to notice her, though, was that he already knew about her. If he hadn't, she might have escaped even Soma's notice.

In any case, it would have been awkward to keep talking to her from the ground, so Soma stood up, turned, and greeted her once more.

"Anyway, it's good to see you again. I believe it's been a week."

"R-Right... Good to see you."

"Yes. Also, since I didn't have a chance to say so before, thank you."

It had been seven days ago, when Soma had collapsed in the forest, that he met her. She had helped him when he wasn't able to move by letting him lean on her while he walked back to the yard.

"You don't have to thank me... It was my own choice."

"Well, I feel indebted to you, and you were objectively of help to me, so it doesn't matter what you were thinking at the time. I have the obligation to give you thanks, and you are entitled to receive it. You may choose whether to accept it or reject it, though."

"You're the one thanking me, so why are you lecturing me? But it's fine, I

guess... I accept your thanks.”

“Yes, that would be fortuitous.”

“I still don’t get it, actually...” She looked at him disapprovingly, but he just shrugged. He knew what he was saying might come off as a lecture, but he couldn’t fix it now. He just had to get her to let it go.

“Well, that settles that. I just realized, though, I still haven’t asked you your name.”

“Well, yeah, it wasn’t a good time for that, and there wasn’t any need to.”

“I need to know now, so tell me. My name is Soma, by the way. You can call me however you like.”

“I’m not totally convinced, but sure... My name... Hmm...”

“Hmm? If there’s some reason you can’t tell me, you can use a pseudonym.”

“A pseudonym? Now look here...” She gave him an exasperated look, but Soma just looked back quizzically. He had been completely serious. She clearly had something going on, and all he needed was a name to differentiate her from others. It didn’t matter to Soma if it was a pseudonym as long as she answered to it.

“All right,” she sighed. “That was then, and this is now. I’m Aina. You can call me whatever you like too.”

“So, then, Aina...”

“Y-You’re just calling me by my name right away?!”

“Is that a problem? I could call you something else.”

“It’s not a problem... It just, um, caught me off guard...”

“I’ll call you Aina, then, if that’s acceptable.”

“Y-Yeah, fine... But in that case... I’m gonna do the same to you, *Soma*!”

“I have no problem with that.”

“You’re not even fazed?”

“What was that you said?”

“N-Never mind!”

Soma looked quizzically at the shouting girl, whose cheeks were flushed slightly red. He was thinking to himself that she seemed quick to anger, and that he wasn't even sure what had set her off, but he kept it to himself. Even Soma had discretion at times.

“In any case, Aina...”

“Wh-What?”

“Hmm? Your face looks rather red. Do you have a cold? You should go home and rest, in that case. The beginning of a cold is the most important time to take care of yourself.”

“Just get to the point already!”

“Why are you angry with me? I don't understand.”

He only had discretion at certain times, though.

“Well, the point is, please feel free to come to me if you need help with anything.”

“How did you even get to that point? I don't get what you're talking about...”

“Was that complicated in some way? All I mean to say is, I intend to repay you for helping me.”

“Why didn't you just say that? And like I said, it was my own choice, so you don't have to repay me.”

“Yes, and it's my own choice to feel indebted to you, so I'll choose to help you when the time comes. Pay it no mind.”

“I can't believe you...” Aina couldn't help but chuckle, putting a small smile on her face. It was probably born of incredulity, but a smile is a smile. And it was the first time Soma had seen Aina smile since he met her.

“Hmm...”

“Wh-What is it?”

“It's just that I've been thinking since we first met... Smiling suits you.”

“What?”

“To put it into simpler terms, you’re cuter when you smile.”

“Y-You don’t have to reword it! And what do you mean, cute?!”

“You want me to define ‘cute’? That’s a difficult one to put into simpler terms...”

“That’s not what I meant!” Aina’s face flushed even redder. Soma gave the flustered girl a quizzical look for the third time. He couldn’t comprehend what had her so worked up when all he had done was state his honest opinion.

“What’s the big idea? Don’t think you can get anything by flattering me!”

“I don’t believe stating the truth is referred to as flattery...”

“F-Fine, I get it! Let’s stop talking about it!”

“Hmm, I don’t quite understand... But all right.”

A boy nodding despite the unconvinced look on his face, and a girl breathing heavily with a beet-red face—the scene unfolding would have puzzled a bystander. Regardless, Soma nodded once more.

“Just remember, if you tell me when you need help, I’ll come. If you don’t, I’ll come anyway. Although I can only help you within my own ability, of course.”

She nodded as he continued to lecture her, and a tiny smile stole across her face again.

10

“So, that’s why it’s called the Devils’ Woods,” Camilla’s voice echoed off the walls of the unnecessarily large room. Soma nodded attentively.

This was Camilla’s first lesson as a tutor. It was just the two of them in Soma’s room.

It had been about two hours since he sparred with her and then saw Aina. He hadn’t been busy during those two hours; he’d come back right after he said goodbye to Aina, but Camilla had needed the time to prepare.

They didn’t have a set time for lessons in the first place, and Soma couldn’t complain, considering that he was being educated. And the extra time wasn’t a problem, since Soma was still working on the leftover assignments from when he had been bedridden.

So the classes had finally begun...but Soma thought deep down that it was a lot easier than he’d expected, although he didn’t say that for fear of offending Camilla.

She called herself a warrior by nature, but if he thought about it, her occupation was Skill Assessor. If she were really all brawn and no brains, she wouldn’t be able to do that as easily as she did, so he figured she might actually be smart despite her self-perception.

“I see... So it’s called the Devils’ Woods because it borders where the devils live.”

“And because there used to be devils lurking in there. They haven’t been seen in decades, though.”

“Hmm... Do you know why that is?”

“I think so.”

“May I ask?”

“Sure. It’s pretty simple, actually.”

What Camilla explained was in fact simple. The devils had stopped invading through the woods because they'd been defeated, which made sense to Soma. That also told him one more thing.

"I see... So is that why our family has such a stupidly large mansion?"

"Hmm? Why do you say that?"

"The size of a house is a good way to symbolize a family's status, and if the devils' territory is right there, that means we live on the border. A family that builds a house right next to the border must have high status."

Soma still didn't know what rank his family held, but he'd gotten a general idea from stories like these.

"My parents must be margraves—or, if not that, at least hold some important rank."

A lot of things made sense in light of that revelation, such as the way they'd started treating Soma after they found out he couldn't learn any Skills. He'd already thought they were high ranking, and this new revelation served to strengthen his conviction.

"Hmm..."

He was on the right track, judging by Camilla's amused smile.

"I haven't taught you about noble ranks yet, so how did you know that? You're a fascinating kid."

He couldn't exactly tell her he knew that from his past life, so he just shrugged. He probably could have surmised to some degree even without that prior knowledge.

Soma had learned some things already from his previous tutor, but nothing of that sort. Based on that fact, it was reasonable to assume they were keeping that information from him for a reason, even if the matter of how he'd gotten from there to here was another story.

"Well, that aside, one thing is still unclear to me."

"What's that?"

“I don’t understand the meaning of building a mansion next to the border.”

There were certainly advantages, but the disadvantages would far outweigh them, most of all the fact that it was the most dangerous possible location. If someone had ordered this, it must have been out of ill will.

“About that—this mansion was originally going to be built somewhere else, farther from the woods.”

“Hmm... Well, that makes sense.”

“But they decided to build it here instead in case the devils attack, so we can respond faster.”

“Who did?”

“Your parents.”

“Are my parents idiots?”

“I don’t have any proof to the contrary.”

Soma felt like putting his head in his hands, but that could have also meant his parents were just that confident in their strength. Or...?

“Were you just exaggerating when you said that no devils have been seen for the last decade?”

“Well, your parents may be idiots, but that part was completely true. They are the ones who beat the devils up.”

“But that was over a decade ago, right?”

“Well, it means it wasn’t just for show that they were allowed to build a mansion here.”

“Hmm...”

Soma may have been as confident in the prime of his past life as his parents apparently were now, but he didn’t know how strong the devils were. He didn’t have enough data to go by.

Camilla interrupted that thought. “Well, I bet you don’t get how important that is with no context, so let’s talk about the devils.”

“Ah, I knew this part was coming.”

“How did you know?”

“I got the idea after listening to what you’ve said so far. I have a sense for how you teach now.”

It was relatively simple. As Soma had been reflecting just now, when Camilla talked about things, she always added details that Soma wasn’t entirely familiar with. That would be the devils, in this case. Then he would naturally be curious about it, and Camilla would continue along that line of thought. If they kept that up, he could maintain constant interest in the discussion, which made it easier for him to grasp the subject, since he was motivated to understand. That was what made her lesson easy for him.

“I’m impressed you got that after less than an hour.”

“It means you’re a good teacher.”

“Feels to me like you’re just smart.”

Incidentally, the first thing she’d told him about had been the country that they lived in. That had been another piece of information that his family had kept from him; Soma hadn’t even known where the country was.

He had known that the oldest and most prosperous empire was located in the center of the continent, but it was today that he’d learned that their own country was to the northwest of it. It was a small country surrounded by rugged mountain ranges, and there were only two routes to leave it. One of those was the Devils’ Woods, which had brought them to this topic.

“Okay, let’s talk about the devils, then. How much do you know about them? I doubt you know absolutely nothing.”

“I know a little bit, but not very much at all.”

“What do you know?”

“Let’s see... That they’re an enemy to mankind.”

Any child would know that much. Parents even threatened children that if they misbehaved, the devils would take them away.

“I see... So you actually don’t know much. And that’s not true, by the way.”

“Oh, I had a feeling...”

It was Camilla who was surprised when Soma nodded earnestly in response. Her eyes went wide, as if she were wondering how he could agree to that statement so readily.

“What do you mean, you had a feeling?”

“If that were true, we would have wanted to eliminate them immediately. It would have been unthinkable not to attack, even if we haven’t seen one for over ten years. That, and personal experience.”

“What experience?”

“Pay that no mind.”

“Hmm... Well, you’re right. The official explanation is that we have no reason to go on the offensive just to continue the fight...but I doubt they would say that if devils were actually an adversary to all mankind. So, another question: what do you think the devils are actually like?”

“Hmm...the descendants of those who had to oppose mankind for some reason or another, who came together to form a community of outcasts and troublemakers, I suppose.”

He had just been thinking out loud, but Camilla gave him a look of amazement.

“Is something the matter?”

“Just thinking that I’m starting to understand you.”

Soma gave her a confused look, but Camilla just shrugged. He was curious, but if she’d been willing to give him a real answer, she would have just now, so there was no point in asking anymore. He decided to just let it go.

“Well, about that—make sure not to say it to a Divinist’s face... They literally believe in the stuff they say, you know.”

“Understood.”

Divinism was the one and only religion that existed in this world. There were

technically different sects and subgroups, but it didn't really matter unless you were a believer.

Since it was the only religion, about eighty percent of people believed in it, although only ten percent at most believed strongly enough to be called Divinists. The other twenty percent or so held folk beliefs that were hardly codified enough to be called a religion, and a few rare people fell outside of both categories.

Camilla was a member of the twenty percent of folk believers, and Soma supposed he'd fall into that category too if he had to choose.

"So, the devils—" Camilla stopped suddenly in the middle of her sentence, took her watch out of her pocket, and nodded at it.

"Is something the matter?"

"Just thought maybe we should take a break."

"I can keep going."

"Well, I was considering that you're getting over your pain, but you do seem all right. Can we go on, then?"

"Please, let's."

He really wasn't tired, since it was such a fascinating conversation. The more he heard, the more he became aware of how much he had yet to learn. That included his favorite topic: magic.

But Soma knew he had to get through this lesson first, so he turned his ear back to the conversation as Camilla resumed.

11

Camilla half smiled as she looked at Soma, who was listening attentively to her. It occurred to her that he really was a prodigy.

She didn't know how much he really understood, but the things she was telling Soma were above an ordinary six-year-old's level. The part about the devils, in particular, was usually reserved for secondary school or higher education, the latter of which was open only to scholars, researchers, and those who held important positions.

The majority of the people in this country didn't know what was taught there. It wasn't exactly classified; the instructors just wanted to avoid confusion, and the majority of people wouldn't have understood anyway. This six-year-old kid, though, was talking about it as if it were only natural that he understood.

Maybe she'd been right to think...

"That's probably it."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind, just talking to myself. Anyway, like you said, the devils aren't inherently evil. They do have a strong military, though. They say it takes at least a Medium-Grade Skill to go against a devil."

As she continued her explanation, Camilla thought back on when she'd taken over the job of instructing Soma from his previous tutors.

That wasn't technically accurate, actually; Camilla had never really taken over from them. They hadn't even told her how far along Soma was in his studies, whether it be arithmetic, general studies, or foreign history. Soma had had a different tutor for each subject, but none of them had said anything.

It was unbelievable that they hadn't told her. They were officially employed by a duke, and she'd heard that they were now teaching Soma's younger sister Lina, so it wasn't like they'd renounced their jobs.

At first, Camilla had assumed it was because they didn't like Soma. His attitude and manner of speech could have put off some people, and the kind of person who becomes a tutor for a duke's son is likely to be prideful, so she wondered if that had been a point of contention.

It was unlikely that that was the case for *all* of them, though, so her next thought was that it must be something other than pride. After all, it was for an unavoidable reason, but from the tutors' perspectives, they'd been fired in the middle of a project. That could have gotten on their nerves...but then they would have stopped working for this family—and that didn't seem to be the case, since they'd started tutoring Lina.

So Camilla tried to think of what else it could be, which is where she got stuck. She couldn't think of anything, but more importantly, it wasn't the right time for her to be thinking about it. The other tutors had left textbooks up to high school level behind as if to torment her, but she didn't know how far Soma had studied in those books.

She was at full capacity just pondering the question of how she was supposed to teach. That was why she'd needed a break, which had led to her encountering Soma in the backyard...and that had been meaningful, since she'd realized the simplest solution immediately after sparring with him.

She'd successfully refreshed her mind. If anything, it was so simple, she didn't know why she hadn't thought of it before. All she had to do was ask Soma how far he was in his studies.

Really, why hadn't she thought of it? She could make excuses for herself, but they were just that—excuses.

She asked him, though, and what he told her put a lot of things into perspective.

It wasn't for nothing that they had high school—level materials prepared. The previous tutors had actually been planning to start on them at the time that Camilla took over. Soma had already finished everything from the middle school curriculum.

Needless to say, she was surprised, but she also realized why the tutors hadn't told her how far he'd progressed. It was probably a message from them

not to misjudge his talent.

She did think they could have just told her that instead of beating around the bush...but it made sense for people from this country. It also probably had to do with the fact that Camilla was a Skill Assessor.

“Hmm... Does that mean that the same grade of Skill is stronger for a devil than for one of us?”

“Yep. Our country thinks that’s why they’re so strong.”

“I thought that it isn’t exactly easy to learn which Skills an opponent has, though, let alone which grade.”

“Yeah, that’s true. We Skill Assessors can tell other peoples’ Skills, but we have to touch them for that.”

“So how did they come to that conclusion?”

“Simple—they came up with the theory based on the devils’ strength. Nobody’s actually done a Skill Assessment on a devil before.”

“Mm...”

Camilla thought she had some idea of why Soma might make that sound, and she probably wasn’t wrong.

“The concept of Skills may be easy to understand, but I’ve always felt that this country has gone too far in reifying it... Perhaps that’s true of other countries as well, though.”

“No, you’re right. They still use Skills in other countries, but this is the only one that takes them as an absolute truth.”

“Hmm... Is there a particular reason for that?”

“Kinda. It’s no big deal, though.”

The country’s overemphasis on Skills stemmed from its founding. It had originally been part of a neighboring country, but it seceded due to poor treatment. The reason for that treatment, though, was because its land was not very fertile—frankly, it was barren—so tax revenues were low. As a result, the country to which it originally belonged had never prioritized its needs, despite

the fact that it bordered the Devils' Woods. It was even treated as a buffer zone of sorts to keep the devils at bay.

This angered some people with Special-Grade Skills, so they moved here, beat up the devils who had been doing as they pleased with the land, and declared independence. One of those people became the king, and the first step he took to attract immigrants capable of protecting the new country was to use Skills as their standard.

"Skills as a standard, you say..."

"Yeah, and the military, for one, has definitely gotten stronger since they started treating Skills as an absolute as opposed to a reference. It's well known that when the country we used to be a part of attacked, we defeated them with only a tenth of their forces because we required everyone to have at least one martial Skill."

This was only possible, however, because the country was in a difficult position after being established. The citizens understood that they had to prioritize what they were able to do, not what they wanted to do. If any other country had tried it, they would have met with fierce opposition and failed. In fact, although the strategy had proven so effective, no other country had followed suit.

"Hmm, so that's why our country sees Skills as an absolute."

"Well, that's part of the reason, but that wouldn't be enough on its own. It's also because it was a standard to gather people, like I said."

"I see... Now that I think about it, I've never felt that this is a poor country, although it was supposed to be originally. I assumed that was because of my family, but now I suppose it's because we gathered people with Skills in agriculture and such in order to establish our independence."

"You're a little too good at figuring this stuff out. Are you sure you're six?" Camilla gave him a surprised look.

He was right. It was because their strategy had been successful—maybe *too* successful—that the people in this country who still believed in Skills thought of them as absolute.

“I see... That explains the current state of things, but...”

“Huh? Do you have a question?”

“No, I was just wondering how you know so much about it.”

“Well, it’s part of our national history, and this country’s only been around for a few decades. I’m not so old that I’ve forgotten about it.”

She couldn’t forget about it even if she wanted to.

“Hmm...”

“What? Something else now?”

“It’s just that I understand how we reached my current situation better now.”

“Ah... Well, there you have it.”

Soma probably wouldn’t have had any issue if he’d been born in another country. He could have continued as a duke’s son irrespective of not knowing any Skills.

That wouldn’t be permitted in this country, though—not by this populace. That was what Sophia wanted, so nothing could be done about it.

Which was why...

“You have a right to resent me.”

It was the desire for a kind of atonement that had spurred Camilla to take the job as Soma’s tutor. More accurately, Sophia had set up that opportunity for her.

Camilla had once messed up the life of a ten-year-old girl who would later go on to be called a hero. After Camilla had resigned in guilt, Sophia took her on as the family Skill Assessor. Soma probably had no intention of getting revenge on Camilla, but she would have been okay with it if he had.

Or maybe, deep down, that was what he desired. However...

“Resent you, you say?”

Soma wore a baffled expression. His entire body told Camilla that he had no idea why she said that.

“I mean, nobody knows what Skills anyone else can learn apart from Skill Assessors, right? So if I’d just lied and made up some Skills you could learn, it wouldn’t have messed up your life.”

“It honestly doesn’t bother me.”

His face showed that he really meant it. His expression was as confused as before. He honestly, genuinely, didn’t care about what had been bothering Camilla.

“It doesn’t bother you? The thing that changed your whole life for the worse?”

“I believe I’ve told you already, but all I want to learn about is magic and how I can use it. That being the case, I’m glad to have more time on my hands, so I have no reason to resent you. If anything, I should be thanking you.”

Camilla’s face froze in a weird look when he mentioned thanking her. She wasn’t sure herself what it looked like, but she knew one thing.

For some odd reason, she felt like laughing.

“You don’t say... You don’t say.”

As she nodded for no particular reason, something occurred to Camilla.

She’d already gained plenty of motivation from their sparring session...but she felt even more motivated now.

Camilla smiled as her heart, which felt lighter, commanded her to.

12

A year had flown by since Soma started taking lessons with Camilla.

He had recently begun studying even more subjects than before, but none were particularly difficult thanks to Camilla's teaching style, especially since he'd finally begun learning about magic.

Just yesterday, he'd listened to her lecture on that topic and asked any questions he could think of, but...

"I still see no signs that I'm able to use magic, though."

"Well, that's no good." Aina sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

Soma just continued to swing his stick up, then down, matching his movements, including the movements of his legs, to the image in his mind. He'd been doing this for years, even decades, so he could carry on a conversation at the same time with no trouble.

"It's certainly no good, but I never thought I would be able to use magic easily. This is well within the level of difficulty I expected."

"I don't get how you can keep doing things that aren't getting results, even if you're not expecting any... Is it one of those things where it's like, you get meaning out of the process?"

"No, there's no meaning in the process itself. Not as far as I'm concerned, at least."

"Huh?"

Soma heard her surprised exclamation, but he continued without so much as a glance her way.

He swung his arm and stepped forward—

"But, I mean, why would you keep doing that every day if you didn't think there was meaning in it?"

“I don’t understand your line of thinking. I’m not doing this because I’m seeking meaning from it.”

This—his daily routine—wasn’t for training purposes. It was meaningless, and he didn’t want it to be meaningful in the first place. He just went through his routine because it was his routine. After doing it for decades in his past life, he felt rather off if he skipped a day, so it had become a habit which had continued into his current life.

He didn’t do it for any particular reason; he did it because there was no reason not to. That was what Soma’s daily routine was to him.

“H-Hey... Do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Go right ahead, if it’s something I can answer.”

“Okay, so my question... Do you think if something doesn’t get results, then doing it is meaningless after all?”

“I don’t understand what you mean by ‘after all.’ I suppose it is, though. It would be meaningful only if and when it produced results.”

For example, Soma had reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship in his past life thanks to his ceaseless effort, but he only considered it meaningful because he had succeeded. If he hadn’t reached his goal, then he would have deemed his effort meaningless. Results and results alone were what determined meaning in his mind.

“Yeah... Of course... You’re right. So, there’s really no point to what I—”

“However, whether or not there’s *value* is a different story.”

“Huh?”

“Why do you look so mystified? Meaning is determined by results, but value is determined by individuals. So even if something has no meaning, if you consider it valuable, then there’s value in doing it.”

“So is that why you keep studying magic even though it might not mean anything? It’s valuable to you?”

“I don’t know... No, I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Why not?”

“I think it will have meaning in the end.”

What Aina said was certainly true in the sense that he was doing this with the awareness that it might not result in anything. However, Soma had absolutely not given up.

“But it’s so unlikely...”

“The probability is higher than zero, and that’s enough for me. I would be satisfied if I became capable of using magic in my last moment on my deathbed.”

“What the heck? Are you stupid?”

“I don’t believe I would be doing this if I weren’t stupid.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Her tone didn’t sound like she was making fun of him; it was warm and there was even a hint of agreement in it.

As for what that meant...it probably wasn’t something he should pry into.

“If I had to say, I think my daily routine is closer to that.”

“It is?”

“Yes. I don’t think it will ever be meaningful, but I consider it valuable.”

“What makes it valuable if you’re not trying to get meaning out of it?”

“Well, it was thanks to my routine that I ended up meeting you, for one.”

“Wha—?!”

Although he had always kept a daily routine, what exactly he did had differed over time. It had changed after he was reincarnated, of course, and for the past year or so, chatting with Aina while swinging his stick had become a part of the routine.

Of course, that was only because she’d kept showing up when he came out to go through his routine after their second encounter, and they’d gradually started to converse, but it was nevertheless a part of his routine now.

Most of their conversations, though, consisted of small talk, the majority of that being about what Soma was doing on a daily basis. He knew almost nothing about Aina except for her name...but just a minute ago, she had revealed a bit of her inner self. That made this routine sufficiently valuable to Soma.

“What are you even... Are you stupid?!”

“I believe we just established that I’m stupid.”

“Th-That’s not what I...!”

Soma couldn’t help but smile a little at her panicked, flustered voice. He wasn’t smiling at her expense, but rather because he felt like he’d finally made contact with her true self. For the past year, he’d felt a peculiar barrier of sorts between them.

“Seeing you behave in this way toward me, am I correct to assume I’ve earned your approval, or rather, your trust?”

It was probably unconscious on her part, but that in itself was further proof that she was beginning to open up.

“Do you even realize...?”

“Well, you’ve never participated very actively in our conversations, no matter how many different topics I bring up. It’s always been clear that you’re guarded for some reason.”

“What do you mean, for some reason? Personally, I don’t get how you’re okay with talking to someone shady like me... Shouldn’t you be more guarded?”

“Ah, is that part of the reason you’ve been so cautious?”

It made sense. If she was aware that she seemed suspicious, then behaving incautiously toward him would only worsen his impression of her. Soma now understood that she had put up the barrier between them so she could ascertain what he was thinking.

“So if I’d behaved more cautiously, things may have taken less time? It would be odd to be cautious when there was no need to be, though.”

“What do you mean, there was no need? Maybe this is weird to say about

myself, but aren't I obviously shady? I just showed up to help you one day in a forest nobody should go near, then I kept showing up... It basically screams that I'm up to no good."

"That certainly is an odd thing to say about oneself."

"That's just how suspicious I seem!"

"Someone truly suspicious wouldn't say that... But what you said is right."

On that basis, Soma would also be suspicious because he had collapsed in a forest that nobody should go near. That meant he had no right to suspect her. And if someone's up to no good, they don't usually come help someone else who's fallen down.

"Maybe they would, though... Like, maybe they'd want to gain your trust by helping you."

"That's not coming to help. That's coming to get me in their debt. I can tell the difference quite easily."

It was true. Discernment was just as important to a swordsman as his skill with a sword. He had no intention of following that path again, but the skills he'd once developed hadn't simply gone away, so it was easy for Soma to ascertain things like that.

"O-Okay... So what now?"

"Hmm? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, you were waiting for me to let my guard down, so you must want something from me, right? You wouldn't be talking to someone shady like me every day if you didn't..."

"I told you, I didn't perceive you in that way...but I can't deny that I want something from you."

"Of course... After all..."

"What I want is not a favor, though, so much as for you to tell me what's on your mind."

"You wouldn't be talking to a d—wait, what?"

“Is something the matter?”

“For me to tell you...? Why?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer...”

Of course, everyone had an issue or two, but it was clear to see in Aina’s case. She sometimes appeared depressed while she listened to Soma talk, and most importantly, she went out of her way to come here every day. It was hardly difficult to tell that she must have some reason for that.

“At the very beginning, I did wonder if you were up to something, but I could tell soon enough that all you wanted was a change of scenery.”

“O-Okay... So what? Why do you want to know what’s on my mind? Are you going to blackmail me?”

“Why would you jump to that conclusion?”

Soma had been moving his arms and legs the whole time, but now he stopped and exhaled. It was partly because he had finished his routine, but also because he wanted to say what he was about to say properly, and not just in passing.

“I already told you a year ago that I would help you when you needed it. I thought that knowing your problems would be perfect for that purpose.”

In other words, Soma’s reason for wanting to know her problem was simple and clear. He wanted to solve it for her.

“What the heck?” Aina muttered. A mix of emotions showed on her face. Although it was difficult to describe with one word, since it was a combination of many things...the closest analogy would have been tears of joy.

“I guess you’re right, though. You’ve been getting less cautious with me, and you’re right that I have a problem. And our conversations have been pretty one sided.”

“Yes. You should tell me about yourself too, for fairness’s sake.”

“Yeah...”

Aina smiled, then let out a breath.

And then...

“The truth is...everyone says I’m a failure.”

She began to tell him about her problem.

13

It was after an incident a bit over a year ago that people started to call Aina a failure.

It began with a rite of passage in Aina's culture. More specifically, it was a preliminary step in the ceremony that children had to undergo to be recognized as adults. People reached adulthood after undergoing multiple of these on a yearly basis.

As for what that preliminary step was, to put it simply, it was just a Skill Assessment.

"Hmm... So it's the same thing that I did—that we do."

"I guess so. They probably do something similar everywhere in the world."

So Aina had received a Skill Assessment, but...

"I take it that you failed?"

"No, the ceremony itself went fine."

It certainly had gone fine, since it had revealed that Aina already knew a Skill:

Sorcery (Special-Grade).

"I see how it is."

"What? No way, did you figure the whole thing out already?"

"Yes, I believe I did. You're bragging to me, are you not? Picking a fight? Very well—I accept! Let us step outside to settle this!"

"You don't get it at all! And where's 'outside,' anyway?!" Aina yelled without thinking.

Soma, though, appeared unbothered. She gave him a confused look, but he just replied with puzzlement.

“Hmm? Am I mistaken?”

“Not even close!”

“I see... I was joking, anyway, so it’s a good thing that I wasn’t right.”

“You were joking?! Come on...”

Maybe he wasn’t going to listen to her seriously, Aina thought for a moment.

“Well, in any case, I don’t want to force you to talk about it. You can stop here if it’s too difficult. I can take some other opportunity to repay you.”

At those words, Aina’s shoulders relaxed. She exhaled.

“Thanks for being considerate, but it’s okay. I’m the one that decided to talk about it.”

“Hmm, is that so?”

“And you said it yourself—it’d be unfair if I didn’t.”

“That I did.” Soma smiled wryly.

Aina felt the same, though—it would be unfair to continue as they had been. She didn’t know why Soma had continued this for the past year...but she did know that it had saved her. It weighed on her conscience that despite that fact, she hadn’t told him anything.

“I guess it’s just that I want to talk about it, though...so you don’t have to listen if you don’t want to.”

“No, I’d like to listen. I was being honest when I said I wanted to know.”

“It’s not that complicated, anyway...”

It had been revealed that she had a Special-Grade Skill. Everyone present had been overjoyed to hear it—but it didn’t last long.

The day after the grand celebration, one more discovery was made.

“Hmm...and what would that be?”

“That I can’t use magic.”

When everyone found that out, their disappointment was incredible...as was the way their opinion of her instantly changed.

“I can’t blame them, though... They were just that excited for me before.”

“Hmm? You do have the Skill, do you not? What exactly does it mean that you can’t use magic?”

“It means what it sounds like. Like, for example... Flame.” Aina stuck her right hand out as she invoked flame. She had sufficient mana in circulation...

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord’s Guardianship* XXXX:
Magic / Torchlight (Failed)

Yet no magical flame was created.

Having a Skill meant there were no restrictions on your ability to use it. That was a given—it didn’t take any reasoning to figure out. And the same went for Aina; she had the knowledge of how to use flame magic thanks to her Skill. What she had just tried to do was exactly that. In fact, due to her Special-Grade Skill, she had the knowledge of how to use a wide variety of magic, but none of her attempts had ever succeeded.

“Everyone in the castle—no, everyone in general—made sure my method wasn’t wrong. We went over the steps from the beginning. Everyone was baffled. They said there’s no reason I shouldn’t be able to do it.”

That said, she couldn’t do what she couldn’t do. She would have loved to know why she wasn’t able. She’d asked various acquaintances, used whatever connections she could, and tried things out, but she wasn’t even able to cast the simplest possible spell.

“I researched and tried all sorts of things, of course...but three days passed, then a week, then a month, and I still wasn’t able to use magic.”

That was why Aina had run away. She could no longer take the way everyone looked at her. She’d kept her story safe inside her heart; she hadn’t been able to tell Soma and, in any case, hadn’t wanted to. That was what had led to the events of a year ago.

She was now in the care of a married couple who lived in a town near the woods, but this, too, was something she couldn’t tell Soma. If she did, he would

surely realize what it meant.

She got the feeling that Soma had already realized...but she still didn't feel like telling him explicitly in her own words.

As Aina was thinking, Soma suddenly broke the silence. "Well...I have one thing I want to clear up."

She gave him a confused look, unsure of what there was to clear up. She'd given him the entire series of events that had led to her being called a failure, so what doubt could—

"Not one person understood why you were unable to use magic. That means nobody found anything that seemed strange, correct?"

"Huh? Yeah, that's right..."

"That must mean either that it's something that doesn't appear strange, or that they simply didn't find it. In either case, I believe I'll see if I try slashing..."

"Wait, I don't know if I like the sound of—"

She didn't get the chance to voice the rest of her sentence.

In front of her, she caught a glimpse of light. But the moment she noticed its glow, it was already gone.

She sensed a slash. She didn't know what its target was, and she didn't feel any pain—but she knew that *something* had been cut.

"What did you just...?!"

"I get the feeling that it should work now. Try using magic again, and we'll see for ourselves."

"Just tell me..." Aina stopped short of finishing her question and sighed. She figured it wasn't worth asking. It was clear that Soma had done something; that much she could be sure of.

And there was one more thing. Whatever it was, she could be sure that Soma wouldn't do it for no reason.

"Okay, fine, I just have to try using magic, right? Not that it'll mean anything."

It had been a year since she'd run away. It wasn't as if she'd done nothing in

all that time. She'd tried just about everything she was capable of, and nothing had worked.

So that was why...

"Flame," she muttered, sticking her hand out.

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup: Magic / Torchlight (Backfire)

For just a moment, a light appeared in her hand.

"What?"

It was, without question, a failure. Aina's knowledge from her Special-Grade Skill told her as much. This kind of failure was caused by using an excess of mana, which made the spell fail before the flame manifested.

In other words...

"Hmm? I believe I saw a flame just now."

It wasn't like before, when her magic hadn't activated at all.

It was an actual failed spell.

Aina had no words. Something welled up inside of her. She pushed it down, though, and forced her trembling lips to form the incantation again.

It was like before, except this time, she wasn't being careless with her mana out of a conviction that the spell would fail anyway. She carefully used just the right amount of mana.

"Flame..." she nearly whispered, but it took a clear shape.

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup: Magic / Torchlight

It was a tiny, tiny flame—not enough to use as a light, barely enough to start a campfire with.

And...it was the first magic flame that Aina had ever created.

“Oh, it worked this time. I suppose that really was blocking it. I can’t imagine anything good based on that...but for the time being, we should celebrate. Congratulations, Ai... Aina?”

As she gazed wordlessly at the flame, she heard Soma’s flustered voice. When she looked up at him, wondering what was going on, he began to panic for some reason.

“What is it, Aina?! Don’t tell me...it was a trap? What have I done?! I cut it...and now...I can’t see anything...?!”

Soma was aghast and panicked, and she watched him in confusion...and then felt something warm roll down her cheek. *Oh, this is why*, she thought to herself, almost as if she were observing herself in the third person.

She might as well have been, because despite her attempts to stop, the tears kept pouring out, one after another. There was nothing she could do.

No—as soon as she had that thought, she realized there was something she could do, something she *had* to do.

So, though she knew it was unsightly, Aina, with tears still streaming down her face, lowered her eyebrows, lifted her head...

“I don’t know what you did...but I know you did it for me. Thanks, Soma.”

...and expressed her gratitude to Soma with a smile.

14

It had been about thirty minutes since Aina had started crying and Soma had panicked. *That was close*, he thought to himself as he walked down a corridor in the mansion.

He walked confidently despite having just come back from outside. He didn't seem to be hiding the fact that he'd been out, because he didn't need to anymore.

That wasn't because he'd received permission, though. He wasn't allowed to go out, just as he hadn't been a year ago. Of course, that was to be expected; he hadn't seen his mother once since then, and she was the one who had set the rule.

The real reason he no longer had to hide that he was going outside was a complicated mix of factors—

“Oh?”

“Huh?”

The second he turned the corner, Soma saw a familiar face—one that looked similar to his own, although its owner was shorter than him and had different hair and eye colors.

It was his sister, Lina.

“Oh, if it isn't Lina. It's been a while.”

“I-It has been, d—Soma...”

Lina seemed to be treating him like a stranger despite her friendly smile. She wouldn't meet his eyes—hers were darting around uneasily. And the kicker was how she addressed Soma.

“Hmm... I'm glad to see that you're doing well, but why don't you call me 'dear brother' as you used to?”

“No... I don't think I can do that.”

“Mm...”

No luck, as he'd figured. It had been about a year since he'd last seen Lina, after all. He knew it would be hard to keep things between them the same as before.

“Ah, that's right.” Soma had an idea when he saw how tired his sister looked. He knew that right now, she probably couldn't rest her mind while in the mansion...so how about a change of scenery?

“You seem rather tired. Why not go out occasionally? Do you remember that time when we snuck out together? You could come with me, like you did then —”

However...

“Thank you for being considerate, and I appreciate the invitation, but I don't have the time for such things. I think you would also be better off if you stopped wasting your time like that and did something more productive, d—I mean, Soma. Maybe then, you would... No, never mind.”

“Hmm? Lina?”

“I mustn't waste any more time here... I'll excuse myself.” With that, Lina rushed off, seeming as though she genuinely were busy. She vanished around the corner and out of Soma's sight without even turning to look back at him.

Soma, left alone, scratched his head as he looked at the place where Lina had just been standing. “That was certainly a scolding...but I wouldn't call it completely wasted time.”

Today, especially, had been meaningful. And if that was the culmination of everything he had done up to this point, then all of that time had been meaningful by extension.

Whether that justification was meaningful or not was another story, though, and either way, the person whom the justification was meant for was already gone.

“How cruel is the passage of time...”

Soma shrugged as he thought back on how his sister used to follow him

around everywhere, calling him “dear brother.”

†

“Does this mean that she’s come to hate me?”

After Soma used their lesson time to recount the events of that morning, Camilla shrugged. “I dunno... That’s not really something I can answer.”

There wasn’t anything else she could say. Camilla had seen his sister, Lina, a number of times, but she and the little girl were never exactly close, and they hadn’t met in the last year. Camilla didn’t have any idea what Lina thought of Soma.

She could make an educated guess, though.

“I’m more interested in what happened before that.”

“What happened with Aina, you mean?”

“Yeah, it’s just like you to notice something weird when she said she couldn’t use magic, so you tried cutting it.”

“Hmm... Is that so?”

“You should realize that much about yourself... I guess it’s also like you to see your sister for the first time in a year and have her tell you to do better things with your time.”

“I don’t quite understand why it’s like me... It’s true that I have a lot of free time, though, so she was right on that account.”

“Huh? No, I didn’t mean it like that. And if *you’re* not doing anything, then this country must be full of nothing but idle people...”

“Is that so?”

Camilla sighed as she looked at Soma, who was skimming a book in his hands as he implied that she must be exaggerating.

How could someone who looked at graduate-level research and gave his measured opinions of the results not be doing anything? She supposed that in a sense, the only people who could do that were those with time, but she didn’t know any world in which that would be called free time.

Even if the endeavor was ultimately meaningless.

“In that sense, I get why she felt like saying that, though,” Camilla mused.

After all, Lina was currently studying to become the head of a ducal family. It was far too great a burden, considering her age, so she must have been working herself rather hard. Of course she turned down a casual invitation for a change of scenery.

She had only been venting her frustration, though, and Lina was the one who’d wanted this in the first place.

Camilla hadn’t told Soma this part, but after Soma was deemed talentless, she had done a Skill Assessment on Lina. It was the obvious decision, since the family had had to consider the possibility that Lina was also talentless...but this Assessment had resulted in misfortune.

It turned out that Lina was far from talentless—she was extraordinarily talented.

So the decision had fallen on Lina.

And Lina decided.

She understood that it would be best if she took her brother’s place.

The benefits of that decision trickled down to Soma as well; that was why he was able to go outside freely now. Apart from Camilla, everyone treated him as if he weren’t there, so nobody scolded him for going out. It may have seemed cruel at a glance, but it meant there was nothing binding Soma.

At least, that was how Soma thought of it; perhaps some people would have taken it harder. It could even have been that Sophia had decided to treat Soma like this because she knew how he would feel about it.

In any case, Soma had Lina to thank for his current lifestyle. Soma could probably guess some of this, which may have been why he was especially considerate when it came to Lina.

Lina probably would have earnestly accepted his invitation before her Skill Assessment...but she hadn’t because her state of mind had transformed—had *had* to transform—over the past year.

The studies she had undertaken in preparation to become the head of the family were slightly different from what Soma had been doing before, which was because Sophia had deliberately refrained from teaching him certain things. For the same reason, Lina had a couple more tutors than Soma had had; they taught things such as how to govern well.

Camilla had heard whispers that one of them was not the best of people. This tutor was said to enjoy seeing their students rise to the top...but in order for that to happen, they would pull others down. More precisely, this tutor belittled others to make their students think their position had gone up in relative terms, then took pleasure in being thanked for it. Needless to say, Camilla deeply despised this kind of person.

In even worse news, this tutor currently had a target for their put-downs within the mansion. That was Soma, of course. They had never met, and Soma wasn't in the public eye right now, but he couldn't be hidden completely.

The tutors also had a higher status than the servants who worked in the mansion, so the servants couldn't exactly refuse if asked for information. Given their status as tutors, they could use that information to put Soma down in the form of speculation. It made Camilla sick. She didn't even want to think about how Lina was probably being influenced by hearing such things all the time.

Lina was bright for her age—even precocious—but she was still a child. That made it easy for others to influence her. Sophia had apparently selected her tutors carefully with that understanding, but she couldn't make perfect decisions in every single case. And even if Lina were being influenced, Camilla couldn't prevent it unless there were something specific she could point to.

This was a ducal family, and there unfortunately weren't many people who could teach how to govern. Camilla couldn't do anything rash. If the tutor had done anything demonstrably wrong, they would already have been fired, so they must not have had *that* much influence so far.

It seemed like it was putting a rift in the relationship between brother and sister, but that relationship itself no longer officially existed.

Honestly...

"If only I could do something about it..." Camilla murmured, lost in thought,

as she watched Soma continue to read.

15

“Hmm? Ms. Hennefeld, I have a question,” Soma piped up while Camilla was pondering his relationship with his sister.

“Huh? Having trouble understanding? Or did you figure something else out?” Camilla responded without much care, because she knew she couldn’t answer a majority of Soma’s questions.

What Soma was reading was a technical book that a scientist might read, and although Camilla had gone to high school, she hadn’t continued any further. There was no way she could answer whatever he had to ask about it.

It was also a question of field. Soma was reading research on magic. It wasn’t necessarily because Soma had put in effort that he was now reading this book when he’d known nothing about magic a year ago. It wasn’t that Soma *hadn’t* put in effort either, but there was next to nothing to study about magic at the high school level.

In the current era, magic was completely dependent on talent. You could only use it if you had the knack for it. It didn’t require any theory or knowledge.

It was only natural that there would be a limited number of people studying the subject if study had no practical benefits, so the majority of reading material on magic consisted of research materials. If Soma wanted to find information about magic, he had no choice but to read those.

“Yes, my question is... It says here that magic does not fail as a rule. Is that true?”

“Well, I can’t use magic, so take what I say with a grain of salt, but that’s what they say. That goes for more than just magic too.”

“Oh, like what?”

“This might be a bit hard for you to grasp on a personal level...but when someone with a Skill does something, it doesn’t fail unless their opponent has a Skill of a higher grade.”

Taken to its logical conclusion, that meant if someone had a Special-Grade Skill, their attack would always reach their opponent. Even if the target teleported away, the attack would follow them across space. It made sense when you considered that Skills were considered Special-Grade precisely because they made such results possible.

“Hmm... It certainly does make sense, considering that what makes a grade higher is the fact that it outperforms the opponent’s evasive and defensive maneuvers.”

“Well, it’s the scientists’ job to study the specifics. We laypeople can just think of it in those terms.”

“Regardless, does that make it impossible to miss intentionally?”

“That’s different. You don’t call it failing when you miss or hold back on purpose, right? If you’re actually aiming, though, you’ll never miss as long as the level of your opponent’s Skill isn’t higher than yours.”

That was why it was recommended to choose a partner with Skills of the same grade for sparring. If they were different, the individual with the higher grade would be forced onto the defensive. It wouldn’t be much of a sparring session if they kept shooting off attacks that their opponent couldn’t defend against, after all.

That made what Camilla had done with Soma before rather unusual...but it didn’t count, since Soma himself was even more unusual.

“Hmm...”

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s just that I saw a spell fail earlier, even though the book says that shouldn’t happen.”

“Oh, yeah, you mentioned something like that.”

She knew that Soma was still going about his daily routine, but she’d only joined him that once. He just told her about it at times.

He’d told her earlier, so she knew what Soma was doing and that he was meeting a girl named Aina in the Devils’ Woods. Camilla knew he wasn’t telling

her everything, but she could guess based on the summary alone.

It also told her just how exceptional Soma was.

“He doesn’t seem to be aware of it himself, though... I knew Skills weren’t everything, but I didn’t really internalize it before.”

“Did you say something to me?”

“Nah, just talking to myself. As for why the magic failed even though it’s not supposed to...sorry, I lied earlier. It’s not supposed to fail, but Special-Grade Skills are different.”

“That would make Special-Grade Skills an exception, right?”

“It’s pretty hard to explain...but it’s basically because Special-Grade Skills have powers that fall outside the bounds of common sense in the first place.”

It wasn’t especially difficult to understand. It was just that the kind of person who can cut space itself with a sword isn’t included in your everyday common sense.

“Hmm? I would think that with some training, it would be normal to be able to cut through space with a sword...”

“Look up ‘normal’ in a dictionary before you say that. Anyway, because of that, people with Special-Grade Skills can intentionally fail even when an action isn’t supposed to. Don’t you think what happened with Aina was because she was Special-Grade?”

“Mm... She said it backfired because she used too much mana, so I thought that that could happen with magic in general.”

“Well, maybe magic in particular can fail if you do that. I haven’t heard of it happening, but it could just be because our country’s behind in magic research. You should know that as well as I do.”

“I suppose you’re right.” A bitter look crossed Soma’s face, probably because he knew that most of the magic research materials were basically useless. In reality, they were Divinist propaganda.

Since magic was completely talent-based, nobody knew how to get better at it, or even how to learn Sorcery. When it came to Swordsmanship, you would

learn it eventually if you kept swinging a sword, and your Grade would also go up. Magic, on the other hand, wasn't as well understood, so there were a number of accounts mixed into the research materials of people learning Sorcery by converting to Divinism. These accounts weren't limited to pseudoscience; the same result was also documented in proper research, although those studies were typically commissioned by the church.

It was no surprise that a serious researcher might lose motivation, since such problems abounded, besides which the barrier to entry to becoming a researcher was already high. That resulted in more and more research having a Divinist bias, further reducing the amount of proper research being conducted in a vicious cycle that prevented the field of magic studies from progressing in this country.

That meant that there were few proper materials for Soma to read, so he wouldn't be able to produce results like he would have otherwise, no matter how hard he tried—hence the bitter face.

“But how did *she* know about that, then?”

Camilla could think of only two possibilities: that Aina was an immigrant or an exile from another country...and in either case, they should act quickly to secure her, seeing as she had a Special-Grade Skill.

Camilla herself wasn't a member of the military anymore, but someone with a Special-Grade Skill couldn't remain inconspicuous for long. Aina could apparently use magic normally now thanks to whatever Soma had done, so someone would find her sooner or later.

The one thing that concerned Camilla was that going off what Soma said about Aina, she could have been an illegal alien...although it wasn't that big a deal.

This kind of thing happened relatively often, even though this was ducal territory. They were close to the Devils' Woods, so it wasn't worth worrying over such small matters. The important thing was not to cross paths with a devil. There was no need to arrest anyone else, so long as they weren't committing any crimes.

Soma wasn't the type to have misjudged her, and the identities of everyone

who lived near the Devils' Woods were already known, so if it were a girl living with them...

"Wait, I just remembered..."

It wasn't just people from the ducal territory who lived near the woods.

Camilla recalled there being a small village on the devils' side.

"No...it couldn't be."

"Hmm... If common sense does not apply..."

"What's up with you? Had another unnecessary idea?"

"You say that as if I often have unnecessary ideas."

"Cause you do. Don't give me that look."

She meant what she said, so even if it was a bit mean to him, it wouldn't change anything. Or maybe the fact that it wouldn't change anything made it meaner.

"Well, that aside...what's your idea?"

"Well, I thought that perhaps if things that go against common sense are possible, then it may be possible to teach me magic."

"Ah... Yeah, that sure wouldn't happen according to common sense."

Cutting through space with a sword, or teaching magic to someone without a single Skill—which was more absurd?

Camilla smiled wryly to herself as she pondered the question. The answer was obvious. Both were completely absurd, and so was having such notions in the first place. As someone who lived within the bounds of common sense, she couldn't make that judgment.

"Well, why don't you just try it, as long as whoever you ask to teach you is okay with it?"

"Yes, I'll ask someone and give it a try."

Camilla sighed as she looked at Soma's lively face.

It also crossed her mind that he belonged to that group that common sense

didn't apply to, which deepened her wry smile.

16

“On that note, you shall teach me magic!”

The response he got to the sentence he’d come up with a few days ago was a bewildered voice.

“On what note?”

Well, he’d said it to her the minute he saw her face after coming out to do his routine...so she must have been bewildered, if not outright shocked.

He had known that would happen before he said it, though, so he took a moment to savor her reaction before he offered a simple explanation.

“I mean, you’re right that common sense doesn’t really apply to people with Special-Grade Skills, but I’ve only been able to use magic for a day... How am I supposed to teach you when there’s so much I don’t even know?”

“It’s easier than cutting through space with a sword.”

“What’s with your standards?!” Aina shouted.

The logic was sound for Soma, since cutting space with a sword really was easy in his mind. That didn’t change the fact that his standards were warped, though.

“You never know until you try. Contrary to my expectations, it may end up being easy.”

“Doesn’t that imply you don’t expect to be able to do it?”

Pffft, fffft...

“You can’t fool me by looking away and whistling! You can’t even whistle!”

Actually, it wasn’t that he didn’t think he could do magic—he was *hoping* that he couldn’t do it. He did want to use magic, but he would have been a bit disappointed if he learned this way, even though it was his own idea. What would all of his previous efforts amount to in that case?

That said, he would still be overjoyed if he learned how he could use magic.

“Also, this can serve as repayment for yesterday.”

“Repayment? I guess I do owe you for that...”

“Yes, I originally intended it to offset what I owed you from a year ago, but I don’t believe the two are equivalent.”

“Yeah, you’re right... Compared to what you did for me, what I did was nothing—”

“It wasn’t nearly enough to repay you for saving my life.”

“That’s what you meant?!”

Aina seemed shocked, but Soma was puzzled as to why. All he’d done yesterday was swing his stick once, which was nothing compared to his daily routine. It would have taken some nerve to equate that to Aina saving his life.

“It wasn’t small; it meant a lot to me... And what do you mean, saving your life?”

“I mean exactly that. Even I would have been in danger if you had just left me there.”

He had been completely incapacitated, and given the situation and the place, if he had been unlucky, he could have been left without anyone ever finding him. In actuality, it had been a bit after that encounter that Soma’s family began to treat him differently, but even at the time, it wouldn’t have been unusual if they’d simply given up on searching for him. Considering that, it was no exaggeration to say that Aina had saved his life.

“It seems like an exaggeration to me either way...but fine. I know you’re not going to back down now.”

“You know me well.”

“We’ve been hanging out for a year. In that amount of time, I’d get to know you whether I wanted to or not.”

“Did you not want to? I would hate to pressure you into it...”

“I-It’s a figure of speech!”

After a bit of banter along those lines, they decided to give it a try.

Although it seemed to be true that she didn't know much, Soma tried to do the same thing as Aina.

"Okay, so I put my right hand out and get into position... What next?"

"Then you send mana into your palm and say the—"

"Pause right there."

"What?"

"Before we talk about sending mana...what exactly is mana?"

"Huh?"

However, it didn't take long for them to realize there was a gap between what each of them knew.

"That's a hard question... I don't know how to explain. It's just mana."

"I've never felt anything like that before, though. What if we disregard mana for the time being?"

"What? But you can't use magic without using mana."

"About that... Why don't you use swordsmanship as an analogy for the process of using magic? That would make it easy for me to understand."

"Maybe it would be easy for *you*, but how am *I* supposed to teach it like that?!"

Aina was more of a hands-on learner than a theoretical one. She tried her best to give an explanation, but it made little sense to Soma since it consisted largely of onomatopoeia.

The fact that Soma was also a hands-on learner made the problem worse. Maybe if they had shared the same senses, it would have been easy for him, but it wasn't hard to see that the gap in their knowledge made learning impossible.

Soma wasn't about to give up just then, though. He racked his brain for another way.

"It's also possible that the reason I can't sense it is because I don't understand

it...so what if I were able to understand it?"

"Um, I don't like where this is going... What are you thinking?"

"Well, I figured that I may understand magic if I collide with it."

"Huh?!"

"No, that's not quite the right wording. I figured that since I specialize in using a sword, I may understand magic if I try slashing it."

"Huh?!"

Aina was still shocked, even after he reworded for accuracy. She looked at him in disbelief, like she had no idea what he was talking about. Soma, in turn, gave her a confused look, not understanding her reaction.

"Is that really so shocking?"

"More astonishing than shocking... Are you serious?"

"Of course." Soma nodded. "Why?"

Aina sighed, then gave Soma a look of disdain. "And you're not going to change your mind no matter what I say?"

"Of course not."

"Fine... Then I don't have any more to say. You can see for yourself why it's a bad idea."

He didn't know what she meant, but before he could ask, Aina had walked some distance away. Seeing her get into stance, he did the same.

Then...

"Flame, obey my will and reveal your power. Let all that stands in my way be immolated."

It was immediately obvious that this wasn't the same thing he'd seen yesterday. The chant was different, for one, and Aina was also sticking out both hands instead of just one. He wasn't sure why, but she seemed oddly motivated.

Soma considered that a positive, however.

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing* Gift of Discernment
Mind's Eye Mental Concentration / Eye of the Void:
Appraisal

Soma looked intently at her, holding his wooden stick. Then he noticed something gathering at her outstretched hands. That was probably her mana.

“Mm, I still don’t quite understand...”

He would have a better grasp of the particulars if it were a form of chi energy, but it didn’t seem to be the same thing. He wasn’t even sure how he could tell that much.

After seeing so many things, though, he could notice details that the untrained eye couldn’t, and knowing that was enough for him. That was also how he’d been able to see the strange thing he’d cut for Aina.

But just being able to see it didn’t tell him much about it—and more importantly, it didn’t seem like he had much time left to stand there and stare at it.

“Flame Arrow!”

Flames manifested in Aina’s hands and immediately flew outward with explosive force. They took the shape of an arrow, which shot straight for Soma.

Law of the Sword / God-Killer / Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance / Sword of Pandemonium *Gift of Discernment: Original Style* Emulation / Demon Slayer

With one flash of his sword, he slashed it just as it approached his chest.



Exhaling, he released his mental tension and watched the flames disperse into the air.

He'd concentrated so he could use one of the techniques he knew from his former life, since he'd doubted that he could cut magic just by swinging a stick in the ordinary way—but it had tired him considerably.

He hadn't used all of his strength and collapsed this time, though, so it was an improvement from a year ago.

"Huh?"

An inane sound interrupted his thoughts about his growth. He didn't have to guess who had made it, but he turned to look anyway and saw Aina with her jaw wide open in a vacant expression.

"That's a rather unladylike expression. Are you okay? Why do you look like that, anyway?"

"Sh-Shut up about my face! Do you even understand what you just did?"

"Yes, of course I do. Why?"

To be honest, though, what he understood was that he hadn't accomplished anything. Cutting magic with his stick had taught him nothing.

"So my spur-of-the-moment idea failed... I had better give it more thought."

"That's not what I mean!"

"Oh?"

Apparently Aina wanted to say something else. She seemed oddly flustered.

Soma gave her a puzzled look as if to ask if there was anything unusual going on. Seeing him, Aina let out a sigh.

"Being with you makes me feel like everything I thought I knew is wrong..."

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, you said it yourself earlier... Magic doesn't fail. And I was aiming at you for real! I thought you would see how reckless you were being if you got hurt... I don't know how you actually cut it."

“It doesn’t seem at all strange to me... It may have been magic, but it was really only an arrow made of flames.”

Which was laughable compared to a dragon’s breath.

“My Sorcery is Special-Grade, you know? It shouldn’t be possible to cut Special-Grade magic...”

“Is that so? It seems to me that it would be the same as cutting through space. Easier, if anything.”

“They’re nothing alike. You know...teleportation is High-Grade magic, so I think that thing you heard was assuming a match between a High-Grade Sorcery user and a Special-Grade Swordsmanship user. In that case, they could cut space itself to make their attack land.”

“Hmm... So you’re saying that wouldn’t be the case if the Sorcery user were Special-Grade?”

“Yeah... I don’t think cutting space would even be possible in that situation. And that goes for magic too.”

“Yet I cut it.”

“That’s why it’s weird!”

Soma still didn’t quite understand, though, despite Aina explaining herself. Camilla probably hadn’t gone into that much detail precisely because he wouldn’t understand. He’d have to ask her about that later.

“Well, I was able to cut it, and that isn’t going to change. Not to mention, this won’t mean anything to me until I understand how magic and mana work.”

“Only you could say that...” Aina sighed. She seemed to feel similarly to Soma, though.

It seemed he wasn’t going to be able to learn magic that easily, but that also meant he had many other things to try.

This was probably as far as they would go for today, however. He hadn’t completed his routine, for one thing, and it would be getting late by the time he did.

Luckily, though, he had all the time in the world, so there was no need to rush.

Of course, he needed Aina's help...but Soma didn't doubt for a second that she would cooperate. It seemed only natural for Aina to be here now. It was a bit late in their acquaintance to think about what that meant, so he wouldn't give the matter any further consideration.

Readying his wooden stick, Soma began his daily routine once again.

17

Lina Neumond was extremely irritated.

And this wasn't just acute irritation—it was chronic. She'd been irritated ever since a certain thing happened.

She looked out the window in search of the source of her irritation, but she still didn't see him, which made her even angrier. A huge sigh escaped her lips.

Unfortunately, that sigh did not go unnoticed. The voice she'd been listening to suddenly paused, and she felt a sharp glare on her. Unwillingly, she turned her head to see her bespectacled tutor giving her an angry look. Just as she'd expected.

"Miss Lina, are you listening?"

Lina sighed underneath the shrill voice that ensued. For a moment, she wondered what would happen if she said no, but she opted not to do that so as not to create a messy situation.

She actually hadn't been listening. She didn't need to. It would be a complete waste of time to listen to a lecture on what she already knew.

"I'm listening... Basically, it's thanks to my mother's hard work that we have peace in this nation and the devils don't invade, yes?"

"W-Well, yes, that's correct... But that's not all—"

"And my father's work prevents other nations from invading ours. I understood perfectly well."

"Y-Yes... I apologize, but would you please behave as if you're listening?"

"My apologies. I was distracted by something outside the window."

"Outside the window?" The tutor looked puzzled, probably because she knew there was little to see from that window.

Lina's room was located at the eastern edge of the mansion. The window was

also on the eastern side, so when she looked out of it, she could see what was next to the mansion—which was nothing but boring scenery.

If you were being generous, you could call it pastoral, but all there was to see was dirt, grass, and trees, with the occasional bird flying past...and the very rare person going into the yard.

“Well, I can’t see it anymore, so pay it no mind.”

“All right...” The explanation hadn’t satisfied the tutor, but she seemed to remember she had a job to do. “Shall we resume the lesson, then? Make sure you pay attention, or you could end up like *him*. We wouldn’t want that.”

“Yes, yes, I know.”

Lina let the usual rebuke go in one ear and out the other, pretending to listen intently, then returned her gaze to the window. If she was going to be bored either way, this was many times better.

When she spotted the person she’d seen moments before, though, she instantly bit her lip. It was to prevent her irritation from growing, since that very person was its source.

Yes, that was why she bit her lip... No other reason.

“Who am I making excuses to?” she muttered under her breath too quietly for anyone to hear.

The person outside the window had started to move across her field of vision. In less than a minute, she couldn’t see him anymore...and she found herself sighing again.

Her mind returned to the events of a week ago, when she had met the boy who used to be her brother for the first time in a year.

The memory was accompanied by feelings not of enjoyment, but of anger.

She only cared a little that he’d acted too natural after not having seen her in a year, or that he hadn’t been happier to see her, or that he hadn’t told her she was cuter now. None of those things were the real problem.

What upset her most was the look on his face. It ticked her off that he seemed to be enjoying himself.

If that had been all, though, they could have parted with just an exchange of innocuous words. The reason she hadn't been able to do that was because of what he'd said to her—his invitation.

If he'd only invited her out, it shouldn't have been a problem. Lina went out more than he did, after all. More often than not, she would have preferred not to, but the fact remained that she was going out.

So it wasn't going out that was the problem... What she couldn't bear was that he'd connected it to that one time.

That day, that time, that place...the scene she saw after she'd followed behind him.

It felt like he'd defiled that crystal clear memory she held.

It wasn't really his fault, though. It was all in her head. She knew that much.

Knowing that and being able to stand it, though, were different things.

If anything, she'd taken it well in that she hadn't dumped a lot on him right then.

Not that it would have changed anything if she had.

After all, their paths had already diverged a year ago.

"You no longer have a brother."

"No, I never had one."

She'd had that exchange with her mother the day of her fifth birthday party.

Before then, the only birthdays she'd ever known were those she celebrated in secret with her brother, mother, and the servants in the mansion. She was happy enough with those, of course, but the day of her fifth birthday was to be a grand celebration.

She couldn't *not* be happy...but it was then, when she looked over the people who came to the party, that she noticed for the first time.

Her brother wasn't there.

So Lina had asked her mother where her brother was. That had been her answer.

The most unfortunate thing that happened wasn't that her mother gave her such news at an otherwise grand and glamorous party.

It was that Lina understood everything those words meant.

Sophia herself had never expected that. While her experience with Soma had given her a bit of a filtered point of reference, she knew that Soma was special, and children were children. She only told Lina that much because she felt she was obligated to, not because she thought Lina would understand. She even felt bad that she would have to help Lina gradually come to understand over the coming days.

"I understand, mother."

Sophia understood for the first time when she saw Lina's eyes as she agreed—Lina was also a precocious child, even a genius.

And Lina was a genuine genius. Soma's comprehension stemmed from his past life, but Lina had it just from her inborn talent.

Her own status, her brother's status, her mother's status—Lina understood everything just from what her mother said.

It was truly unfortunate, and both Sophia and Lina knew it, but nothing could be done.

Lina had already grasped that she didn't belong to any normal family, just as Soma had, and she understood the concept of noblesse oblige.

Perhaps Lina could have pretended not to know. That probably would have been best for her.

But she understood that this was the best for everyone, so she accepted it earnestly.

"That's why..." she muttered out loud without thinking. She nervously looked back at the room, but her tutor was no longer there. Searching her memory,

she vaguely recalled seeing her off with her head still in the clouds. Her tutor hadn't said anything, either because she hadn't noticed or she hadn't wanted to make a big deal out of it.

"It doesn't matter to me either way."

She took out her pocket watch to check the time. There was still a little time remaining before her next tutor came.

That was why she looked back out the window, as if averting her eyes from her watch, and happened to see Soma, returning with good timing—or maybe bad timing.

Lina looked up to Soma. The way he never bent his will to anybody else had been a strong influence on her. He was always brimming with confidence and never backed down, no matter the situation.

But now she knew that was all a facade. After all, he had no Skills and would never learn any. If he had no talent, then he must have been faking the whole time.

If he had been just any kid, she would have thought it was childish of him—that it was just the sense of worldliness only children give off.

But this was *Soma*. It was hard to imagine that he didn't know.

Actually...that was still in the range of possibilities. He hadn't been told about his own Skills, so he could have been waiting with high hopes for the future.

Lina knew that the tutors had been praising him sincerely, so even if he was faking, there was some factual basis for the pretext.

That was only until he learned his Skills, though.

The way he'd been acting since then—the way he appeared right now—could only be artificial.

So...

"Please stop..."

She didn't want him to keep acting the same as he had before. Though it may have been for his own sake, it felt empty to her.

She didn't want him to keep going into the woods.

She still remembered the sword fight she'd seen that day. Though it was because they were only children, she thought to this day that he'd been amazing.

Even if that wasn't really true, she wanted to let it remain so in her memories.

However...

"If I can't have that..."

Looking down at Soma's smiling face, Lina clenched her fist as she came to a decision.

Seeing that smile on his face had pushed her over the edge.

Lina had forgotten one thing, though. Actually, so had Sophia and the tutors.

That was the fact that Lina was still a child. However precocious and talented she was, she was just a child.

So she didn't realize that the way she was thinking was wrong.

The newly arrived tutors, including the most recent arrival, called Soma talentless and scorned him. That was influencing Lina more than anyone realized.

Yes, despite everything, Lina was just a child.

She was trying so hard despite being a child...but the person outside the window smiled as if he didn't know or care.

That was more than enough to push her to take the last step.

As long as they didn't exchange words, the truth was irrelevant. What she could see and perceive was everything.

Even if she'd once wanted the opposite...

Even being as talented as she was...

Her heart had been pushed over the edge.

So, as she watched Soma disappear into the distance...

Lina resolved to destroy all her perfect memories of him.

18

Lina walked alone in the sunlit forest.

Her steps showed no hesitation, for she had been here once before.

About two years ago, she had happened to see Soma sneaking out of the mansion early in the morning and followed him.

The fact that she still remembered so clearly after two years was proof of just how vivid the experience had been. She could still almost feel how her heartbeat had raced.

Or it could have just been that her heartbeat was racing now, out of curiosity and the feeling of transgression from sneaking out of the mansion.

Today's outing was quite different, but what the two had in common was the fact that she was convinced now, as she had been then, that something would happen if she continued down this path.

Considering that it had been two years, she wasn't sure that she was even in the same place...but in fact, she had bet correctly.

She saw figures and heard voices ahead. That was when she knew her memory hadn't failed her.

Confusion fell over her, though, because what she saw before her wasn't what she had expected.

She'd been so sure that he would be practicing his sword swinging like he had on that day, but this time, he wasn't alone. There was a girl standing next to him. She looked to be about the same age as Soma or Lina, and she had striking red hair and eyes.

Her hair, which was tied up on each side of her head, swung as she yelled something.

"I still don't get why you had to do that!"

"Well, that was my only option at this point. If I can't feel mana, I have to

touch it directly.”

“That doesn’t make it less dumb to put your head in the way while I’m casting a spell! I could have burned your head off if you were any slower!”

“There’s no need to worry about that, since I cut it before then. We can cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“That just makes me more worried!”

This scene of the girl bantering with Soma was strangely irritating to Lina.

This was a different feeling than the one she’d had while she looked down at Soma’s face from her room. It wasn’t even directed toward Soma this time.

It was directed toward the girl, for standing too close to Soma, for being overfamiliar with him.

“Ah!”

For an instant, their eyes met.

She wasn’t just imagining things. And the girl wasn’t the one whose eyes Lina had met. As she had been glaring at the girl, Soma’s head had moved in front of Lina’s line of sight as if to block her, then turned toward her.

It was almost like that one day. Soma had surprised Lina then too, with timing and methods she’d never expected.

It was almost like he’d known everything from the beginning.

“But that can’t be true... It’s nothing more than a coincidence.”

It had to be. Soma had no Skills.

How could he notice Lina when she’d erased any sounds or signals that might tip him off?

Obscure Presence: Seclusion.

That was why the people at the mansion hadn’t noticed her sneaking out...but if he’d noticed her anyway, then there was nothing she could do about it now.

She'd wanted to surprise him to get back at him for that one time...but he'd ended up surprising her again.

That left her dissatisfied...but soon she could get back at him for both times.

"Hey... What happened?" the girl asked Soma as Lina proceeded forward, half out of stubbornness.

She hadn't noticed Lina, which was a relief, since it meant Lina hadn't made a mistake.

That raised the question of how Soma had noticed her, though.

No, it was just a coincidence. There was no greater reason. Lina shook her head as if to clear away the thought.

"Hmm, how to explain..."

"Seriously, tell me what's going on."

"I believe it would be faster for you to see for yourself. Look over there."

"But I don't see anything over the—what?!"

Lina watched the girl look in her direction as Soma instructed her to, then open her eyes wide in surprise. Lina smiled unconsciously; that was exactly the reaction she had wanted.

Obscure Presence was a Skill that top-tier assassins had, after all. It would prevent her from being noticed even if she were walking right next to someone, as long as they weren't paying attention.

Of course, Lina hadn't specialized in the Skill, so she probably had some weak spots...but even so, it shouldn't have been easy to notice her.

She couldn't help the fact that Soma had noticed her...but her pride had been restored after getting the reaction she'd wanted from this strange girl.

"No way... Nobody was there a second ago!"

As she basked in the satisfaction of the girl's reaction, Lina moved closer to them...which was when she remembered.

Noticing the slight smile on her own face reminded her—she couldn't forget to smile.

Her mother had taught her that every greeting should start with a smile.

So Lina put a friendly expression on her face. She would need it for whatever she was about to do.

Their faces came into clear view, and once she was close enough for them to hear, she opened her mouth.

“A good morning to you.”

19

“Would you like to do a bit of sparring, like we did back then?”

Lina nodded without a second thought.

She'd been intending to suggest it herself, so it was convenient for her that he'd asked.

The girl who Soma had introduced as Aina watched Lina walk some distance away. There was a slight smile on Lina's face.

Now Aina wouldn't get in the way.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, I'm ready now,” she replied, checking her hands just to make sure. She was clutching a stick she'd picked up from the ground.

Soma was similarly armed, which would have made it appear to a bystander that they were just playing with sticks.

No, that had to be what it actually was, because that was what Lina had seen before.

And judging by the fact that he looked as if he'd prepared the stick beforehand rather than just picking it up off the ground, he was planning to do the same thing again.

Aina had presumably seen it too, so Lina couldn't fathom why the girl would take this business seriously... If Aina had seen, she must have realized that this was nothing but playing with sticks.

The last time Soma and Lina had sparred, a combination of factors had prevented her from realizing it was nothing but play, but Aina was different. Judging by how familiar she acted with Soma, she must have seen it countless times. Even if she hadn't realized at first, she must have eventually.

If Aina had just pointed that out to Soma, Lina wouldn't have to do this—

“No... I’m misdirecting my anger.”

It had been Lina herself who decided she should make Soma face reality by beating him within an inch of his life. Nobody else bore the responsibility.

If he resented her for it...she would bear that too.

Lina had no right to denounce anyone else in the first place. She could have just told him the facts without going to this length—could have told him that nothing he did would succeed because he had no Skills, and that this was nothing but play.

She should have just pointed that out.

She wasn’t going to dwell on that regret any longer, though. She gripped the stick harder as if to make sure of that, to convince herself.

“Let’s begin, then.”

“Yes, you may have the first move.”

Soma’s stance as he nodded coolly could hardly be called a fighting stance at all. Lina could tell, having studied fighting techniques, unlike him.

She didn’t want to look at him like that any longer, so she resolved to end this immediately.

She assumed the proper stance, then closed in toward his flank with a single step.

It would be over before Soma knew what hit him.

That was okay.

That was what she wanted.

She wanted her overwhelming strength to show him the truth, so he would stop this clumsy charade.

That desire became the force behind her restrained attack.

Swordsmanship (Special-Grade) *Mental Concentration*
Moderation: Slash / Restraint

She wasn't looking down on Soma.

Well, in a way, she was...but she was trying to be considerate of him.

Special-Grade was a rank above High-Grade. Those who had Special-Grade Skills were few and far between and would be considered prodigies among prodigies. Someone with Special-Grade Swordsmanship was on the same level as a force of nature. They could easily chop someone into pieces using just a stick, even more so if their opponent had no Skills.

So Lina concentrated all her energy into making sure that however badly Soma was hurt, he at least wouldn't die...

"Huh?"

Which resulted in her falling face-first onto the ground.

She didn't understand what had happened.

No...she didn't want to understand.

What had happened was simple.

Soma had dodged the slash to his side like it was nothing, then landed a counterattack on her head.

It had been so unexpected that she'd tripped over her own feet, which had sent her collapsing forward.

That was everything.

But that was impossible. She may have been holding back, but a Special-Grade user couldn't lose to anyone High-Grade or lower. That was what made them Special-Grade.

"Hmm... It's true that this is more play than anything—though we called it sparring—but you're playing around too much."

She had no words.

She felt ridiculed for a moment. It was like he'd presumed that was all she could do.

In actuality, though, she was the one who had been ridiculing him.

She could call it putting all her energy into holding back or whatever she wanted, but nobody else could take it as anything but ridicule.

Yet despite that fact, Lina was the one lying on the ground.

But maybe it wasn't *despite* that after all. Maybe this was exactly the arrangement Lina had wanted.

As if to push the thought out of her mind, she kicked at the ground and swung her arm, forcing herself back on her feet.

This swing was far stronger than her previous one, but she still couldn't let go of her common sense.

Swordsmanship (Special-Grade) *Mental Concentration*
Moderation: Slash

She heard a short exhale, then immediately felt a blow to her head.

She managed to avoid ending up in an unsightly state this time, though, because some part of her had been expecting it.

Some cool and composed—maybe idealistic—part of her kept whispering in the back of her mind.

This is exactly what should happen. Of course my brother can do this much.

But the larger, more realistic part of her was screaming over it.

That's not true. It can't be true.

It would be crazy if it were. It would have to be a lie.

If my Skill-less brother isn't really talentless...

Then why are they treating him so terribly?

It makes no sense.

It's incoherent.

That would mean...there was no reason at all for him to be ostracized and treated as if he doesn't exist!

Swordsmanship (Special-Grade) *Mental Concentration* Divine Fulfillment: Glint

“Not bad. You’ll have to do better than that, however.”

She unleashed an attack with all her might, as if compelled by her thoughts, but he dodged it almost too easily.

She felt his stick hit her head again, but she didn’t stop there.

She couldn’t let it stop there.

Swordsmanship (Special-Grade) *Mental Concentration* Divine Fulfillment / Wild Dance: Great Blossoming

She stepped, and swung, and stepped, and swung...and he hit her head each time. She felt like she’d become some kind of musical instrument.

At the same time, all that she’d experienced over the past year passed through her mind.

The thing that stuck out the most was how much she’d been praised.

When she told anyone that she was attending parties as the heir to the family and studying so she could better fulfill that role, they told her how impressive that was for her age.

When the conversation turned to Skills and she said that she had Special-Grade Swordsmanship, they raved that she would keep the kingdom safe and sound.

That went for people in her inner circle too—not just strangers.

She was praised whenever she understood a subject and moved on to the next level. Her tutors told her almost every day how smart she was and how proud they were to be teaching her.

The one who said the most things like this was her mother. Not a day went by

without her mother praising her for something, however small. Anything she did, anything she said, her mother would praise her for it.

It was almost like her mother was making up for not being able to praise someone else.

Lina had heard so, so much praise this year, both from people she knew and people she didn't.

And she was grateful.

But deep down, in the bottom of her heart, she wasn't happy at all.

Swordsmanship (Special-Grade) *Mental Concentration* Divine Fulfillment / Unrivaled Power: Brilliant Brandish

"Hmm... Not bad, really, but I believe you need just a little more. Have you not had many opportunities to train with other people?"

Of course she hadn't. The only people who could take her on would be other Special-Grade users. Not even a High-Grade user could hold a candle to her if she were taking the fight seriously.

The only people who had High-Grade Swordsmanship were first-rate soldiers. Nobody like that would take a job as her tutor, and it would be a mistake to even hope for someone higher.

Naturally, her swordsmanship tutor was Middle-Grade, which was extravagant enough for her, so she did most of her sword lessons on her own. Her tutor just taught her verbally, but the lessons were thorough, teaching her how to hold the sword, then how to swing it, how to step—everything down to the correct mentality.

The tutor looked at her with awe, but she did her best to be diligent and take it seriously.

So...

The first thing she'd felt upon seeing these two today had been envy.

Swordsmanship (Special-Grade) *Mental Concentration* Divine Fulfillment / Unrivaled Power *Obscure Presence: Strike* Omen of Doom

Those feelings pushed her forward.

The next attack Lina released could have been called the culmination of her year of swordsmanship lessons.

It wasn't especially complicated. It was just a combination of everything Lina currently knew how to do.

The simplicity, however, only amplified its effect. The start of her swing and its trajectory were unreadable. It was closer to an assassination technique than a sword technique.

"Oh, that one wasn't bad. Consider your movements leading up to it, though. They gave away what you were about to do."

He just dodged her like it was nothing and tapped her head again.

She still wasn't about to give up, though. It was a matter of stubbornness at this point. She was determined to land a hit on him.

It just didn't make sense to her: how the strangers who praised her didn't know about Soma at all, how the tutors who praised her knew barely anything about him, how they always compared her to others when they praised her and said she was better than a *certain someone*.

As for the ones who knew Soma, even when they praised her, they looked as if they were leaving something unsaid. Like her mother.

And Soma seemed completely unbothered by it all. That made the least sense to Lina out of everything.

It felt like he was saying everything she'd done, everything she'd studied, all her efforts and all the sword techniques she'd trained in, were meaningless.

Everything.

But she couldn't accept that. She couldn't allow herself to.

She'd had no other choice. She'd never intended to choose anything else.

If he was just going to negate all of it...

"I... I...!"

Heavenly Sword *Swordsmanship (Special-Grade)* Limit Break
Arbiter of Mankind: Final Gambit Astral Blade

The last thing she remembered was swinging her arm with all her might.

20

The next thing she knew, she was looking up at the sky.

Her field of vision was filled with a mix of green and blue, and she felt the ground against her back.

It didn't take her long to realize that it'd happened again.

The difference this time, though, was that she didn't feel the urge to stand back up.

Her entire body felt fatigued, but there was no pain anywhere. Not a single hint of it. Of course, only her head had been hit, but even that didn't hurt.

That alone told her how carefully Soma had been holding back for her sake.

Needless to say, she had been soundly defeated.

Considering that it was just a training session, it was probably wrong to look at it in terms of winning or losing.

Lina didn't think so, however. She'd put her all into it, at least.

But she'd been completely beaten. She had no excuse.

It was like he'd negated everything she'd done.

However...

"Your last attack was very good. You only lost by a hair's breadth, and you were improving with every swing. You really have talent for this."

"Oh..."

Soma's face appeared before her eyes, and she felt a familiar sensation on the top of her head.

But it wasn't a hit.

He'd placed his hand on her head and started stroking her hair.



What he'd said could have possibly been interpreted as sarcasm. Lina didn't think it was, though, because it sounded familiar.

Right... She'd heard the same thing two years ago.

It all made sense to Lina when that memory came back to her.

She understood why she hadn't wanted to lose, why she felt like everything had been negated.

At the same time, she felt her remaining strength leave her body.

She knew she could let her guard down now.

"Well, it's quite worthwhile to spar with others. It taught me that I've gotten rusty. Perhaps I should do it more often...although that would be hard work."

As soon as she heard those words, an idea crossed Lina's mind.

It was only an idea, though. It would never come to fruition.

After all...

"For one thing, I have no sparring partner...but I would be glad to have one if the opportunity arose."

She felt him shoot her a glance. It was only for a moment, but it was too clear to just be in her head.

His intention was clear.

But could she really?

Could she wish for that? Did she deserve it?

His face seemed to be saying she did, though it could have been her imagination running wild with desire.

But she didn't care even if it was...so she put her wish into words.

"D...Dear brother..."

†

"I'll be your partner!"

From a distance, Aina heard Lina say those words.

She sighed, wondering why Lina apparently wanted to keep going. Maybe it was because she'd already come as far as she had.

Aina's sigh also contained exasperation and a kind of envy.

She didn't have to be told that she was no match for either of them. She'd known since she first saw Lina—she was a Special-Grade Skill user, what they called a Giftholder in some places.

Aina was also one, but a Giftholder of Sorcery only excelled in magic. She couldn't be sure of her chances against a High-Grade user in close combat.

She couldn't mingle with people like those.

That thought didn't quite incite jealousy, though, because she knew she had something only she could do.

Aina couldn't do what Lina could do, but Lina also couldn't do what Aina could.

In any case, the short yet oddly long-seeming sparring session between Soma and Lina, which had looked a bit like a quarrel between siblings, had come to an end. Maybe it had just been Lina throwing a fit...

Aina sighed again. "Now that you two are done, I'm going to go..."

"You are? I had some other things I wanted to try."

"Is it my fault? I'm sorry..."

"You don't have to apologize, Lina. He did such a ridiculous thing, there's nothing left to do."

"You think so? It was quite the ordinary thing to me..."

"That just makes it more ridiculous! Get a grip already!"

Aina had no clue where he got the ideas for all those things he tried, but most were potentially dangerous to him if not done properly.

No matter what happened, Soma himself brushed it off as nothing more than

a little pain, but Aina couldn't just accept it. She wasn't in the least bit pleased, so although she may have been repaying him for his help, she was more than ready to stop.

"If I can't use magic the usual way, though, I have no choice but to forge ahead and try the dangerous options."

"That's just like you." Lina smiled.

"Um... You're not supposed to smile proudly about that? Are you okay? Like, in multiple ways?"

Lina's demeanor seemed to have changed since she'd arrived. It was like she'd been refreshed, or like some kind of spell had worn off.

Aina figured this was probably Lina's real self... And maybe it made sense that Soma would have a sister like this.

"Anyway, see you tomorrow, I guess," Aina said with a sigh.

"Well, if you put it like that, I can't help it. See you tomorrow."

"I don't think I'll be able to come tomorrow... But see you soon."

Lina had apparently skipped a lesson to come here, so she couldn't come back tomorrow, but in good time, she would return to spar with Soma again. That was what she meant by "see you soon."

One of the reasons Aina had wondered if Lina was okay was because her tutor apparently valued appearances highly. But it probably wouldn't become a problem so long as Lina came back before anyone else noticed.

The lessons themselves were apparently very by the book, so she didn't have to listen as long as she looked at the textbook beforehand. Moreover, the class was her first one in the morning, so she said she would be able to come on occasion in the future. To Aina, the plan seemed more concerning than logical...but she had been desensitized enough by Soma that her first mental reaction had been "yep, that's Soma's sister."

"See you." She turned away from the two and began to walk into the woods. She was able to hear their voices for a minute longer, but those soon faded away too.

Once the only sounds she could hear were her own footsteps and the rustling of the trees, Aina let out a big sigh.

Their sparring session from earlier crossed her mind. Actually, it had never really left her mind since it had happened. The memory was so vivid that she could almost see it before her eyes.

Amazing was the one simple thought that encompassed it all.

Aina hadn't been able to follow most of Lina's movements, as expected of a Giftholder of Swordsmanship. She wasn't sure if she would last even a moment in a fight against Lina.

What was even more amazing, though, was how Soma hadn't let Lina get to him at all.

Soma's movement was nothing very special in itself. Aina could follow it perfectly well.

Nothing about it had been difficult to understand...which made it all the more unusual.

After all, although Lina had looked more impressive to a bystander, Soma had overpowered her.

He hadn't done anything out of the ordinary, but he had forced her to yield.

That showed just how high his skill level was.

She watched Soma's swordplay often, and it was so beautiful she never got tired of watching, but this was only the second time she'd seen him actually spar with someone.

She'd been amazed the first time too, of course, but it couldn't compare.

Soma's true strength was the kind that you only saw when he had an opponent...and she hadn't seen the limits of it even when he was sparring with a Special-Grade partner.

How far did it really go?

All Aina knew was that the only one who knew the answer to that was Soma.

And he'd asked Aina to teach him how to use magic.

An indescribable feeling similar to pride welled up in her as she thought about it...and she knew that this never could have happened if she hadn't met Soma.

It was so fun, she thought. It made her so *happy*.

A year ago, she would never have had that thought...

"I finally found you."

So she'd forgotten.

"What?"

"Do you know how hard I looked for you? Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would find you *here*."

She'd forgotten how easily happiness could be snatched away.

"Albert?"

"Yes. It's been a while, my lady."

He dipped his head as he replied to her quivering voice.

The face he then lifted was familiar to Aina...but she felt no joy at the sight of it.

She just gazed speechlessly at it as she felt a chill running through her mind.

21

It was an old, worn-down place. It could even have been called deteriorated.

It was hard to pinpoint what specifically created that impression. It could have been that it was dimly lit, or that the wooden table was coated in a thin film of grime, or that the ten gathered there were wearing all black with their faces covered.

There were endless reasons you could point to, but they all combined to create a dismal impression...and the main reason it seemed that way may have been the atmosphere of the group of people there.

They themselves would have been glad to hear that. It would have given them even more motivation.

With nobody there to tell them, though, their motivation remained as it was.

And that was more than enough.

“Let us begin. I have an announcement to make to you all. What we have been looking for has been found.”

The pronouncement filled the room with surprise and commotion, which quickly turned to joy.

Which of course it would. This was their first step toward a long-held dream. How could they not be happy and excited?

That didn't apply to everyone, however. One among them remained composed. He carefully considered the information presented, then opened his mouth.

“And you're sure about this?”

“Yes, I saw them the other day. I am completely sure.”

“I see...”

The statement of confirmation incited more exclamations of wonder.

He swallowed and faced the nearly trembling bodies.

“So that means...”

“Yes... The time has come. We will not have to languish in obscurity for much longer.”

There was no response to the prophetic words. They were too moved to speak. Their hearts shook with the joy of knowing their time had not been spent in vain.

“The world will soon be set right. He will surely guide us when that time comes. We must not lose heart before then.”

“Of course. Let us further strengthen our focus, so that we may welcome Him.”

“Yes. Glory to the Dark Lord.”

“Glory to the Dark Lord,” the attendees replied in unison, smiles clearly visible on their faces despite the darkness.

†

“Here I come!”

“Yes, show me what you have.”

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing* Gift of Discernment /
Surrender: Dodge

Soma moved his arm out of the way of the attack, which was accompanied by a high-pitched shout.

He had only been able to do that so easily, though, because his opponent had intended it.

Lina shot off more attacks, not resisting the dodge. Soma managed to dodge the second, then the third and fourth, but the fifth finally gave him no choice but to block the blow.

“Yes! I did it! I made you block!”

“Yes, you did well... But why did you stop there?”

“Oh...”

As soon as Lina realized what she’d done, she took a hit to her head.

In the end, they’d reached the same result as always.

“Augh... I was so focused on landing an attack on you, I didn’t think about what I would do after that.” Lina hung her head.

It was true that she’d done well, however. It had been a month since she and Soma had made amends. Since she’d been coming here once a week, this was their fourth time sparring. However, she’d already forced Soma to use his sword, which was nothing short of shocking. Even if his skill with a sword were far inferior to what it had been in his prime.

“Well, so long as you understand that, you receive a passing mark. You’ll need more practice before you can land a hit on my body, however.”

“Mm... But I’ll get there someday!”

“Yes. I’m looking forward to that day.”

He wasn’t just saying that to flatter her. He was genuinely looking forward to it, even thinking to himself, *So this is how it feels to have an apprentice.*

He’d never been able to consider that in his past life. He’d had no intention of doing anything but pursuing the path of the sword.

He could do this as a way to kill time, although that was a blunt way of putting it.

To walk the path of the sword meant that every swing of his sword was for his own sake. It had been that way for Soma in his past life, at least. That had left him no time for others.

He had done unrelated favors for others at times, but he couldn’t spare a minute of his time when it came to the sword.

He could apply the same mindset to magic in this life. It would mean that if he gained some crucial information, he would use it so that he could learn magic and nothing else, without sharing it with anyone.

If that information was even something he could articulate.

But back to the subject at hand.

“Why don’t we leave it here for today?”

“Already?! I’m not tired!”

“Well, I think she’ll be upset if I leave her on her own for much longer.”

“Oh... That makes sense.”

Lina and Soma turned to look at Aina, who was standing at a distance. Her gaze was cast in their direction, but she seemed to be off in her own world. It was less like she was bored, and more like she was thinking about something...

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Aina.”

“I’m sorry we took so long.”

“Oh—d-don’t worry about it. It’s pretty cool to watch you two spar, anyway.”

“Really?”

“Why would I lie about that? If it wasn’t, I’d come late or just not come at all.”

“That makes sense...”

Soma exchanged glances with Lina as the three spoke. There was a hint of puzzlement on her face, as there often was.

That was because Aina was clearly acting strange. It wasn’t especially obvious when talking to her, but it became so when she was by herself, like she had been just a minute ago.

She hadn’t always seemed this way. It had started about a month ago, and Soma knew it wasn’t in his head if Lina noticed it too.

If he thought about it, though, he hadn’t left Aina on her own until about a month ago.

It could also just have been that he hadn’t noticed because he’d been so focused on what he was doing on his own.

Regardless, Soma felt like he had to do something about it. He knew she had something going on, but it wouldn't be quite right to just ask her and try to fix it. That left one thing he could do.

"Regardless, that means you're spending a lot of time doing nothing, right?"

"Yeah, I can't deny that..."

"I have a suggestion, then. Why don't you make effective use of that time?"

"What do you mean, effective?"

"Let me see... You could think of a signal to use in case you get kidnapped."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing more than what I just said."

He had no other intention in particular. He had just figured it would be easier to know when she got kidnapped if they decided beforehand on a signal to use.

"When would I even need to use that?"

"It's important to be prepared for any situation, just in case."

Not that that was at all likely to happen. Nobody had any reason to think it would. It was just a random thought, a silly game to pass the time. Anything to distract her briefly, he figured.

"And what would you even do once you knew I was kidnapped? Come save me?"

"Yes, naturally?"

It wouldn't happen, but if it did, he would go save her as a matter of course.

Aina appeared surprised at his declaration, however.

"What are you... You're teasing me again, right?"

"Absolutely not. If you were kidnapped, I would go save you, no matter who was behind it or how they did it. I can promise you that."

"Okay... Yeah, I get it. Sorry."

"Hmm? No, I don't think you did anything worthy of apology. I only—"

“Okay, okay, I got it! Enough!”

“Hmm?”

He got the feeling she didn’t quite understand him, but if she insisted she did, then he had no choice but to drop the subject. It was a silly conversation, anyway.

The second he had that thought, though, the conversation started up again and took an unexpected new direction.

“Dear brother! What about me?! Would you come save me?”

“If you were kidnapped? That’s a difficult question...”

“What... Why?! Wouldn’t you come save me?!”

“Your situation is different from Aina’s. You’re training so that you can protect yourself in situations like those.”

“You... You’re right! That means I have to stop training so you’ll save me!”

“I’m not sure what, but I think something went wrong with your reasoning...”
Aina sighed. A faint smile appeared on her face, though.

Seeing that, Soma exhaled. Aina had been doing a lot to help Soma learn magic, all in the interest of repaying him for helping her, but it felt like she’d gone overboard with it recently. He was glad to see her let off some steam.

Of course, that didn’t resolve the root problem, but he didn’t know for sure what that was, or even if there really was one.

As he watched Aina and Lina talk, wondering what the matter could be, Soma shrugged his shoulders.

22

“All right, on to mankind and devils.”

“Mankind and devils?” Soma gave her a confused look. He felt like the time for this topic had long passed. He was justified in thinking so too, since he’d already heard about it.

But...

“I’m sure you have your doubts, but just listen. You need to know what I’m gonna talk about.”

“Hmm... Okay, understood.” Soma obediently nodded, since this was the first time Camilla had said such a thing to him. He figured she must have a good reason for saying he needed to know.

“All right, let’s get started, then. Soma, do you know what the technical meaning of the word ‘mankind’ is?”

“Of course I do. It’s an umbrella term for a number of races, including humans.”

“Exactly. Chiefly humans, but also demihumans, elves, demonkin, and vampires. The word ‘mankind’ technically refers to those five races. People usually just use it to mean humans, though.”

Soma hadn’t known until he’d heard stories like this, but there were many different races in this world. It was understandable that he hadn’t known, since almost everyone in the mansion was human—and those who weren’t would have been difficult to spot.

The non-humans in the mansion were exceptions, though. It was usually easy to identify non-humans.

Each race had its own distinguishing features which could identify them at a glance.

For example, demihumans, who called themselves beastfolk, usually had

animal traits. Some were minor, such as ears or a tail, but some demihumans were as much as half beast. They were the most obviously non-human of the races.

Demonkin also had a distinctive appearance. They usually had monster-like traits. Some people went as far as to call them a type of monster, so they tended to face persecution.

Elves were also easy to spot—they were often beautiful for some reason, so the first thing people thought when they saw someone beautiful was that they must be an elf. They also had distinctive pointed ears, so it was hard to mistake them for another race if you paid attention to the details.

Vampires were the only race of mankind that were difficult to tell apart from humans. They tended to have pale skin and beautiful appearances—although not as beautiful as elves—but those were hardly distinguishing traits. They did have fangs, so you could tell if you saw those...but it wasn't often that you could look inside someone's mouth. That made them easy to mistake for humans, and it was said that it wasn't hard to falsely claim to be a vampire.

The reason humans were usually the basis for comparison between the different races was simple. Not because Soma in particular was a human—it was because that decision had been left up to humans. That had resulted in all of the races of mankind being officially defined in contrast to humans.

“Do you know why we call those five races mankind, by the way?”

“No, I don't. In fact, there is one thing I have to ask. My first thought was that it must be based on appearance, but in that case, why are spirits not included?”

As implied by “many different races,” there were more than five races in this world. Soma had learned that much, but he hadn't been told why certain ones didn't count as mankind. Ever since he'd heard about it, he'd wondered why that was.

“That's pretty simple. It depends on whether or not they have their own country. It's determined by whether other countries recognize them as the official race of the country, so it's no problem if some of the citizens are of other races.”

“Ah, so that’s why spirits aren’t included.”

“Yeah, they haven’t formed a country. Same reason that apparitions aren’t included. There’s no consensus whether they should even be considered a race, actually.”

“Hmm... So is it the same situation with dwarves?”

Dwarves, gnomes, and amazons also existed in this world, but they were rare enough that it was said to be good luck if you met one.

“No, that’s different. Dwarves aren’t recognized as a separate race.”

“What do you mean?”

“Simple: they’re not an independent race. There are barely any pure-blooded dwarves.”

“I see.”

That would certainly explain why they weren’t recognized as a race. He could probably have come up with some arguments for why they should be, but that was the status quo in this world.

“So is that why you live here, Ms. Hennefeld?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re a dwarf, aren’t you? And a pure-blooded one at that.”

Camilla’s eyes widened in shock. She apparently hadn’t expected him to say that at all.

To Soma, though, her reaction was equally unexpected. Dwarves had a distinguishing feature: they never got taller than a human child, even when fully grown. So considering her height, it was the obvious conclusion...wasn’t it?

Soma gave Camilla a questioning look, and a wry smile formed on her face.

“I should’ve expected as much of you, but I didn’t think you’d figure that out.”

“Really? The conclusion seems rather obvious if you think about it...”

“Well, when I said we’re rare, I meant near-extinction level rare... Nobody ever expects one to be right in front of them. Dwarf genes tend to get kind of

overpowered by the other parent's genes when we interbreed with other races. I usually tell people I'm just short."

"I see..."

"Anyway, that's not relevant. Let's get back on topic. Why do you think the category of 'mankind' was created in the first place?"

"Hmm?"

He'd never thought about that. That was just how he'd been taught things were.

"Do you mean that it was created to fill a need?"

"Sort of."

"Hmm, so that means... I see where this is going. This is where the devils come in," Soma muttered.

Camilla smiled wryly again. He looked over her face and nodded as if to say he'd thought so.

"How'd you get that from what I said?"

"It seems obvious to me. You did say that we were going to talk about mankind and devils."

"Oh, I guess so... Tch, my mistake."

"I wouldn't call it a mistake..."

If anything, it was a positive that she was easy to understand, but Camilla continued with a disappointed sigh, as if she'd wanted to surprise Soma.

"Well, you got it. The devils are actually the reason the classification of 'mankind' exists now. Or I should say, they were made into the reason."

23

Before there was such a thing as a devil, there was great conflict between the different races of the world.

However, when dwarves were driven to the brink of extinction, everyone realized that if the fighting continued, it would result in their mutual destruction.

The interbreeding of dwarves with other races was one factor in their near-extinction, but the largest factor was that so many had been killed in battle.

“Basically, they wanted to stop the fighting, so they made up ‘devils’ to be an enemy of all mankind.”

“Ah... How foolish of them.”

“Honestly...”

The concept of “devils” had been deliberately created. Some of the devils had probably done things to warrant it, but it had been mostly for the convenience of the people in power at the time.

That wasn’t why Soma called it foolish, however. It was for a more fundamental reason.

That meant the war hadn’t come to an end. It had just paused temporarily.

With a common enemy in the devils, the other races had decided it wasn’t the right time to fight amongst themselves and had signed a truce treaty.

The people who’d created this situation had probably known it was all a farce, but the truth didn’t matter to them.

They’d used it as an excuse to gather military forces and turn the brunt of them on the devils—and also on other countries and races, almost as an afterthought.

Especially unforgivable was the fact that the human race had been the most active in attacking the devils.

They'd deliberately created and preached this concept of "mankind," yet they never really believed in solidarity with other races at all.

It seemed the other races had also adopted that stance, however, so the feeling was apparently mutual.

The question, then, was whether one farce could make allies of parties who had been fighting for so long.

In a sense, it was natural.

The scope of the conflict had decreased from what it had been, so the effort hadn't been entirely meaningless, but it was foolish nonetheless.

And the most foolish of the countries was Veritas—a kingdom which proclaimed itself to be the oldest country with legitimate human lineage.

That was the country that Soma's more diverse country, Ladius, had split off from.

"Hearing this makes me glad that we declared independence."

"Couldn't agree more."

"One question... If we know that that's why things turned out this way, why do we still use 'mankind' as an umbrella term?"

"Simple. It's already been made official. It's not so easy to just take that back."

"What a bother..."

Nobody needed it anymore, and yet it couldn't be taken off the books. How bothersome international affairs were.

"So, why did I need to know this? Am I even meant to know this?"

"Oh, of course you aren't. Only a few people in each country know."

"That begs the question of how *you* know, and why you would tell me..."

"How I know is a secret, but the reason I told you is simple. Your role in all this is more complicated than you think."

"Hmm?"

This was probably what she meant. Soma didn't officially exist at the moment, but they couldn't erase the truth, however hard they tried to deny it. The existence of that truth was an issue for them. There were more than a few people who considered it a hindrance.

The biggest problem here, however, was outside the country, not inside it.

"This is a young nation. One crisis, if it were big enough, could be a fatal blow to it."

"Ah... I have an idea of what you mean."

"To put it subtly... Choose your friends wisely."

Ladius was what was known as a mixed nation—one that had various races living in it. Soma had heard he could meet any number of races if he went to the capital, even if they weren't common nearby.

There was one exception—those who were only allowed to live in one country, the devils.

Whatever the backstory may have been, the human race would never forgive the devils—if anything, the backstory just reinforced that. It may have been a farce, but they'd been made into an enemy group.

If the child of someone with a measure of status befriended...no, even made acquaintances with a devil, their family would gladly censure them. Nobody would be willing to stand up for them, and a situation like that had a real risk of ending the country.

"Hmm... Well, I can understand that, but why didn't you just tell me not to talk to any devils and leave it at that?"

"You'd want to know why not, wouldn't you? Then I'd have had to take the time explaining it to you anyway, so I figured I'd just tell you up front."

"And what would happen if I told someone else about this?"

"Well, Sophia would probably do something about it, but I'd end up on the chopping block. And I mean that literally."

"I see... I'll keep my lips sealed, then. I have no plans of killing my teacher."

“I’d appreciate that.”

As he watched Camilla nod in response, Soma thought of one more thing.

It was that Camilla was aware of the possibility that he could become more than acquaintances with a devil.

“Well, I doubt you want to stay in this country.”

“Hmm?”

“Sophia’s going to try to keep you around some way or another. I think she wants you to be Lina’s attendant in the future. At least, it looks like that’s what she’s preparing you for. I don’t imagine you’re going to just lie down and accept that, though.”

“I can’t rule out the possibility.”

He was telling the truth. He couldn’t deny there was a chance he would accept.

“But that’s only if you can use magic by then, right?”

“That would be correct, yes.”

Soma’s one goal in this life was to use magic. That didn’t include mastering it. If he could use it, that was all he needed to be satisfied. In that case, staying in this house would be worth considering.

But...

“I’m sure you’d go anywhere to make your dream come true. That includes devil territory.”

“You know me well.”

“I’m not your teacher just for show. And it looks like that’s the more likely outcome, since you’re not making any progress.”

That was the truth. And while the idea was only gradually growing in his mind, he was beginning to have thoughts of going to places like that.

“I don’t feel like stopping you—not that I could anyway—and I bet Sophia feels the same, so I want to put an end to it right now. Live how you want, but don’t forget to take us into account.”

“Hmm... I’ll handle it appropriately when the time comes. Nothing is certain as of yet, and I have a lot of time left.”

“Not like you can do much until you’re an adult, anyway.”

The age of majority differed between races and countries, but it was fifteen in Ladius. That lined up with when people graduated secondary school, and they could act independently from then on. Before then, parental permission was required to leave the town, let alone the country, although there were occasional exceptions.

“So I’ll be tying you down until then.”

“I’d appreciate it if you would go light on the tying down.”

Soma shrugged as he thought to himself.

What he’d said had been completely honest. He’d handle it appropriately. That wasn’t a lie—he intended to keep that promise if he could.

However...he figured she would let him break it if he had no choice, so he hoped she would go easy on him then.

He wasn’t confident that he wouldn’t cause any trouble.

Soma exhaled slightly as he thought quietly to himself.

24

Dissatisfaction permeated the air throughout the dimly lit space.

Nobody dared to say it aloud, but the looks in their eyes communicated it with eloquence.

He kept a cool and collected look on his own face as he felt all their eyes on him, however. He continued his announcement with an air of hardly even noticing or caring.

Impatience was beginning to seep into their glares, but he still showed no reaction.

“That is all I have to announce.”

“What?!” multiple of the attendees exclaimed.

And of course they would, since it had already been over a month since that day.

They hadn’t completed their preparations, of course, but they could do that once the first step had been taken. If anything, it would go more smoothly that way, considering what was to come after.

They were just losing patience waiting for a new development.

“Oh? Is there a problem? You all seem rather dissatisfied with what I thought was a perfectly fine announcement.”

“Don’t play dumb with me... You’re the one who said we wouldn’t have to be in obscurity for much longer!”

“Yes, I said it would be *soon*. We’ve waited this long. What difference does a little more time make?”

It was true. Even another year would be little compared to the length of time that had already gone by.

However...

“That’s not what I meant!”

“I must apologize. I misspoke. I suppose I was unable to completely hide my joy.”

“What?”

They felt doubtful for a moment, but then quickly realized what he meant. Shock fell over their faces.

“You don’t mean...?”

“I do. I apologize for how long it took, but the preparations on our end are finally complete.”

“In that case...!”

“Yes, I plan to finalize things today. It will depend on her...but we could get started in as soon as a week if all goes well.”

“Wha...” They couldn’t help but interject in surprise again, but it was for a different reason this time.

This was moving much too fast.

“It’s starting next week?!”

“We haven’t finished our preparations yet!”

“Yes, so please hurry. The more time you take, the longer it will delay us.”

“You should’ve told us earlier, damn it!”

“My apologies. I wished to surprise you.”

“Yeah, well, you got your wish!” one of the followers said angrily, but there was an obvious undercurrent of happiness to his words.

Of course there would be, since this meant their obscurity really would come to an end.

“Stay focused as we move forward, and glory to the Dark Lord.”

“Glory to the Dark Lord!”

Their joyful shouts echoed through the dim space.

Aina absentmindedly looked at the scene before her. Soma and Lina were sparring...or more like performing a sword dance now. Their dance-like motions entranced her as she watched.

Lina probably wasn't aware of that. She was intent on hitting Soma with her repeated attacks.

But Soma, moving skillfully, wouldn't let that happen. He'd been forced to block one of Lina's attacks last week, so it had looked like she'd finally caught up to his level, but the gap had opened up again.

Either Soma had been holding back before, or he was still improving. Aina couldn't tell which, but she could tell for sure that Lina would need more time before she could catch up to him.

Aina hadn't noticed it as it was happening, but her eyes had improved to the point that she could grasp that. She hadn't been able to follow their movements before, but now she could see everything they were doing.

Although she didn't realize it herself, Aina had grown a lot.

She probably wouldn't have been happy even if she had known, however, because it wasn't the kind of growth she wanted.

That was why she sighed as she followed their movements. *They've been growing steadily, but not me...* she thought.

Of course, as mentioned before, Aina *had* grown, and that included her magical power. Her improvement was worthy of a Special-Grade user; really, it was something to be proud of. Anyone else who knew about it would have wondered what more she could want and would have felt inferior in comparison.

Yet Aina would probably still have felt the same even if she'd known that.

Because in fact, it wasn't good enough.

Aina hadn't been able to teach Soma to use magic like he wanted, and that was everything to her.

She sighed deeply.

At the same time, the thought came to her, *Maybe I should give up.*

She'd been thinking so for over a month now. She hadn't managed to repay Soma in any way—at least, that was how she felt, regardless of what Soma thought about it. But she still couldn't do what she couldn't do.

So she should say sorry, then leave and never come back, she thought.

That wasn't an idea that Aina would have been likely to have on her own, however. She'd started thinking that way after the conversation she'd had that day.

"Won't you come back to the Dark Lord soon?"

So the familiar man, Albert, had said to her.

Yes—Aina was one of what they called the devils.

That wasn't what they typically called themselves, however. They knew very well that "devil" was a derogatory term. They preferred not to use any names that others came up with for them, including regional and town names.

There were two exceptions, though: the Dark Lord and the Dark Commanders.

The humans had created those two titles out of fear and awe, so Aina's people had come to prefer them. The Dark Lord, as the name suggested, was the ruler of the devils, and the Dark Commanders were the strongest of all of them.

Their status was similar to that of the Elite Seven on the side of mankind. The number was about the only difference. While there were, of course, seven people in the Elite Seven, there were four Dark Commanders.

Those four made up a larger proportion of their own population than mankind's seven, and they were no less skilled.

Ten years ago, one of the Dark Commanders had been defeated by one of the Elite Seven, which was said to be because that member of the Elite Seven was the strongest of them all. The devils considered it a win that the Commander

had even survived to tell the tale.

That aside, the Dark Lord and the Dark Commanders were supreme beings to the devils.

And Albert was one of the Dark Commanders.

He was the one who had invited her back—invited the girl who'd run away because she couldn't take everyone's disappointment. Normally, she would have immediately said yes.

Aina had decided to hold off on giving her answer, though. Although she could use magic now, she still felt some lingering fear...and most of all, she was enjoying herself. She enjoyed being with Soma. It made her happy. She didn't want to leave him.

And while she'd been mulling her decision over, someone else she enjoyed spending time with had come along—she wasn't sure if they were close enough to warrant the term, but she'd made a new friend.

That had only made the decision harder for her.

“See you tomorrow, then.”

“See you!”

Aina had been thinking for so long, it was already time for the three of them to part.

She'd been doing almost nothing but thinking lately. Not just when she was watching them spar—the thoughts came unbidden even when she was trying things with Soma.

That was probably partly because she was running out of things to try, though.

But...

It had to come to an end soon.

“Yeah... Bye, Soma. Bye, Lina.”

She deliberately hadn't said “See you,” because she was still unsure what she should do.

With that, she turned away. They seemed to have more they wanted to say, but she ignored them and walked away.

“I imagine you’ve had enough time to make up your mind. What do you say?”

Albert suddenly appeared before her. It didn’t surprise her, because she’d had a feeling this would happen.

Just then, it all clicked for her.

With one look at Albert’s face, she understood.

She knew what she’d really been worrying over.

It was so simple, she inadvertently chuckled to herself.

“My lady?”

“Oh, sorry, Albert, I wasn’t laughing at you... I was laughing at myself for worrying about such a little thing.”

She’d realized now how silly she’d been.

She had nothing to worry about.

After all, she’d already made her decision.

So...

“Then...”

“Yes, I’ve decided.”

“So, what academy are you thinking about?” Camilla asked out of nowhere while Soma was reading magic studies, part of a tutoring lesson turned half self-study.

Soma looked up inquisitively, not because he was bothered by the suddenness of the question or because he wasn't sure how to respond, but simply because he had no idea why she would ask such a thing.

“Hmm... That's a troublesome question for me, seeing as I have no choice.”

“Huh? What do you mean, you have no choice? I know there's only one thing you want to do, but you have multiple choices when it comes to academies.”

“Well, it isn't that I don't think I would be able to go to an academy. It's that if I were told to go somewhere, I would have no choice but to go.”

“Oh, that's what you meant. Well, there's something you don't know about.”

“Does that mean I would have a choice?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

This came as a surprise. Soma had thought that even if he could attend an academy, he would have to go to whichever one he was assigned. Apparently that wasn't the case, though.

“If you expressed a preference, I'm sure she'd take it into account somewhat. Actually...not just somewhat, she'd do it to the best of her ability.”

“Hmm... Well, I would be happy to share my preference, but...”

“Huh? Something the matter?”

“How would I tell her about it?”

He would have to tell his mother, Sophia. But sadly, he hadn't seen her for over a year—not even on his birthday—so he wasn't certain he would even have the chance to talk to her.

He wasn't unhappy with that fact. He understood the situation. And based on some things Camilla had said, his mother would have preferred if things were different between them.

It still meant, though, that he was left with no opportunity to tell her how he felt, which meant she had no way to accommodate him.

"Well, about that, I think it'd get to her some way or other if you talk to yourself about it... Like, right now, for example."

"Some way or another."

"Yep, some way or another."

"The same way that I got that birthday present last year from an anonymous woman who claimed to be watching over me?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"I see how it is."

He got the gist of what she meant. It was true that it was still possible to communicate without meeting in person—if Soma had someone to tell his mother how he felt, for example.

As a side note, the present from the anonymous woman had been a pocket watch. Soma hadn't known until then, but apparently pocket watches were symbolic of coming of age. He was originally going to be given one after his Skill Assessment, which was customary among nobles.

"Hmm... I never thought that I would have the choice of where to go. If you ask me, however... I would prefer an institute of magic if possible."

There were different academies for different subject areas. A few were meant for general studies, but most had one specialty which the majority of students would go on to use after they graduated, so the best option if you wanted to study magic was to go to a mage academy.

There were conditions to attend each academy, however. You had to have talent for the subject studied there. In the case of a mage academy, that meant magic talent.

"Yeah, they usually wouldn't let someone who can't use magic into a mage

academy. That doesn't mean you have no options, though."

"You're saying I have a way to get in?"

"Yep. It'll take some luck, though."

"Luck..."

"You need a recommendation to get into a mage academy, which makes sense considering how magic is."

Since magic relied on talent, there were few ways to become a mage. That meant that there were few people who could teach it, resulting in a small number of mage academies, so the barrier to even taking the entrance exam was high.

"We could get that part taken care of if Sophia were to recommend you, though. She could make up some reason for it, considering your future."

"Hmm... That just leaves the exam."

"Yep. That's where luck comes in."

"Hmm?"

The exams weren't the same every time, Camilla explained. They differed between academies and test administrators, but they were always based on practical skill. The problem, then, was what he had to do to pass.

"If they tell you it *has* to be magic, then you're out of luck. You'll have to just let it go then."

"I assumed that would normally be the case."

"Nope, not necessarily. It depends whether they specify you have to use magic to do the task."

For example, if the tester told him to block their magic using his own magic, he would be out of luck. But if they just told him to block their magic *somehow*, he would have a shot.

"So they'd probably pass you if you blocked it with a sword."

"Wait, are you sure that would be okay?"

“You’d be following the instructions, right?”

“I suppose... That just leaves the question of whether the examiner would accept that argument.”

“That also depends on your luck.”

The reasoning seemed a little forced, but it at least showed that he had a chance.

At the very least, he had the right to choose. It would be up to him to make something of it.

“Well, you don’t have to decide today. Think on it.”

“Understood.”

It still didn’t quite feel real, but this was worth serious consideration.

He was still hesitant to make a final decision to go to a mage academy. It wasn’t about whether he would be accepted or not—if they rejected him, he could just go somewhere else. It was that he wasn’t sure if a magic academy would really be the right place for him.

Over the past month, Soma had tried many things with Aina’s help, but he hadn’t seen any results. That was unlikely to change in the future. He was convinced of that for some reason he couldn’t articulate.

That meant he had to think about how to change his approach...and he had to question whether going to a mage academy would be good enough for that purpose. It seemed like it could just end up being a sort of extension of the same things he’d already been doing.

There was also the chance it wouldn’t be, of course. And even if it were, it would be worth it just to read the books they were bound to have in a mage academy. It would also be worth it in that he would be surrounded by mages, so he could immerse himself in magic 24/7.

If he couldn’t use magic with conventional methods, though, that meant he would have to bring in information from somewhere else. Soma had once gotten a hint on how to improve his swordsmanship from an unrelated source. If that were also possible with magic, then perhaps he could accomplish that at

another academy.

Or...

“Hmm... It may also be fun to go on an adventure.”

“Huh? You’re not going to an academy?”

“It was just a thought... But it may not be such a bad idea.”

“Oh... Well, it’s not like you *have* to go to an academy. If you’re serious about that, it’d be possible.”

“Hmm... I’ll give it some thought.”

It would mean leaving Aina and Lina behind, but then again, so would going to an academy. It would hurt, but he had nothing to regret when it came to either of them.

Soma knew that Lina was having to do a lot of hard work, but he thought she would be okay as she was now. She would be able to stop to catch her breath and avoid burning herself out.

Aina would have given him pause until yesterday, but there was no more need for that. Not that she’d suddenly disappeared or anything... It was because she’d seemed strangely refreshed when he’d seen her this morning.

He’d refrained from asking why, but she’d looked carefree, like she’d either resolved something or just put it behind her. She probably still had problems left unresolved...but he got the sense that she would be okay.

It seemed a little unfortunate to him that he hadn’t been able to repay her in the end, but it was fine. She was okay now, and that was what was important. Soma had no regrets.

He didn’t plan to go on an adventure immediately, anyway. If he did, it would be in place of going to an academy, which would be in over a year. For now, he would continue spending his days as he had been.

“Well, that’s an option, at least.”

He didn’t exactly dislike his current life. It was fun enough, and he was satisfied except for one thing. That one thing, though—not being able to use

magic—was as important to Soma as everything else combined.

In the end, Soma's nature would never change, even after death.

All of this would come later, though. For now, he had to do some thinking about his options so that he wouldn't regret his decision when the time came.

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“This has been a very long time coming. As a Dark Commander, I hereby announce the initiation of our grand scheme.”

His declaration echoed in the darkness but met with only silence from his followers.

It was not because they were angry or otherwise upset, however. Quite the opposite. It was all they could do to hold themselves together as delight flooded their bodies.

“Finally... It’s finally happening.” One of them managed a response, their voice shaking.

Their mouths, the only parts of their faces visible under their hoods, were turned up in smiles.

The Dark Commander had no intention of responding to that, however. He had expected that reaction from them, so he just felt satisfied—but also a little sorry.

“Yes, it’s finally happening. I must apologize, however. If everything had gone well, I would be announcing the completion of our plan as opposed to its commencement.”

“Well, it wouldn’t have accomplished anything for us to tell you to hurry up... Everyone here understands that. And this way makes for a better plan, right?”

“Yes... It certainly would have gone more smoothly if she had cooperated, but then we may not have had enough material.”

There was no longer any need to worry about that, however.

She had always been the perfect resource. With a bit of fear smacked into her, she would be an ideal sacrifice. He could have just brought her by force before.

But he couldn’t kill her, and there was always the risk of something going

wrong if they trapped her. This was the only way if they wanted to ensure their plan would work regardless of the circumstances.

Considering that, there had been no need to even go last week... Perhaps he had been a bit hasty despite himself. He cleared his throat slightly, as if embarrassed by his own immaturity.

One thing was certain, however: their dearest wish was soon to come true.

He nodded as if to confirm that, then stood up.

“I will be on my way now.”

“So soon?”

“My apologies... I simply cannot wait.”

“That means we all feel the same, then.”

Those words elicited smiles on all their faces in an uncharacteristically carefree moment.

And that was the correct reaction in a sense, considering the circumstances.

Therefore, the man smiled likewise in response, then dipped his head.

And then...

“I will bring her, then. The rest is in your hands.”

“Yes, you take care of your part, and we’ll take care of ours.”

“Thank you. Glory to the Dark Lord.”

“Glory to the Dark Lord.”

With that, he left the scene.

†

Aina sat alone, doing nothing, beneath the sunlight filtering through the trees above her. There was an absentminded look on her face, her eyes unfocused.

Nothing in particular had happened. She was just bored waiting for Soma to come.

“So bored...” she said out loud with a sigh, which did nothing to ameliorate

the situation.

She scanned her surroundings, but all she saw were the same trees as always. Another sigh escaped her as she looked at the uninhabited scenery.

On an ordinary day, Soma would have already arrived some time ago.

This wasn't unanticipated, though. Soma had let her know the day before that he would be about thirty minutes late. Yet Aina had still come at their usual time out of habit.

She'd heard from him; she'd just accidentally found herself coming like she usually did.

"Who am I even making excuses to?"

She smiled wryly in response to her own thoughts.

Really, who was she making excuses to?

It didn't warrant excuses. The very fact that she was here right now—that she hadn't gone back—was reason enough.

That didn't change that she was bored, though.

She was wondering how she could kill time when it happened.

"Don't move."

"Huh?"

Without any warning, Aina felt something pressed against her neck. She couldn't tell what exactly it was, but she could tell for sure that it was sharp.

That wasn't what sent Aina into a panicked confusion, however. It was that the voice was very familiar to her.

She'd heard the same voice just last week.

"Um... Lina?"

"Yes, it's me."

Aina heaved a sigh of relief, less because it really was Lina than because she'd answered her.

Lina's voice was oddly stiff, which did bother Aina...but she would let that go

for now. More importantly, Aina had something to tell her.

“Um... That really startled me, so don’t do that again, okay? And I thought you weren’t going to come until tomorrow.”

“That was my original plan, but I wanted to surprise my brother. It doesn’t look like he’s here yet, though...which is convenient for me.”

“Convenient? You mean you wanted to surprise me too? I mean, you did...but that wasn’t a very funny prank.”

“What makes you think that this is a prank?”

“What?”

Well, it must have been. It *had* to be. There was no other option.

What reason could Lina possibly have had to—

“Why wouldn’t I pull my weapon on a devil?”

Aina’s breath immediately caught.

Her confusion also settled, though, because she understood what this was about now.

It would be stupid to ask how long she’d known. Aina had been foolish to think Lina hadn’t known in the first place.

And Aina hadn’t especially tried to hide it. She’d intended to tell the truth if either of them asked. She just hadn’t said anything because they hadn’t asked her about it. That, and she hadn’t wanted to tell them.

So Aina released the tension from her body. She knew resistance would be futile, so she decided not to even try.

She just wished she’d had the chance to tell Soma—

Lina sighed. “Honestly, you’re so naive.”

“What?”

Just as Aina was fixing her resolve, Lina inexplicably stepped away and sighed.

Lina then stepped in front of her with a face that looked not murderous or hateful, but exasperated.

Aina could tell that much, but she couldn't tell *why*, which sent her straight back into her previous confusion.

"What... What do you mean?"

"Nothing more than what I said. If that had been anyone other than me, you'd be dead, you know? Honestly, you should be more cautious, coming to a place like this."

"Huh?"

She genuinely didn't understand.

Why was she being lectured? Why wasn't she already dead? Why was Lina acting the same as she always had?

None of it made sense to Aina.

"You're...not going to kill me?"

"Why would you think that? I have to admit, I get annoyed at how close you are with my brother sometimes, but I don't hate you so much that I want to kill you."

"B-But, you just..."

"It was a prank, of course. No...not a prank. More of a warning."

"A warning?"

"I wanted you to understand the danger you're in. Neither you nor my brother have been cautious enough since my arrival."

Now that Lina mentioned it...Aina really hadn't been cautious enough. That was mainly because Lina was Soma's sister, but looking back, Aina had been careless.

"Well, my brother probably doesn't have to, since he'd be fine either way. It's a problem in your case, though. I've been thinking I should talk to you about it, so today was the perfect time, since I caught you alone."

"Got it..."

It didn't look like she was lying, and she had no reason to. That meant the reason she'd given for her actions was real.

The tension melted away from Aina's body for a different reason than before. She sighed.

"Don't scare me like that... It really wasn't funny."

"I told you, it wasn't a prank. I had to scare you for it to sink in."

"I mean, maybe you're right about that, but..."

She must have had the right to do a bit of complaining. She'd really thought she was about to die.

"Just be more careful from now on, okay? It would have been really bad if someone else had found—"

"Huh?"

All Aina could process in that moment was that Lina had suddenly leapt away.

Why Lina had done that, Aina had no idea, but she quickly realized she didn't have time to wonder. Some force had blown Lina away just then.

"Lina?!" she screamed as she turned around in an unthinking reaction. She'd instinctively realized that the mana had come from behind her.

That instinct was correct...because she saw someone she knew there. Her eyes widened in shock.

"Albert?!"

She didn't have any time to stand in shock. She immediately knew what Albert was about to do with his outstretched right arm.

She put out her own hand to stop him.

"Ma—"

"Shock Wave, mow her down."

But she was too late. She heard a huge rumbling sound behind her.

A smacking sound immediately followed, probably the sound of Lina hitting the ground. Before Aina could turn to look, Albert vanished.

She quickly turned her head. Albert was reaching a hand toward Lina, who had collapsed on the ground.

For a second, Aina wondered why, before she remembered what Lina had just been doing. She hadn't actually intended to hurt Aina...but it would have looked that way to a bystander.

As soon as she realized that, she started to yell.

"W-Wait, Albert! She... She wasn't trying to hurt me or anything! You don't have to save me from her!"

She didn't know what to say, so she just said what came to mind.

And maybe it had worked, because Albert's arm stopped moving.

"I see... I wish I'd thought of that. It could have further deepened your despair... But it seems there won't be any need for that. I'm glad I continued my daily routine...or perhaps this is the Dark Lord's doing."

"Albert?"

She didn't understand what Albert was saying. She just felt a vague unease.

Suddenly, she was hit with the urge to run away as fast as she could. But she couldn't do that and leave Lina behind.

Albert picked up Lina's body. She seemed to be breathing, which was a relief, but Aina couldn't lose focus now.

"Al—"

"Don't worry, my lady. She seems like she will make quite the good sacrifice. It won't even be necessary to kill her."

"Albert? What are you..."

She furrowed her eyebrows as a chill ran through her. Alarm bells were going off in her head; it was as if someone was screaming at her to get out.

"Now, my lady... The Dark Lord has called for you, as I told you before. Come with me."

"I already told you... I'm not going."

She'd already said so. When she'd seen his face, she'd realized—all her worrying had been about what she could do so she could stay here.

For Aina, it had been a forgone decision that she wouldn't go back.

"May I take that to mean that you don't care what happens to her?"

"Wh..."

That made Lina a hostage.

Aina had never imagined he would do such a thing... It shocked her that he would go so far.

"Why would you... He would never let you—"

"I already told you, the Dark Lord desires this."

"You're lying..."

It couldn't be true.

He—the Dark Lord—her father would never allow this.

But...

"Well... You leave me no choice. I shall have to take you by force. That was my original plan, anyway."

She couldn't resist. She didn't even have the time to.

The next thing Aina knew, she was being blown away, a familiar pair of legs crossing her view where she could only see the ground.

But her body wouldn't obey her. She could barely even move her mouth.

She could tell she was being picked up, though, when her field of view changed.

"Let us return, then. The Dark Lord will be pleased that we brought an unexpected extra."

Aina muttered one last thing under her breath before her consciousness fell into darkness.

It was over an hour before it became known to everyone in the mansion that Lina was missing.

The reason it took so long was simple. The person who was supposed to let everyone know—that is, the first person to notice—hadn't reported it.

"I see. This is my understanding. Lina has been absent from one lesson every week for approximately a month. However, you didn't consider it a problem because she was always back by the next lesson."

Sophia was glaring sharply as she spoke. The woman she was speaking to gave a trembling nod in response.

"Y-Yes... That is correct."

"And you immediately noticed her absence today, but you decided not to report it because you considered it normal for her."

"That's correct..."

"Despite knowing that it usually would have been *tomorrow* and not today."

"W-Well, I figured that kind of thing happens sometimes..."

Sophia sighed. "Well, I understand the situation... Now that we're done, you may leave."

"Um!"

"Did you not hear me? I told you to leave."

"Yes, Your Grace..."

The woman's face was pitifully pale as she dipped her head and left the room.

That wasn't to say that Sophia felt even a shred of pity for her, however.

Camilla let out a sigh as soon as the door shut.



“I always wondered why you hired her.”

“I never wanted to hire her in the first place. But I had no choice. She was better than my other options.”

“*She* was? I guess it was on pretty short notice, and you already hired all the best teachers. But if that was the case, why didn’t you hire someone earlier?”

“Well, I planned to start teaching Soma the subject around now...and the best tutors charge prices to match.”

“You don’t have the money to keep someone around without using them? Really says a lot if even a ducal family’s struggling.”

“We may be a ducal family, but we’re in a young and small country.”

“And now that you’ve hired her, you can’t just get rid of her on a whim, huh?”

“Yes, that would normally be the case. This event more than warrants it, however. Whatever shall I do...” Sophia’s eyes narrowed.

Camilla shrugged in response. She had the thought that Sophia should have done something about the woman earlier, but she opted not to say it out loud. It wouldn’t mean anything if she did. The end result was the same either way; the woman was being disposed of.

And while Sophia had wondered out loud how she would do it, she was likely to just fire her. That would be enough.

The woman was the type who stepped out of line because of her pride and awareness of being on top. Once she fell from that position, she would take herself down the road to hell. There was no need to assist her with that.

And now wasn’t the time to talk about that, anyway.

“Back on topic. What we know now is that over an hour ago... I guess two hours ago now, we couldn’t find Lina anywhere in the mansion. She was there when you ate, right?”

“Yes, we ate together.”

“So it was after that. Either someone kidnapped her, or she snuck out on her own...”

Camilla was acting as if she didn't know, but she could make an educated guess that Lina had snuck out.

She knew that Lina had Obscure Presence, since she'd done the Assessment herself...and she knew two more things.

She knew that Lina had been sneaking out of the mansion every week, and she knew where Lina had been going.

That was because Soma had told her, of course. She hadn't reported it to Sophia, however.

You could call it neglecting her duties, which it was, but if Sophia found out, she would be obliged to do something about it. Camilla didn't feel like doing something that would be of no benefit to anyone.

That meant Camilla would have to make up some reason for coming to that conclusion.

Luckily, that wasn't too difficult.

"It's more likely that she snuck out, I'd think."

"Your reasoning?"

"Who'd be able to sneak in here past your barrier?"

After all, it had been erected by someone who was known as the strongest of all mankind. It would be all but impossible to break the barrier, whether with magic or with a weapon—and even if someone did, they would be caught immediately. It may even have been impossible with Special-Grade Obscure Presence.

But though Sophia took pride in its perfection, it had one weakness. It prevented all attacks and infiltration from outside, but it was completely defenseless if the attacker came from within. Once someone made their way in, even if they had no more powerful Skill to conceal them than Low-Grade Obscure Presence, they would be able to assassinate everyone in the mansion.

Oh, with one exception, Camilla thought, but that was irrelevant at the moment, so she put it aside.

However, although the barrier had that weakness, it wouldn't be a problem.

That was what Camilla was there for.

“So, if anyone were suspicious, you would have already found them, is what I understand.”

“You got it.”

Camilla’s Skill Assessment wasn’t just to be used for the family. Well, according to Sophia, that was half of the purpose...but that still left the other half.

Camilla was there to check the Skills of anyone who entered or was to be employed at the mansion. If even one Skill seemed fishy, they wouldn’t be allowed in. And if they didn’t have even a Low-Grade Skill, it meant they weren’t competent enough to be a fully fledged professional, so the family could handle it if someone like that infiltrated the mansion.

Well, Camilla could think of one person like that who they wouldn’t be able to handle. However, he was not only exceptional but part of the family, so she opted not to pay it any mind.

Since that was the case, the only way for someone to disappear from the mansion would be for them to leave on their own.

“And Lina has a good Skill for that.”

“Which means it wouldn’t be unusual if nobody saw her. I suppose that makes sense, especially given that it’s been every week for over a month.”

Sophia would be aware of that much, of course. They were just going over their reasoning to make completely sure nothing was amiss. That still left the possibility that both of them were mistaken, but this was much safer than one of them thinking it over alone before going forward.

“Perhaps there’s a reason she left today and not tomorrow...”

“Maybe there is, maybe there isn’t. Only she would know.”

“We’ll put that matter aside for now, then.”

“Yeah. There’s also the question of why she didn’t come back today of all days...”

It did tell them one thing for sure: something unforeseen had happened.

“So, what’s the plan, now that we know that much?”

“Right... May I ask you?”

“Yeah, I figured you would. You wouldn’t have called me here otherwise.”

“That’s not true. I needed confirmation one way or another.”

“You’d be asking something of me regardless. The only difference is whether it’s just me or a group of people. And a group wouldn’t be possible this time, would it?”

“You’re right... I wish I could have everyone looking for her, but...” Sophia’s voice caught.

As Sophia had said herself, this was a ducal family, but it belonged to a newly formed small country. That meant that if this matter became a big scandal, it would immediately create stumbling blocks for them.

This couldn’t be solved by force. That meant they had to resolve it in secret before it came to that.

“I get it. If that were possible, you wouldn’t have had to treat Soma any differently either. You’re just making the right choices as a duchess.”

“But I’m a failure as a mother.”

“Then apologize later. I’ll make sure you get a chance to.”

“I would appreciate that.”

“Ha, I’m always covering your back. This is just one of those times.”

With that confident statement, Camilla left the room.

In unforeseen situations like these, the longer they took, the more likely they were to end up being too late. That meant time was of the essence.

As she walked down the long corridor, she wondered what to do.

“Do you have any leads on where to look?”

Despite herself, Camilla felt proud that she hadn’t screamed in surprise at the sudden interjection. She looked down to see a boy standing there as if that was

exactly where he was meant to be.

“Soma... Did you hear...?”

“No, I didn’t hear anything. Why?”

“But...”

Based on what he’d just said, he knew that Lina was missing. But he had no way to get information like that other than from Camilla, seeing as everyone else in the mansion treated him like he didn’t exist.

“Well, it’s nothing much, really... I just happened to hear some rumors and such while I was walking down the hallway. More importantly, as for Lina’s disappearance... Can I take this to mean that you were talking to my mother about that just now?”

“I mean, you’re right, but...”

If he knew about it, then that was easy enough to guess, but she’d had no clue that he had some other way to get information like that. She guessed that meant that the people in the mansion were good-natured enough that he had managed to gain their trust despite the Skills thing.

“You never change, huh... But if you already know, I can just jump to the point. I’m going out to look for her right now. I don’t know how long I’ll take, so study on your own in the meantime.”

“That’s fine with me, but as I asked before, do you have any leads on where to look?”

“Nope, nothing—but I figure I’ll look in the Devils’ Woods or somewhere around there.”

That was why they couldn’t send a large search party. It would be dangerous whether or not they found Lina in there. If a group from their country invaded and *didn’t* find her, it could easily disrupt the barely maintained equilibrium between the two sides, and the responsibility would fall on this family.

Before they did that, they needed to know whether or not Camilla could find Lina.

“I have about three days. In the meantime, Sophia’s going to look into the

other side—the town and the surrounding area—but our chances of finding her within that time frame aren't looking good."

"I wouldn't imagine they are."

They would have two options if it came to that. However, both would entail giving up.

The question was whether it would be on Lina's life, or on the family's fortune.

There was no need to say which was more likely.

"I'll find her before then, though. Just wait and see."

"Hmm... Well, I believe in you."

"Oh?"

Camilla was surprised that he hadn't declared he would come with her. That was good, considering there was no way she could allow him to, but...

"You don't have any weird ideas?"

"Of course not. I'm not going to follow you. I can even promise you I won't."

"Hmm... I get a weird feeling about that, but okay..."

"I'm offended that you would doubt such a good student."

"Well, whatever. No time to talk. See you."

"Yes, see you later."

Soma's attitude bothered her slightly, but it was unlikely that he didn't care about his sister. He'd come to talk about this with Camilla, after all, and he had seemed happy when he'd talked about Lina joining his training sessions.

There was no way he actually wasn't concerned...but maybe that very concern was why he was acting strange.

Regardless, Camilla could only do one thing.

She began to walk quickly down the hallway, shouldering not only Sophia's feelings but Soma's as well.

“Hey...”

“Yes, what is it?”

“I thought you said you weren’t gonna follow me.”

“I did. I’m not following you. I’m leading the way.”

As she looked at Soma, whom she’d found waiting at the entrance to the Devils’ Woods, Camilla let out a huge sigh of resignation.

The two dashed through the forest.

They were moving so quickly that they wouldn't be visible to an ordinary person. All they would have sensed was a wind rushing past.

Despite that, the two were conversing with no problem.

"I don't mind the running, but you have some reason for picking this direction in particular, right?"

"Naturally. I didn't think this would be useful at the time...but it was worth being prepared."

"Huh?"

Symbols etched into the ground and stretching up to the sky led Soma's way. These signs were peculiar in that only Soma could see them.

That was for a simple reason: they were made with magic, and only Soma fulfilled the conditions to be able to see them.

He had quickly realized why that was. When he'd gone to their usual meeting place a little later than usual, Aina wasn't there, and these symbols had been left in her place, etched into the ground. He'd faintly sensed her mana from them.

These symbols had originated from Soma's silly spur-of-the-moment idea—they were the magic she'd come up with to alert him if she ever got kidnapped.

Aina had actually come up with something based on his arbitrary idea, and she'd made it not only a signal that she'd been taken away, but also a way to track her.

"That's what you two have been up to?"

"It's actually serving a purpose now, so it was worth it."

He didn't know what the circumstances were, but he was impressed that Aina

had managed to use this magic. Without it, even searching for her would have been quite difficult for Soma.

“And if that magic’s still activated, then this Aina girl must still be alive.”

“Well, she must still be alive, but she may or may not be conscious.”

“Huh? You know, magic usually stops working when the user loses consciousness, even if the spell is already in effect.”

“I know that, so since she would be likely to lose consciousness if she were kidnapped or fell asleep before I could get to her, she set this magic up to continue unless she deliberately canceled it.”

“She did?”

“The idea was mainly mine, but Aina implemented it. She has good sense.”

“It’s one thing that she can even implement that crazy idea, but why did you ask it of her in the first place?”

“All I can say is, it was just what I thought of.”

“You never change, huh...” Camilla sighed.

Soma gave her a puzzled look, not comprehending what she meant. It could have been a revolutionary innovation in magic, but Soma wouldn’t have reacted any differently even if he’d known. The only goal he cared about was using magic.

In any case...

“Well, thanks to that, we have this trail, which is how you knew she was kidnapped. Is that also how you knew Lina was kidnapped?”

“No, that was coincidental. I only found out after I got back to the mansion.”

Even when he’d realized that Aina had been kidnapped and it would be possible to trace her location, Soma hadn’t immediately gone after her, because he’d also known that he wouldn’t be able to catch up right away.

Based on Soma’s specifications, Aina had created this spell so it would work over a very wide range, even if she had been teleported away. In that case, it would make signposts at equal intervals between the place of activation and

her current location.

In a typical scenario, it was set up to create signposts leading to her current location at set intervals starting from the time she used the spell. These signposts were like towers of light, and they wouldn't be blocked from view even if she were inside a building, since they were incorporeal.

Their height was also set to over ten meters tall, so they would be visible from any location. And since they were triggered at set time intervals, they would usually be located at different distances from each other. It would be difficult to move at a perfectly consistent speed, especially in the forest.

The signposts he saw, though, were in a straight line at equal intervals. And there was no way her captor could have moved at a constant speed in one direction. There were trees in the way everywhere, after all.

That meant that whoever had taken Aina had teleported away.

"Teleported, huh... That's at least High-Grade magic, so whether this person used their own magic or some kind of magical object, they must not be just any ordinary person."

"That's why I decided to go back to the mansion to regroup. I knew I wouldn't be able to get to her right away."

They'd gone out of their way to teleport. They wouldn't have done that if they were going somewhere nearby, which meant it would take a long time to find her.

"I doubt you were just going back to report you'd be gone for a while..."

"Well, I considered that, but I mainly needed money."

Soma had brought none with him when he set out earlier today. That was normal considering he had had no need for it, but it would pose a problem if the search took multiple days. He wouldn't mind sleeping outside if it came to that, but he couldn't exactly go without food.

That was what had led Soma to go back to the mansion—he intended to ask Camilla to borrow some money—which was when he'd heard that Lina was missing. And he wasn't foolish enough to pass up the chance to get more

information about that.

“I guess it would be too good to be true if we cleared up both these issues at once by coincidence...”

“Well, think about the chances that both of them were kidnapped in two unrelated events, versus the chances that they were kidnapped together. I would wager that the latter is more likely.”

“Yeah, I guess I would too. That makes this whole thing make more sense. I guess I’ll follow you, then. I have to say, though... This is unexpected.”

“What is?”

“Just how levelheaded you’re being. I thought you’d be more...well, not *panicked*, but at least angry or something.”

“Levelheaded, you say... Well, if I seem that way to you.” Soma shrugged as he clenched his stick, his knuckles going white.

“You...”

“I suppose I still have more practice to do.”

If only he’d been there... If only he hadn’t been late today of all days for such a silly reason.

He smiled slightly in self-deprecation for having such thoughts. Even if they were true, there was no point in imagining hypothetical scenarios that never could have happened.

He knew that, and yet he still had to keep himself from taking out his frustration on the trees around him. Clearly, he lacked discipline.

“Well, I prefer you acting this way. It’s reassuring.”

As soon as Soma and Camilla finished their conversation, the trees around them suddenly thinned out, like they’d been waiting for that moment.

They’d come out on the other side of the forest. That meant this was where the devils lived.

“Hmm... I should have expected as much, but nothing looks especially different.”

A plain, open field stretched out before them. It was almost idyllic, far from the sort of place they had imagined devils would live.

It was a little late to think about it, but...

“We aren’t going to be attacked on sight here, are we?”

“They don’t look any different from us, so we’ll be fine as long as we don’t let anything slip. That doesn’t mean we’re safe, though. We’ve still gotta watch out for bandits or monsters who’ll attack us.”

“Hmm...”

They would be able to fight back in the event that they got attacked, so they could just cross that bridge when they came to it. That shouldn’t have been a problem.

The problem was whether they would be able to gather any information here.

All they knew right now was the direction in which they were headed. They had no idea what was there, how far away it was, or the surrounding geography.

They could have gone directly to rescue Aina, but they wanted at least an idea of how long it would take. That would determine what they did about food and other supplies.

“So I’d like to gather information nearby, if that’s all right with you.”

“Yeah, that’s all right, but...” Camilla smiled wryly. Soma gave her a quizzical look.

“It’s just that I didn’t think you’d have thought this far ahead. I know you said you were going to lead the way, and you have so far, but I thought you’d need my support when it came to stuff like this. I guess not, though.”

“Ah, well, I’m not very familiar with this sort of thing myself, so I’ll need your help at some point...”

“‘At some point’ isn’t very specific... Jeez, you’re so reliable, it’s almost scary.”

“Hmm... You think so?”

Soma certainly didn’t think he was at all childlike, but he didn’t think he was

that mature either. That was probably because Aina and Lina were also rather precocious.

“Well, let’s just search the town or wherever. There’s no way nobody lives here, given the location.”

Since this was a border, the devils would need people to guard it and enough military forces stationed there to fight back if they had to. That meant Soma and Camilla could expect something closer to a town than a village to be nearby.

And if they went somewhere like that, it shouldn’t have been too hard to ask around for information.

“Yes... Let’s go, then.”

They didn’t have time to dawdle, but rushing would likely backfire on them too. Misinformation could be fatal.

Knowing that, the two began to look quickly but carefully for the devils’ border town.

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They found the place faster than they'd thought they would. When they spotted it, however, they were surprised.

"More of a village than a town."

"Yes, this is certainly unexpected..."

What they'd thought would be a town was clearly just a little village.

A wooden fence surrounded it, and a cursory glance only revealed about a dozen buildings. No more than fifty people could have lived here.

"What to do now..."

Soma and Camilla would stick out as outsiders if they went there. That in itself wasn't a problem. The problem was whether people would tell them anything useful.

If it had been a town, it wouldn't have been unusual for someone to come in looking for information, but it would definitely come off as strange in a place like this.

They couldn't be sure the locals would give them information readily.

"Well, no use worrying about it. Let's at least give it a try."

"You're right."

They had some idea of what the results would be, but just in case their prediction turned out to be wrong, they headed toward the village.

"Well, that was a total loss... I can't even be disappointed, since that was exactly what I expected would happen."

Soma gazed up at the sky from a corner of the town—no, the village.

He'd tried simply asking about the area to everyone he spotted, but they had all either said they didn't know, hadn't wanted to talk, or pretended not to

hear.

Nobody was biting, perhaps because Soma appeared to be a child. From their perspective, he was obviously meddling in something. It was natural that they wouldn't want to get involved.

"Judging by this, I doubt Ms. Hennefeld is having any luck either..."

It wouldn't be unusual if they thought Camilla was a child based on appearance too... That meant she probably felt similarly to him right now.

They'd split up to save time, but maybe they would have done better together—although people would likely assume they were up to something whether they saw one kid or two kids, so maybe the results would have been the same regardless.

As Soma wondered what to do, someone started talking to him.

"I see you've been trying to talk to people, sonny... Is something the matter?"

Soma looked toward the person and saw she was an old woman. Judging by what she'd said, she had been paying attention to what Soma had been doing.

That in itself wasn't especially surprising to Soma. He'd known that she was here and that she was watching him.

She'd watched him with a wary look in her eye, so he hadn't gone up to her initially. He hadn't expected her to come up and talk to him herself.

He didn't know what she was thinking, but if she'd initiated a conversation with him, that meant she was willing to talk at least a little. He couldn't let that opportunity go by.

"Yes, well, I have to travel in that direction for something, but I don't know my way around the area. Seeing as I have to consider food supplies and such, I wanted to ask what is over there."

"I see, I see... I can see why they wouldn't want to talk, then..."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... What to do... I don't mind telling you, but..."

"Mm..."

This was clearly something that people would try to avoid getting involved in if you so much as asked about it. The information must have had a price to match their reluctance. However...

“Well, there probably isn’t much that I can do for you, and I didn’t bring much of value with me either.”

He actually hadn’t brought anything at all, but if she asked for money, he could get some from Camilla.

He didn’t think this old woman would ask for something like that, however.

“Oh, no, that isn’t what I mean. It’s just... I’d like you to listen to my story before I tell you about that other matter.”

“You want to tell me a story?”

“It’s nothing exciting... I just felt like telling it to someone.”

He honestly didn’t have much time, but he also hadn’t gained any information so far. He could afford to lose a little time if it meant learning something.

And there was one thing that piqued Soma’s interest.

He considered it for a moment, then nodded.

“I don’t mind, if you don’t mind telling me.”

“Oh, I’d be happy to have you listen to this silly old lady’s story.”

Thus she began to tell it.

“Let me think... It all started about a year and some ago, if I recall. That was when we found a girl.”

“A girl?”

“Being where we are, we knew right away that she wasn’t from around here, and that she was struggling. We probably should have told her to go elsewhere...but I don’t know why, we just couldn’t bring ourselves to abandon her.”

“Hmm... You say ‘we,’ so does that mean someone else was there?”

“Oh, yes, I was with my husband at the time. He has bad hips now, so he’s lying down inside. Anyway, we took her home for the night...”

They planned to have her leave the next day. They would give her a hot meal and a place to sleep, then send her off once she’d had some rest.

But the girl didn’t look any better the next day. She seemed unwell, not just physically, but emotionally.

They were afraid that if they let her go in that state, she’d end up dead somewhere.

“We weren’t able to do much for her, though... We gave her three square meals and a place to sleep, but we didn’t know what else we could do for her. We could tell she had something going on, but we didn’t think asking would help.”

“Hmm... I can understand that.”

He’d experienced that for himself.

Well, he hadn’t taken her in, so he hadn’t done nearly as much as this couple had...but he’d shared their feeling of not knowing what to do.

He might have felt like that still if she hadn’t come closer to him of her own accord.

“But then one day, wouldn’t you know it, she cheered up a little. She said something about a new friend.”

“A friend, you say?”

“After that, little by little, she started smiling more. We hadn’t done anything to help, but we were happy to see that... We were never able to have kids, but it felt almost like having a grandchild.”

A shadow still lingered over the girl, however. Though it appeared less and less often, at times they would see a lonely, pained look on her face.

“And then, just recently... We saw her smile for the first time.”

“Hmm? I thought you just said that she started smiling more.”

“Oh, yes, but this time, she really smiled from her heart. We hadn’t been able

to save this girl, but now we knew that *somebody* had.”

“Hmm...”

“We were so glad... So, so glad...”

“Madam?”

Soma couldn't help but interject when he heard her voice quivering despite what she was saying.

If his ears and eyes didn't deceive him, her voice was shaking not from joy, but from pain.

“We'd known for a while what she was, but we couldn't bring ourselves to say it... We hear the stories too, even in a little place like this. But...we were just so glad... We thought she was okay now... So we told them.”

“Told them what?”

“That she's okay.”

“Hmm...”

If that was all, then that was all. Nobody had done anything wrong.

But...

Let's say you had a runaway girl.

You didn't know where she was, but one day, you suddenly received word that she was okay.

Wouldn't that be tantamount to being told where she was?

“We figured she wouldn't come back after that. So I was just thinking back on that... Thinking she must have gone home. I wish she'd have told us...but it was inevitable, considering her status, or so I try to tell myself.”

She may have had no basis for feeling that way; perhaps it was out of guilt, out of regret that she'd stepped out of line, that she'd made the girl go back in a way neither of them wanted.

But she probably had some real reason to believe that the girl wouldn't come back.

That must have been why she'd been wary at first too.

"I just wish I could have told her one last thing...that I'm sorry."

"Hmm..."

"That took a while. I'm sorry you had to listen to all that."

"No, I don't mind, but..."

Isn't there something more you want to say? Soma thought to himself, but the woman started talking again before he could say it out loud.

"Now that you've heard my story, it's your turn... You wanted to know what was over there, right?"

Either she didn't want to say what she'd left unsaid, or she hadn't planned to tell him. For a moment, Soma thought about whether to bring it up but then considered time as a factor and simply nodded.

"Yes... Am I correct in thinking something is there?"

"Well, it's no wonder you don't know, since they're not very famous... But there are ruins over that way."

"Ruins?"

Apparently, it was an altar that had been used to worship a god centuries ago.

"Could that be...the Archdevil?"

"Yes, exactly. That's why nobody goes that way. You never know what kind of trouble you could get yourself into if you get involved there."

"Hmm... That makes sense."

The Archdevil was an insane god who was said to have descended to this world centuries ago. He had tried to annihilate mankind but been thwarted by a hero instead.

Of course, this was a different god from the one the Divinists worshiped. There had previously been two gods in this world, but after one went mad, the other god was the only one left—or so the story went.

In any case, this was the god that the devils were said to believe in.

Technically, they were just the descendants of his believers...but of course, even that was made up.

The causation was actually backwards. People made up the idea that the devils believed in an evil god because it created a convenient backstory for the fact that they were considered the enemy of mankind.

However, as you would expect, there were still a few individuals who worshiped the Archdevil, and they were persecuted for it. That made sense considering that their belief system dictated that everyone, including themselves, should perish.

Perhaps there are a few people like that in every world and age.

In any case, because of that, if it came out even as a rumor that someone worshiped the Archdevil, they would have to run away in the night. It was just common sense, then, to not get involved in anything to do with that, and the devils felt the exact same way.

The way the people in this village had reacted made sense now. Although none of them had ultimately heard him out, they hadn't ignored him or been rude to him when he'd first started talking. They'd just run away the instant he mentioned the place he was looking for.

"So why didn't you run away, madam?"

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that sort of thing anymore at my age. And you listened to my story first."

"Well, that does help me. Also, how long does it take to get there from here?"

"Let's see... It'd be about a day on foot, I suppose. I wouldn't suggest going, though. Even putting the Archdevil stuff aside, there are monsters around there, so you'd be better off going around it."

"If I could do that, I would."

That was probably the place. He didn't know what they were planning to do with Aina there, but needless to say, it couldn't have been anything good.

"Are there any signposts or landmarks near it?"

"Is that the place you have to go?"

“I believe so, although I don’t have conclusive evidence.”

The woman looked at Soma as if she wanted to say something, but she didn’t.

Apparently she knew that the ruins were there, but she hadn’t ever been, so she didn’t know any details. That was all he could learn from her, then.

“Hmm... Just to make sure, is there anything else in that direction?”

“Don’t you want to go to the ruins?”

“I just want to make sure that that’s where I should be headed.”

“I see... Well, I don’t think there’s anything else near there.”

The old woman had answered every question he could think of. Soma went over it one more time in his mind so he’d be sure to remember, then dipped his head.

“Thank you for telling me all of this.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it... You listened to my silly story, after all.”

“That was that, and this is this. You helped me regardless.”

“Have I, now? Well, I haven’t told you much, but I’m glad if it helped you.”

“Yes, it was very helpful. But...you had more to say about what you told me before, didn’t you?”

The old woman’s breath caught. She opened and closed her mouth a couple times, her shoulders trembling, before ultimately shaking her head.

“No... I didn’t.”

“Hmm... All right.”

Anyone could have seen that she was lying.

And this was the second time. If she’d had two chances to say it, and she hadn’t either time, then she really didn’t intend to say it. Soma couldn’t change that.

He could feel how regretful she was, whether or not she told him. But if she didn’t want to talk about it, then he couldn’t make her.

So Soma just shrugged and turned away from her.

“You can just tell Aina yourself, along with your apology. Once we bring her back safely, that is.”

“Wha—?!”

He heard her shocked exclamation and felt her eyes on his back, but he didn’t turn around. He just waved goodbye as he walked away.

It was simple.

As soon as she saw Soma, the woman had been convinced that her fears had come true.

And Soma, too, had been convinced he knew who this woman was as soon as he saw her.

He’d heard from Aina about the people who were taking care of her.

Between that, and the story she’d told, Soma wasn’t too dull to put two and two together.

He had a lot he wanted to ask, and she probably did as well, but that could wait until this was over and they had time to talk.

He didn’t know whether they would get that chance, however.

All he knew was that he now had one more reason to get Aina back.

With those thoughts in mind, Soma walked quickly toward the place at which he’d planned to meet up with Camilla.

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Having safely regrouped, Soma and Camilla left the village to share what they'd learned. They'd concluded that there was nothing more for them to learn there.

Camilla actually hadn't learned anything, but the info that Soma had gotten was enough.

They'd also gathered the reason why it was a village and not a town, which wasn't a very pleasant one.

"Tch, makes me sick."

"Well, I suppose it is logical, if nothing else..."

The village was a sacrifice of sorts. It wouldn't be able to defend itself in the event of an invasion, but the devils would know an invasion was happening if the village were destroyed. That was the only reason that village and its people were there—to be the canary in the coal mine.

That had probably been done because the devils' territory was too large. It was over twice the size of Soma's country, but had less than a tenth of the population.

Between that and the fact that it was surrounded by other countries belonging to mankind, they couldn't defend all of it. That was why they'd adopted such a strategy with places that couldn't even withstand a little skirmish.

It was certainly a logical decision, and they probably had some additional reason for it, judging by the atmosphere of the village. Each person was clearly there of their own volition, although their individual reasons may have differed. Soma and Camilla had picked up on that.

Whatever the circumstances, though, it didn't change that Soma wasn't happy with it. That contributed to him not protesting Camilla's decision to get out of there as soon as possible.

That wasn't what they should have been worrying about at the moment, however. Getting back on topic, they started going over what they should do based on the information Soma had gathered.

"If it's a day's journey on foot, then taking into account that we're not used to the area, we can probably make it in an hour... That means the problem is how long it'll take to search the ruins."

"Right, but even considering that, I don't imagine it will take more than two hours in total."

The way there was likely to be the biggest issue. Since there must not have been many people who went to worship the Archdevil, the ruins likely wouldn't be somewhere easy to get to. That added another hour to their time estimate.

They were unlikely to run into any major problems until they got there, at least. That left only one more thing they really had to worry about.

"The ultimate question is whether or not we can rescue Aina and Lina smoothly."

"Yep. We know for sure whoever we're up against is up to no good, but we don't know how strong they are. We can probably assume they're devils, and that they have High-Grade Skills or higher, but there isn't much else we can deduce. Well...I doubt there'll be a Dark Commander there, but we should think about that as a worst-case scenario."

"A Dark Commander, you say..."

The title was familiar to Soma. The Dark Commanders were the strongest of the devils, said to be equivalent to mankind's Elite Seven. The two groups were equal in quality, including the highest-ranking of the devils, the Dark Lord. Despite that, it was mankind that had the superior numbers, so the only reason the devils hadn't been overthrown was because mankind had no intention of doing so...but the Dark Commanders still posed a threat.

As he recalled that information, Soma's surroundings changed again, from an open field back into a forest. It was an even deeper green than that of the Devils' Woods, and it felt vaguely foreboding.

Soma and Camilla wouldn't have come this far if they had been the type to be

discouraged by that, however, so they kept going without paying it any mind.

He could still see the signposts. That meant they were going the right direction, at least.

As he double-checked the trail, he continued his previous train of thought out loud.

“Hmm... Meeting one of them means certain death, correct?”

“Yeah, and that’s no exaggeration—it’s a simple fact. The only people who have survived an encounter with one had either one of the Elite Seven, a hero, or a saint to thank for it. And pretty much everyone except the Elite Seven had to retreat.”

“So only one of the Elite Seven is a match for a Dark Commander. I heard a story that someone else once defeated one, though.”

“Well, they ended up being made one of the Elite Seven as a result, so that’s a bit different...although not so different, I guess. Anyway, even the Elite Seven don’t always win against them, since that person only became a new member because one of the prior Elite Seven was killed by a Dark Commander.”

That was why they were said to be equal.

It also meant that even the strongest of mankind weren’t completely unrivaled. The same went for the devils too, of course.

“I forgot to ask before—what would happen if you fought one of the Dark Commanders?”

“Huh? Well, I guess when I was younger, I would’ve said I’d win, but now that I know my limits, I can’t be so confident. They’d probably crush me, actually. I’d count it as a win if I could last a minute against one, but if I messed up, I might not even last seconds.”

“Hmm... You think so?”

“Come on, you know how I am in battle, don’t you? And High-Grade is High-Grade. It’s never going to—”

In the middle of her sentence, Camilla casually swung her axe. In the next moment, something leapt out—but too late. Her axe had already turned

whatever it was—probably a monster—into two big lumps of meat.

And Camilla was able to just return her axe to her back without missing a beat.

Soma probably could have done the same, but...

“Hmm... I really think you would be able to take on a Dark Commander.”

“Well, I’m glad you think so, but you’re overestimating me. Maybe I would still think so myself if I wasn’t surrounded by Special-Grade users. This was back before I knew my own limits, but I wanted to be one of the Elite Seven once upon a time.”

“So you gave up because of a particular Special-Grade user?”

“I guess so.”

“Hmm... Did that person also want to be one of the Elite Seven?”

“Well, I don’t really know, but he is one now. The Elite Swordsman.”

“I see... What was he like?”

“Pretty hard to describe... But if I had to say, I’d say, a lot like you—” Camilla was interrupted again.

Apparently the old lady had been right about the monsters. They could see three of their silhouettes now, and one jumped out in front of Camilla, then two in front of Soma.

Regardless, the conclusion was the same as the last time. They maintained their speed as they kept running, paying no mind to what were now six lumps of flesh in total.

The only difference was that this time, Camilla couldn’t help but smile wryly.

“Is something the matter?”

“Nah, I was just thinking... If I’d still wanted to be an Elite Seven member at this point, I would’ve given up after what happened just now.”

“Did something really happen that warrants that?”

Camilla sighed. “I can’t believe you sometimes. Listen, okay? We just beat

those monsters in the same amount of time, but you had two while I had one, and I was using an actual axe while you were just using a stick. What kind of idiot wouldn't notice the skill gap there?"

"Hmm... Well, that may be the case, but..."

Camilla was right about that, at least. There was a rather large skill gap between the two. But that didn't mean Camilla was weak.

For example, Soma wouldn't have been surprised if Camilla won in a fight against Lina.

Of course, Lina was growing rapidly, and if the two were to compete based solely on their skills with the sword and axe respectively, it would be a different story...but that wasn't what being strong was about. Soma could confidently state that, having reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship.

There was such a thing as being equally matched in battle, anyway.

Without knowing the criteria, Soma didn't know if Camilla could be one of the Elite Seven, but he could at least say that he didn't think she was so inferior that a Dark Commander or an Elite Seven member would instantly kill her.

He couldn't deny that he may have been biased because she was his mentor, however. And Camilla would have taken it as flattery if he said that to her, anyway.

Camilla's heart had probably been broken when she felt the difference between her own talent and the talent of others. The only way she would recover from that was to realize for herself that it didn't mean she had to give up.

"Hmm... I hope a Dark Commander would take the fight seriously."

"Hey, now, I know you'd probably be able to handle it, but it'd make it harder to rescue the girls. Not that I don't get wanting to battle one, but give it a rest."

He hadn't meant it like that...but it would have been too convenient anyway. He'd thought maybe if Camilla fought a Dark Commander, it would help her regain her confidence, but that was a bad idea, considering Aina and Lina. It had come to mind especially since he knew Camilla well and owed her a lot...but it

would have to wait for another time.

What he should really have been thinking about was how to rescue Aina and Lina.

So he brought his mind back to the present, when...

“Wait, perhaps this is happening because I mentioned that I thought we could handle it?”

“Then this is all your fault...or so I’d say if this were the time for kidding around.”

“Right.”

He had heard that there would be a lot of monsters, but now their field of view was filled with them. And just when they’d thought they had a clear shot too.

“It’s also odd that I didn’t notice the monsters until the last second. Does this mean that they were prepared just in case?”

“I bet. It’s not easy to make monsters do your bidding, but it’s not hard to just gather them in one place.”

“Rather brazen of them...although effective.”

A quick glance didn’t show him any particularly aggressive-looking monsters, but numbers were numbers.

It would take some time just to create a path for themselves, and it wasn’t unlikely that they would be attacked again before they reached their destination. That could prove fatal in this scenario.

“I suppose we have no choice but to fight them.”

“Yep.”

Soma and Camilla looked at each other, gathering their resolve, and nodded.

Then they charged directly into the crowd of monsters, picking up even more speed.

31

When she first woke up, all she saw was darkness everywhere.

She sat dazed for a moment before her eyes adjusted and she realized that she was looking at a stone ceiling.

Still half-asleep, Aina wondered why she was seeing this unfamiliar ceiling, which was when she woke up completely.

At the same time, she remembered what had happened before she had lost consciousness.

She hurriedly forced herself upright and saw that the whole room was made of the same material as the ceiling. She didn't think it was mere stone, however, because of what was on the right wall.

Iron bars.

"So...I'm in a jail cell?"

"It looks like it."

Startled by the unexpected reply, Aina turned around. She was even more surprised when she saw who it was.

"Lina?!"

"Yes. Good morning, Aina."

"Y-Yeah, good morning... Hey, wait!"

Images of Lina being blown away by a shock wave flashed through Aina's mind. The Lina in her mind's eye looked nearly dead, but the one sitting before her seemed completely unhurt, as far as she could tell.

Of course, it was dim, so she couldn't be completely sure, but she sighed in relief that Lina was okay.

"You're all right? That's good..."

"Well, I don't know if I'd call this all right, but I feel fine. More importantly, I

don't understand why we're here. I remember being attacked and losing consciousness after failing to avoid an attack, which leads me to believe we were kidnapped, but... Do you know anything, Aina?"

Aina couldn't say anything in response.

Albert's words came back to her. That the Dark Lord, her father, had wanted this.

That meant they had definitely been kidnapped, but she couldn't bring herself to believe it. He wasn't the type of person to do such a thing. She was confident in that.

Then what was the meaning of this?

When she reached that question, a possibility presented itself to her.

Yes, it made sense if that was the case.

He actually might have wanted this—for Aina to come back.

Maybe he hadn't ordered that she be forcibly brought back, but Albert had interpreted her father's instructions that way.

The rank of Dark Commanders was said to require not only skill, but a deep loyalty to the Dark Lord. That was evidenced by the fact that twelve noble families had to endorse someone for them to be appointed. Maybe they were loyal to a fault.

But other than that...

"Aina? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, n-no, nothing... Well, actually, I might know why this is happening to us."

"Wait, really?!"

At first, Aina had been about to brush the question off, but she stopped herself.

Lina already knew that Aina was a devil.

Of course, she didn't know the rest, but that was enough. Lina's attitude toward Aina hadn't changed now that she knew. That meant that Lina had accepted her knowing that she was a devil.

She was scared at the thought that Lina might reject her...but she didn't want to keep secrets anymore.

So...

"You're the Dark Lord's daughter?!" Lina exclaimed in surprise upon hearing Aina's history and her idea of what was going on right now.

That was an understandable reaction...and Aina didn't see any hateful feelings in it. Lina was purely surprised, and after taking a second to process it, she nodded.

"Okay, I see... I think you could be right about this, if that's the case. It's just..."

"Just?"

"I don't understand why they put you in here, or why they took me too."

"Yeah, that..."

Lina was the problem that needed to be figured out here. Albert had called her a sacrifice, as well as an "unexpected extra," but Aina couldn't interpret that in a way that her father would have wanted or allowed.

Aina could have rationalized that it had been a bluff to capture her, but that was unlikely given that Lina was here as well.

So did he actually...?

No, he wouldn't...

She was going back and forth in her mind when someone else chimed in.

"You seem to be confused, so allow me to clear things up."

Startled, Aina looked in the direction of the voice to see that Albert had appeared on the other side of the iron bars without her noticing. He was dressed in a black robe, no differently than he had been before, but he looked somehow ominous to Aina in the dim light. She swallowed.

Lina spoke first as Aina hesitated.

"So... You're going to tell me why you brought me here?"

Albert nodded in response.

“Yes—in fact, I told you earlier. I brought you as a sacrifice.”

“But... Father would never let you do that!” Aina yelled.

Albert’s response was not what she’d expected. A confused look appeared on his face, like he had no idea what she was talking about.

“What are you saying, my... Ah, no, I see what you mean.”

He quickly seemed to come to a realization and nodded, but Aina was still confused. She glared at him, thinking he’d meant to throw her off—and then a chill shot through her.

Albert was smiling.

No...he was smirking.

One corner of his mouth was turned up in a blatant sneer.



“Ah, but my lady, you are sorely mistaken.”

“About what?”

“That we find that man suitable to be our Dark Lord.”

“Huh?”

She didn't understand why he'd say that. It would mean— “We do not accept him as the Dark Lord. There is only one who we consider to be our Dark Lord, now as it always has been. Well...there are those fools among the Dark Commanders who call your father the Dark Lord, but I am sure they will realize their idiocy once our real Dark Lord has been revived. Of course, we shall have to depose them, since such fools are unfit to be Dark Commanders. I would prefer to do so now, but new as I am, I lack the authority. Quite sad, really.”

Aina had heard that her father, the current Dark Lord, had only attained that position about ten years ago with the defeat of the previous Dark Lord. The Dark Lord hadn't always been her father, and he hadn't been one for his whole life. She'd known that some opposed him due to his only having been appointed recently.

But she'd never once imagined that a Dark Commander would be one of those rebels.

While Aina was shocked, she picked up on something Albert had said that bothered her. It wasn't something she could ignore, so she instructed herself to stay calm and opened her mouth to speak.

“So... When you say Dark Lord, you mean the former Dark Lord, don't you?”

“How many times do I have to tell you? There is only one Dark Lord, now and forever.”

“That part isn't important. That's what you mean, right? But the former Dark Lord was overthrown.”

“Yes, quite unfortunately.”

“So, what do you mean, you're going to revive him?”

“I mean precisely what I said. We are going to revive the Dark Lord. I have

made a number of preparations for this purpose.”

Resurrection.

Sure, it was said to not be impossible...but it practically was, for all intents and purposes.

How was he going to...

“Wait, when you say sacrifice, you don’t mean...”

“What else could I possibly mean by it? Of course, no ordinary sacrifice will suffice for our Dark Lord, but a Giftholder should work just fine—and how much more so two of them!”

“Two? So you really are going to...”

“Yes, my lady. You, too, will be sacrificed to the Dark Lord.”

Aina was oddly unfazed by what Albert had said to her with a smile. She had gathered as much from their preceding conversation...and somewhere deep down, she'd known since the beginning.

If he had only wanted to forcibly bring her back, there would have been no need to keep her in a jail cell. It would only have caused more problems, in fact.

But if he was going to sacrifice Aina, there was no reason *not* to imprison her. She'd known that, but she hadn't considered it out of fear.

This wasn't the time to talk about that, however. She may have run away, but she was still the Dark Lord's daughter...and most importantly, Lina was here too.

She couldn't allow this.

"There will be consequences for this, you know..."

"Yes, there will be consequences. The Dark Lord will be revived. We will take down those fools, including the man himself, torture them to death, and then it will be time for us to strike back. At last we shall exact revenge on those who scorned us and called us devils!"

The shouting man seemed insane in Aina's eyes.

How would reviving someone who had already been defeated once give them the ability to strike back? More likely than not, he would just be defeated again and end up worse than before.

But she knew saying that would be in vain...and there would be no need to, anyway.

"Okay... I understand."

"Thank you for your understanding. Sadly, you will not be able to join us, but do not grieve. Your noble sacrifice will be the first step in our revenge!"

“You can do that if you so please, but leave us out of it.”

Instantly, part of the iron bars flew away. No—they had been cut. Then Lina immediately leapt at Albert.

Aina had realized that Lina would try to do something. That was why Lina hadn’t spoken since her first words to Albert here, and why Aina had distracted Albert by talking to him.

Lina was holding a length of wood that she’d broken off of the bed. Normally, it would have posed no threat, but it was clear to see by how the iron bars had been slashed apart—it would make a fine weapon in Lina’s hands.

Even Albert shouldn’t have been able to escape Lina’s surprise attack unscathed— “Hmm... You didn’t *really* think your little ‘surprise attack’ would work, did you?”

“Huh?”

Something flew through the air in the next instant. It took Aina a few seconds to comprehend what it was.

No, her mind refused to comprehend it.

In the dim light, she clearly saw the dark red liquid...and the small body that slumped to the ground as that liquid flowed from every part of it.

“Ah, this won’t do... I only meant to counter her attack. I should have expected this from myself, but I made a mistake at the last moment, I suppose. We may both be Special-Grade users, but I am one of the Dark Commanders... I am always sure to have backup plans in mind. In any case, she looks to be near death...but I suppose that isn’t a problem. All we need is for her to live a little longer. After that, when she dies, she dies.”

“Albert!”

She stuck her right hand out in an unthinking reaction. She didn’t have a specific plan in mind—she just knew she couldn’t let him get away with that.

Albert turned to look at her once he noticed...and his mouth curved into a smile.

His eyes said it all.

It was a look she'd seen tens, even hundreds of times—one that said, *What does a girl who can't use a single spell think she can do?*

Just then, something clicked in Aina's mind.

She'd always vaguely disliked when Albert called her "my lady."

Now she'd realized why that was.

There had always been a derisive undertone in his voice when he said it. A very faint, nearly unnoticeable undertone, but unmistakable nonetheless.

Now that he no longer had to hide it, he was letting it show through his eyes...not that it mattered at this point.

Still, Aina put all of the resentment she'd felt up until now into her next words.

"Immolate all that stands in my way—Flame Arrow!"

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup: Magic / Flame Arrow

"Wha—?!"

Albert's eyes went wide at the brightly burning arrow of flames that flew forth.

But after the arrow quickly closed the distance between them, it appeared to be absorbed into his face.

"Huh?"

"My, what a surprise... I didn't think you would be able to use magic."

It was Aina's turn to be stunned as she watched it vanish like it was nothing.

Albert hadn't even bothered to pretend to activate his magic.

It wasn't like what happened with Lina. He'd shown signs of activating his magic for a split second then.

But he hadn't needed to use any magic at all to make Aina's spell disappear.

That was just how big the skill gap was between them.

No, she'd already known that very well.

But if she wasn't even able to create a little diversion...

"Hmm... How in the world are you able to use magic, after I took the trouble to block your powers?"

"Huh? You did...what?"

"Oh, you failed to realize? Well, I suppose I will explain, since your end is near. Yes, as I said, I deliberately put a block on your ability to use magic. A feat worthy of a Dark Commander—especially since not one person noticed—is it not?"

Aina stared speechlessly at the proud look on Albert's face.

This meant that the man before her had been responsible for everything.

"Why would you..."

"Is it not obvious? I wanted to force you into the depths of despair. I intended to use you as a sacrifice from the very beginning. I never thought it would work *this* well... I didn't know what to do when you ran away. Well, I suppose based on the results, that turned out in our favor anyway, since it is not easy even for me to divert their eyes. Thank you for everything, my lady."

Albert spoke sincerely as he dipped his head.

She could tell that everything he'd just said, including the words of gratitude, was genuine.

The thought made blood rush to her head instantly.

After all...

Everything she'd gone through was *his fault*.

She couldn't just...!

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship*
Persistent Buildup: Magic

“Al—”

“Not that the likes of your magic would accomplish anything, but it is quite frustrating. Be quiet for a minute.”

“Gah!”

She didn’t know what hit her.

It was like what had happened in the woods. She’d been blown away before she knew it, hitting the wall of the jail cell.

The one difference was that she felt a sharp pain this time. Something surged up into her throat. She spat it out, spilling deep red onto the floor.

An even stronger force hit her, forcing her to the ground and sending pain through her whole body.

“Ugh, ah...”

“Hmm... I never was all too interested in bug collecting, but perhaps it would be fun if it were anything like this. I much prefer this, however.”

“Agh!”

Pain suddenly shot down her arm, forcing a groan from her. She looked and saw Albert’s legs; she grasped that he was stepping on her.

But Aina gritted her teeth and lifted her face.

“Al...bert!”

“My, I thought you would cry out in pain, but you have more fight in you than I thought you would. You’ve changed a lot in the past year... This will be fun, then.”

“Ugh...”

He twisted his foot, sending more pain shooting through her. Aina, though, gritted her teeth and bore it. Doing so wouldn’t accomplish anything...she was just stubborn. She didn’t want things to go his way.

She couldn’t do anything... She hadn’t been able to do anything...

But at least...

“Hmm, I thought you were nothing more than a sheltered princess, but it seems I have to change my assessment of you. Of course, that doesn’t mean anything else will change. You’ll make a more amusing plaything this way, but when we tire of you, we’ll simply wring your neck. That’s the only reason we let you live.”

She could hear him, but she couldn’t say anything in return. All she had the capacity to do was withstand the pain.

“Of course, I’m not the only one who thought so...but you already knew that. And that seems not to have changed in the new place you were staying.”

Aina struggled to say something, the words getting caught in her throat.

“Oh, you want to ask what I mean? Very well, I’ll tell you. I think you would understand if you thought about it a little longer...but here’s one question. How did I know you were there? The answer is simple. I was told. Who told me, and why, I will refrain from saying out of my abundance of grace.”

She wondered briefly who’d said something, but her thoughts naturally led her to the conclusion.

She really didn’t have to wonder who it had been. She’d barely interacted with anyone around her, except for two people. That limited the number of people she could suspect.

Yet Aina couldn’t doubt them even a little.

It wasn’t that she thought Albert was lying.

He was probably telling the truth, but there had been some kind of mistake.

She didn’t need any reason to be convinced of that.

“You’re still hanging on... How disappointing. Although it may not be refined, I suppose I’ll have to use force to make you understand.”

The pain worsened right after he finished speaking. His foot ground harder and rougher into her.

But she withstood it. It was all she could do anymore.

She could tell that she was losing strength.

And that if this went on, she would die before very long.

“This won’t do; you may not last until the ceremony at this rate. I had better stop here, then. Ah, right... I have an idea. Would you beg me for your life? I would heal your wounds for you if you did. I plan to kill you anyway, but you wouldn’t have to suffer in the meantime.”

She would have been lying if she’d said his offer didn’t tempt her, but Aina gritted her teeth, putting all her effort into resisting.

Even if that was all she could do... Since that was all she could do, she decided it was all she *would* do.

Albert sighed. “You won’t beg? Not much fun, are you? Ah...could it be that you’re expecting someone to come save you in your moment of need? No such thing could really happen, you know.”

Someone flashed through her mind when she heard “save you,” but she pushed the image out of her mind.

She instinctively knew if she thought about it, it would break her heart.

And she didn’t have to be told...he wasn’t coming.

Of course he wasn’t.

Saving her wouldn’t be valuable.

It wouldn’t be meaningful.

Well, maybe he would come to save his sister...but that was his sister. Not her.

It would be the same for her either way.

Aina had known for a long time that the world wasn’t kind.

Despite that, she had already been saved once.

Which made it even less likely that the same thing would happen again.

“Hmm... What a shame. I suppose I’ll prioritize making you cry out in pain, then. Amuse me a little longer in the end, will you? Let me hear your cries of despair—”

“I’m tired of listening to you go on. If you want to hear someone scream and cry so badly, then do it yourself.”

As soon as Aina heard those words, the pressure was lifted from her arm.

The next thing she heard was the sound of a wall crumbling...but that didn’t matter to her right now.

That voice...and the figure that appeared before her...

“I’m sorry, but Lina was in more danger, so I prioritized her.”



“Soma?”

“Do I look like someone else to you?”

“No... You don’t.”

“That’s good. I ran a bit late, but as promised, I’m here to save you.”

When she saw the familiar boy, a single tear ran down her cheek.

33

Soma's eyes narrowed in anger and frustration with himself as he looked at Aina lying wounded on the floor.

He wished he could have gotten there earlier...but there was something he had to do before he could think about that.

"It looks like we'll have to treat your wounds before we go. Can you use healing magic?"

"No... I can't..."

"Hmm..."

Aina didn't have any serious external injuries at a glance. Her right arm was hurt from being stepped on, but that was far from fatal.

That was only taking into account what he could see on the outside, however. Not even Soma could see inside her, but he had an idea of how badly she was hurt, including internal wounds.

Aina had definitely suffered fatal injuries, between the broken bones and damaged organs. She would likely die within an hour if he left her here, and it would be dangerous to move her unless he was very careful.

There were no villages or settlements in the surrounding area, so they wouldn't make it in time if he tried to carry her somewhere.

After thinking that far, Soma came to a decision. He'd had a feeling that this would be his only choice, and he sighed in resignation.

"Well, I see no other option."

"Yeah... Don't worry...about me... Just go...rescue Lina. Thank you for...coming to save me... That's all... All I could ever..."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Just stay still. You can thank me later. I'll lose focus if you move."

“What are you...”

He didn't listen to the next part of what she said. All his focus was on his hands.

He lifted the stick he was holding, then swung it down at Aina.

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance
Gift of Discernment: Original Style Emulation / Secret
Technique: Blade of Devotion

He felt all his strength leave his body at once. His knees threatened to give out, but he just sighed instead.

“Whew... That was hard to do twice in a row, but better that I'm exhausted than the alternative. How do you feel now? You should be completely healed.”

“Huh?”

Soma furrowed his eyebrows as he looked at the speechless Aina, wondering if he'd made some mistake. He hadn't had many chances to use this, after all, and the majority of Lina's injuries had been external.

Aina's arm looked a lot better, which was a good sign, but he honestly wasn't very confident in how he'd done on the inside.

It should have healed any wounds, at least...

“What? No way... I actually feel better?”

“Hmm... There seems to be no problem, then.”

Soma sighed in relief as Aina incredulously felt her own body, then slowly stood up. She looked perfectly okay now, so they were safe for the time being.

As Soma was lost in thought though, Aina glared at him for some reason.

“What was the meaning of that?”

“Hmm? It was exactly what it looked like.”

“All it looked like was you slashing at me with a sword.”

“Well, I used a special technique.”

Blade of Devotion was a secret technique passed down by one school of swordsmanship that used the sword not to harm, but to heal.

Soma didn't fully understand it himself. He'd had it used on him once and figured out how to use it based on how that had felt.

He'd once asked about how it worked and been told that it transferred the user's life force into the target to heal their wounds, but when he asked how that was possible, he'd been told it was just intuitive.

The one thing he definitely understood was that using it exhausted him like nothing else.

“What? You never make any sense... Well, it did really help—wait!”

“Is something wrong?”

“What do you mean, is something wrong?! Lina! She was really hurt!”

“I thought I told you, I healed Lina first.”

“Huh?”

As he'd said before, Lina had needed to be healed more urgently, so he'd had to prioritize her. That had resulted in him being subjected to that irritating monologue and had delayed how fast he could come save Aina.

“O-Okay... That's good.”

“Well...it's not completely okay with me.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“I told you I would save you, but I ended up putting you last. I wish I hadn't had to do that, so I'm sorry.”

“H-Hey, you don't have to apologize! It makes total sense that you prioritized Lina because she was in more danger...and it doesn't change that you saved me. So...that's plenty...”

“Mm, but personally...”

“I-I told you, it's okay! Let's just get out of here. I don't want to stay here any

longer.”

“Well, I agree with that, but unfortunately, we can’t just yet.”

“Huh?”

Soma wasn’t sure which came first: Aina’s confused interjection or the thing that showed up in front of him. Regardless, he casually swung his arm.

Law of the Sword / God-Killer / Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance / Sword of Pandemonium *Gift of Discernment: Original Style* Emulation / Demon Slayer

The flames that had been quickly approaching him vanished all at once, and he let out a sigh.

“Nobody likes a man who doesn’t know when to quit.”

“I am perfectly all right with being disliked. I care more about stopping those two from being taken away. They are our precious sacrifices to the Dark Lord.”

“Albert... You’re not hurt?”

“I definitely hit him, so I think he healed.”

“I did, in fact. It seems I was too enraptured by the fun to pay full attention. I never thought I would end up in such a disgraceful position.”

The man—apparently named Albert—who had come out of the huge hole in the wall sauntered closer.

It had already been demonstrated by the flames, but his eyes were full of malice, in contrast to his manner of speaking. His pride had probably been wounded, judging by the way he was making excuses.

“I could already tell from your behavior before, but you really are a little man. If you’d only stayed put, I would have done you the favor of leaving you alone.”

“Oh? *You* wish to spare *me*? I see, I see... Ha ha ha! Don’t get too full of yourself, you little brat!”

The moment the man shouted, Soma was surrounded by flames on all sides.

Unbothered, he stared into the red wall in front of him and nodded.

“S-Soma?!”

“I swear, this is why I hate little brats like him... Always full of themselves, not knowing how little and weak they really are. You understand now, right? Once he’s dead, it won’t—”

Law of the Sword / God-Killer / Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance / Sword of Pandemonium *Gift of Discernment: Personal Style* Emulation / Demon Slayer II

The flames were gone in the blink of an eye.

“Wha—this can’t be! I may not have said the words, but that was one of my best spells, and you just...?!”

“You said something about me not knowing my own strength, but your sacrifices and I know it quite well. I would say that you’re the one who doesn’t know, since you seem to be unaware of the gap between our levels.”

“Ghh!”

“I’ll take this opportunity to show you...although it will mean nothing, as you were about to say yourself.”

“You bastard! Don’t think you’re so great just because you managed to avoid one of my spells!”

“*You’re* the one who seems to think he’s so great.”

Looking at the man through narrowed eyes, Soma crouched down when he noticed something on the ground—an iron rod of the perfect length.

Honestly, he didn’t have to use such a thing. He didn’t know who this man in front of him was, but in all likelihood, Soma’s stick would have sufficed to take care of him.

Soma never would have done this normally. He had been honest before about letting Albert go. He didn’t enjoy tormenting the weak.

But now that Albert had been offered mercy and spurned it, there would be no more forgiveness from Soma.

There was no way he could let this slide.

Soma was angrier than he had ever been before.

Angry that this man had hurt his sister and friend.

He had absolutely no intention of letting him get away with it.

“Well, I’m no monster. I’ll give you the time to savor your regret and despair. Rejoice—and die.”

“You damned brat! Fine, then—as you lie on your deathbed, you will regret ever having scorned the Fourth Dark Commander, Albert the Reaper!”

There was no need for more words. Their malice said it all.

Clutching the iron rod as if to imbue it with his will, Soma leapt toward the man.

34

In a corner of the dim room, he breathed quietly so as not to be heard.

He wasn't planning to run away. He was biding his time before striking back.

He didn't know how many were left, but if even one of them survived and completed the ceremony, the victory would be theirs.

It concerned him that they had been attacked today of all days, but perhaps this was a test from their god. In that case, if they overcame it, then their lord would rule the world once more.

The thought spurred a new motivation within him.

But that was when it happened.

He heard someone walk up right next to him and stop. His body automatically tensed.

"I'm not finding any more... Was that all, then? Eight in total. Pretty shady guys, just by looking at them, but what were they trying to do? I guess now that I'm done with them, it doesn't matter what they were plotting. Now what to do...look somewhere else just in case, or go home?"

But just then, the silhouette turned around.

He would've been noticed if this person had come two steps, no, even one step closer... His god was on his side after all. He smiled.

The footsteps resumed. The corners of his mouth turned up as he watched the departing figure's unguarded back.

This would fulfill one of his long-held desires, in two senses.

He knew that silhouette—that woman.

He'd spotted, no, encountered her in battle over a decade ago.

The conclusion then had been the same as today. There was one obvious difference between then and now, however.

Back then, he hadn't been able to do anything but run and hide, but today he could kill her.

He would complete the revenge that he'd vowed that day, and he would bring back their lord.

As his heart danced in joy knowing how wonderful this day was, the man leapt at her back.

He thrust his short sword forward with the intent to kill.

"Die, Silver-Black—"

"Dumbass. You thought you could kill me before I sensed all that anger you're giving off?"

For a moment, he couldn't grasp what had just happened.

"Huh?"

The next thing he knew, he couldn't feel the lower half of his body, and the woman appeared to be upside down.



Why was he upside down—no, why was he face to face with her in the first place? It finally became clear to him as he met her icy gaze.

He'd been cut in half at the middle.

"You...damned Silver-Black Warriress!"

He held his glare on the woman until the very end.

The last thing he felt was something running down his side before his consciousness slipped into eternal darkness.

†

As she looked at the man on the ground before her and the dark red fluid pooling around him, Camilla let out a sigh. She had an indescribable look on her face.

She hadn't honestly needed to make that last attack. He'd already been beyond help.

But after hearing that abominable name for the first time in so long, she hadn't been able to just leave him.

"Jeez, I guess I can be more sensitive than I realized."

She sighed again in annoyance with herself.

Back when she'd been active in battling the devils over a decade ago, the enemy had taken to calling her the Silver-Black Warriress. The name had probably been based on the colors of her hair and her armor.

Such things weren't rare... If anything, they were common. People gave a second name to those they considered threats, and shared the information with others. This was such a normal thing that most of the time, people didn't even know their opponent's real name.

The most important thing was to give them an easily understood name so it wasn't difficult for others to tell who you meant. That meant using a distinctive trait of theirs, and hair color always counted as one of those.

This was because hair color could tell you how dangerous someone was at a glance—it indicated their talents. Each hair color indicated a different set of

talents, and black was treated as especially significant because it was said to mean they had talent for everything.

And that was a fact, not just a superstition. There was research backing it up, and if nothing else, it was definitely true of Camilla. It could easily have taken an hour to list off all the Skills that Camilla knew or had the potential to learn along with explanations of each one.

That was the reason Camilla had thought to aim for the top...and also why people had been convinced of Soma's talent. Of course, there was also the way he spoke and behaved and the excellence he displayed, but his hair color was one reason that Soma had been treated as a genius.

But in hindsight, maybe that had backfired and led to his current situation. If he hadn't had black hair, maybe they would have been treating him better now.

It wasn't just because Soma had no talent that he was being treated as if he didn't exist; it was also because they'd overemphasized his talent before to the point that they had to treat him like this now.

Anyway, that title was part of a past that Camilla didn't look back on fondly. Remembering her younger, less experienced self brought back things she'd rather have forgotten, which had been why she'd wanted to get rid of the man immediately.

That aside...

"So... Is that really everyone now?"

Turning her back on her opponent had been a ruse to make her opponent let down his guard—it hadn't been because she really hadn't noticed him.

A quick check didn't reveal any more signs of people around, which probably meant that had been everyone.

The place being what it was, she was genuinely curious what they'd been plotting, but that could wait until later. There was no need to worry about it now that she'd defeated them all...but more importantly, things weren't over yet.

The most crucial thing right now was to reconvene with Soma once he'd rescued the girls.

"Maybe I didn't really have to distract them, anyway."

In fact, Camilla was doing this away from Soma to divert their enemies' attention. By messing with them, she had intended to buy Soma time to rescue the girls.

The plan had been for her to retreat once the rescue was done, but it had ended up like this. There was no use retreating now that she'd killed them all...and she felt a chillingly strong power from Soma's direction, even from this distance. All the enemies she'd defeated today combined would be nothing compared to that.

"Actually, did I make the wrong call? Can't really afford a mistake here..."

She was half joking, but this was a familiar feeling to her, from when she'd once encountered a Dark Commander.

He had been defeated in battle that time...but this closely resembled what she'd felt then.

She didn't think Soma of all people would have been bested so soon, but...

"Tch... I guess I'll go check it out. Maybe there's something I can do."

Pushing down the urge to shrink back in hesitation, Camilla hurried toward where Soma was.

35

Don't screw with me, he thought. *You must be screwing with me.*

It was supposed to have been perfect. He had planned to combine his talent with his comrades' power and complete the revival ceremony.

They had planned to take matters into their own hands this time.

They had planned to get the upper hand, to make talentless scum like this kid grovel before them.

And yet...

And yet...!

"You just came and...!"

"Shut up. Nobody wants to hear your blathering. Or if you're going to speak, say something worthier of being said. Your life may be meaningless—but you could at least make the words you say mean something."

"Damn you!"

With those words, he snapped.

Albert hadn't truly been making a serious effort until just now. He'd known it would create issues.

But he didn't care anymore.

Releasing all his limits, he filled the entire vicinity with magic—enough to destroy an entire army—then gathered it toward himself and poured even more energy into it.

"Die!"

With a shout, he thrust it directly forward—and it harmlessly scattered away.

"Wha—no! How can that possibly..."

It wasn't possible. It *couldn't* be possible.

This wasn't...!

"This isn't...!"

Albert yelled as he shot off another full-powered spell.

†

Aina stared speechlessly at the scene before her.

It was like a dream, so much so that she questioned whether she really was dreaming. Maybe she was on the verge of death, and this was all in her head.

It was too good to be true, after all. He'd come to help at the perfect time, and he was more than a match for the Dark Commander.

Oh, but... A thought occurred to Aina.

This is Soma we're talking about.

"This can't be... No, this can't be! Why... Why have you been interfering with us in the first place?!"

"That's a difficult question to answer, seeing as I don't know what you were trying to accomplish. I do know, however, that you hurt my sister and my friend-slash-magic mentor. That, to me, is a good enough reason to eliminate you."

Aina smiled slightly when she heard him call her his magic mentor, even though she'd done nothing to deserve the title.

She had another thought at the same time.

This was so incredibly lucky, it was like a dream...but somewhere deep down, she'd had faith in Soma all along.

If she hadn't, then she wouldn't have been able to use her magic right before she lost consciousness as she was being taken away, nor to keep it activated this whole time.

That realization allowed her to accept this opportune scene.

She accepted it and just looked on, doing nothing. After all, there was no need for her to do anything now.

So Aina watched Soma's back intently, waiting for it to be over.

†

Camilla had once seen her battle a Dark Commander.

It had been over a decade ago, near the end of the war.

Camilla had never forgotten that moment.

As part of the advance guard, all she'd been able to do was look on from behind.

It was unforgettable.

And it was the decisive moment that broke Camilla's heart.

However long she kept trying, she would never reach that level.

That thought led to her giving up.

That was also the reason that she was a Skill Assessor now. She'd run away, chosen another path, and ultimately run away from that one too.

So an unspeakable sense of inferiority still smoldered deep in Camilla's heart.

"This can't be happening! I'm not going to lose to a little brat like you!"

"As long as you keep talking like that, you'll remain at that level."

Camilla stood frozen in shock before the scene.

It surpassed the fight she'd seen back then.

Flame and frost, wind and lightning, all flying wildly in every direction...and one boy standing against it all.

It was so obviously a reckless fight, one with only despair waiting at the end, even more so because he held only a stick and an iron rod. But the boy's usual brazen attitude remained unshaken in the midst of it all.

And almost as if to say his attitude was justified, all of the attacks aimed at the boy stopped before they reached him. It looked like there was a line they couldn't cross, some kind of barrier—which there probably in fact was.

His swords *were* the barrier. They blocked each and every one of the attacks running rampant in every direction. That was all there was to this impossible

scene.

Not only that—the man’s body was simultaneously being hacked and sliced at, little by little, as if the blocking were only a sideshow.

The boy wasn’t even going all out, judging by the way the cuts came at regular intervals.

The skill gap was too obvious to ignore. As that became clear to the man, his face darkened in a mix of emotions.

“Have you realized your wrongs by now? Have you lost hope? Then begone already—to the otherworld, that is. I will allow you one last privilege—you may take your own life.”

“Stop making a fool of me, you damned kid!”

“Oh, I’m not making fun of you—this is one last show of mercy. I intended to kill you, pitiful as you are...but you’ve turned out to be so pitiful, I don’t have to. Even I can’t help but feel bad for you.”

“Is that so... Then you’d better regret that!”

What the man was trying to do was obvious to Camilla, who was standing behind Soma, next to the stairs leading down into this area.

There were two girls behind Soma, apparently being guarded by him. One was Lina, who was lying on the ground, and the other was a girl Camilla had never seen before. She knew right away that the girl was probably Aina...

Just then, the dead space of the ground behind the girl swelled, and spears of earth shot out at her with incredible force.

“Crap!”

Despite noticing, Camilla couldn’t make it in time. She was too far away.

Yet she started moving immediately, reaching her hand out.

“Heh heh heh, I’m not going out alone... I’m taking you with me!”

“Hah...”

A deeply exasperated sigh echoed in the room, oddly clear amid the chaos.

In the next moment, the spears that had been stretching toward Aina were gone without a trace.

“Wha... How?! How did you realize... How did you stop it in time?!”

“You just keep going lower and lower... It’s almost impressive, really. And thanks to that, I no longer feel any pity for you.”

“Y-You... You goddamn—”

The man leapt at Soma in one last show of resistance, a look of pure rage on his face. At the same time, the flames advanced toward him with even more momentum.

“Flash.”

It was a quiet murmur that echoed through the space—but it signaled the end.

The wildly burning flames vanished as if nothing had been there in the first place, and the man—now cut into two symmetrical halves—flew past Soma on both sides. As soon as the halves passed Soma, they were slashed into countless pieces, then vanished without a trace.



“Not one cell of yours may remain on this earth. May you regret your folly in death. Not that I intend to forgive you if you do.”

Having said that under his breath, Soma sighed and turned around.

Incidentally, Camilla, who had tried to reach out to Aina but stopped as soon as it became apparent that it was unnecessary, was frozen in a strange pose. Once Camilla noticed, she cleared her throat and started talking to Soma as if it were nothing.

“I guess I should have known you could handle it. I came just in case, but looks like you didn’t need me after all.”

“Well, as you could see, he was just a small fry.” Soma shrugged.

If he was a small fry, then so is just about everyone else in the world, Camilla thought. Soma definitely had a point, but Albert had also been strong enough that even Camilla wasn’t sure she could have lasted a minute against him.

“I mean, you must already know, since he said it himself, but Albert was a Dark Commander.”

“But his attitude was clearly that of a small fry, was it not?”

“Well, I can’t deny that...”

As she listened, she looked back at the area that had been a battlefield just a moment ago.

The second look left her just as awed as the first.

The area beyond where Soma stood was so destroyed, it was hard to tell what had been there before. The only reason she could guess that it had been a row of jail cells was because one was left intact on either side. The walls and even the ceiling had been blown out, which was very telling of how much fighting had taken place.

That just made the strangeness of this side stand out more...as well as the strangeness of the kid who was responsible. It was almost enough to make one want to back away, but Aina didn’t seem to feel that way as far as Camilla could tell, and she was surprised to notice that she felt the same.

Indeed, Camilla had once seen a Dark Commander defeated, but it hadn't been as one-sided as this, and Soma didn't have any martial Skills, let alone a Special-Grade one like *she* did.

With that in mind, it was needless to say how improbable Soma's existence was.

"Well, I guess I already knew that," she muttered in amazement, just then remembering something she'd once been told.

"Whether or not you have a Skill, you ultimately decide your own path."

Camilla's former mentor had once said that.

It was because Camilla had believed that, experienced it for herself, that she had been aiming for such an unrealistic goal as becoming one of the Elite Seven.

Although that dream had ultimately been crushed in the face of overwhelming talent.

A useless thought came to mind... What if she'd known Soma before then?

But that was a meaningless hypothetical. Soma hadn't even been born then, so it was impossible in the true sense of the word.

However, she felt differently about it now than she had just recently. She thought that if she had, just maybe she would still be trying to become one of the Elite Seven.

"No point in thinking about that, anyway..."

Camilla was already broken.

So she shrugged her shoulders, brushed off the thought, and looked back at the children.

The matter was settled now.

There would still be some trouble to deal with after this...but that could wait until they got back to the mansion.

"Well, that resolves everything we needed to do here."

“Yep, now we just—”

“Yes... I’m counting on you for the rest.”

“Huh?”

Camilla made a confused sound in response to being interrupted right as she was about to say they just had to go home now. She quickly grasped what he meant, though.

Immediately after, Soma’s body began to tilt to the side, and he collapsed onto the ground.

“S...Soma?!”

Aina’s panicked voice echoed through the space.

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Sophia sighed as she looked up from the written report she held.

If she were to sum up her current state of mind, she would have said that she was unsure what to do.

She felt like they'd brought home something troublesome, but she couldn't exactly blame them.

As she thought about it, she looked back at the paper to confirm what she'd just read.

It was an account of the recent incident—Lina's kidnapping.

She'd already read it once, so she wasn't surprised this time, but it still made her sigh.

The fact that they'd gone out of their way to send a written report instead of just making a verbal one had made it highly likely that there was going to be an issue.

That potential issue was that Camilla, who had written the report, had brought Lina back from devil territory.

Given that, Sophia couldn't help but imagine the worst.

"It seems it didn't come to the worst, at least..."

The good news was that the kidnappers hadn't acted with the intent of starting a war. But their actual intent was nothing to be happy about either.

Their goal had been to revive the former Dark Lord, and in all likelihood, they were Archdevil worshippers—legitimate ones, not just the "Archdevil worshippers" all devils were claimed to be. Those who wished for the destruction of the world—genuine enemies of mankind.

And one of the Dark Commanders had been among them. Since he was the Fourth, he had probably been the replacement for the one Sophia had defeated...which would place him one step below the absolute worst.

“If this were mere happenstance, it would be far too good to be true... Rather, we should probably take this to mean that Archdevil worship has strong roots among the devils.”

It would make more sense to think that the number of Archdevil worshippers had increased to the point that one had been chosen as a Dark Commander, rather than that one of only a few worshippers had been chosen by chance.

Perhaps it wasn't so far-fetched to think that the devils would become a true enemy of mankind, not just a fabricated one.

That was just one possibility at the moment, however. She would express that concern just in case, but she didn't intend to take any further action.

It would have been another story if that Dark Commander were still alive, but there was no need to do anything more now that he'd been killed in battle. That was another piece of good news.

“But if I submit this as is, they'll probably interpret it to mean Camilla defeated him...” Sophia smiled wryly.

It wasn't that she thought it would be impossible for Camilla. If anything, she thought Camilla had enough hidden talent to defeat a Dark Commander. That was Sophia's objective assessment as a member of the Elite Seven, not just a bias toward her as a friend. It was for that reason that she had asked Camilla to come to the mansion in the first place.

Sophia didn't know how Camilla understood it, but she thought highly of Camilla not just as a Skill Assessor but as a fighter. However, Camilla seemed to have given up on that path.

So the past Camilla would have formatted this report a bit differently.

It would have been written in such a way that it was clear that someone other than Camilla had defeated him.

It was possible to interpret the fact that she *hadn't* written it that way as Camilla taking credit for something she hadn't done, but Sophia perceived it differently.

It seemed to her like a declaration that Camilla didn't care if it was

interpreted that way...because it would end up that way regardless.

It could have been in Sophia's head, and she didn't intend to go out of her way to check. She just hoped it was the case.

In any case, as was clear based on the fact that she was thinking like this, Sophia was almost certain that someone other than Camilla had been involved here. It wasn't specified in the report, but she could tell.

Though she was talented, in practice, the chances of Camilla actually accessing her hidden talent and winning against a Dark Commander were one in a million.

That meant it was almost certain that someone else had been there to defeat the Dark Commander.

And as for that someone...

Perhaps this meant Sophia's perception hadn't been clouded after all.

Or maybe what she should have said was...she never should have expected less from her son.

"If Camilla rose up again, that means she must have seen something there. I break, and you fix... How ironic."

There was a lonely look on Sophia's face as she spoke under her breath.

It could also have been because she spotted an additional piece of information at the bottom of the report, unrelated to the incident.

Sophia gave the report one more look, then crushed it in her hand. Flames ignited inside her closed fist, turning the paper to ashes. She opened her hand, letting the remains scatter out, only to vanish.

That was the true end of this incident.

It meant nothing had ever happened.

Lina's kidnapping had been a complete coincidence, and everyone responsible had been defeated. That meant this was Sophia's best course of action.

Only those with a vendetta against this nation would be happy to create unnecessary friction with the devils.

She would make an objection to them through secret channels, of course, but that was all.

There would be no war. With this new information, the issue could be settled as even.

The same went for the last part: Sophia had never received any report, so it was irrelevant to her that there was now one less person in the mansion.

It only meant someone who shouldn't have existed in the first place was no longer going to be there. Nothing would change in the household.

Except that Sophia would feel a little lonelier.

"This world was always too small for you. Go forth and learn—learn just how big the world is, and that that is where you can shine."

She had known this day would come, whether it was sooner or later.

So Sophia closed her eyes.

She was in no position to pray for his safety, but she wished that he would find good fortune wherever he ended up.

It would be some time after that before Sophia noticed that one other person was missing from the mansion.

†

"Let's be on our way, then."

Soma readjusted his bag on his shoulder and looked behind him.

He was on the border of the Devils' Woods. Behind him was a girl dressed similarly to him.

Aina looked at Soma anxiously. She was carrying a bag of clothes and other things on her back.

It wasn't because they were about to set out on a journey that she was anxious. Well, that was certainly part of it, but...

"Are you sure about this?"

Soma just shrugged in response to the question she'd asked him many times before. His answer wasn't going to change.

"It would be too bad a look for me to stop now, anyway. How could I show my face back home, saying I'd changed my mind, after I already said goodbye to my teacher?"

"Well... You're right, but... But... I mean, you haven't said anything to Lina."

"Ahh, right, I felt guilty about that myself, but how do I put this... There isn't any more need to do that."

Aina gave Soma a doubtful look, but he had no intent of disclosing the details. He knew telling her would result in more trouble.

Really, he probably should have done something about the small figure hiding in the trees behind him, but he wasn't confident that he could stop her. He saw no future where she didn't tag along, even if he tried to stop her, so he decided to just let it happen.

It would probably happen no matter what he said to anyone. He sighed, realizing they were alike in some odd ways.

"Well, don't worry about that. In any case, what are you planning to do if I don't come with you?"

"W-Well, um... I'll figure it out, just like I managed a year ago."

"That was on your side. You have no experience over here."

"I mean, you're right... But doesn't the same kind of thing go for you?"

"I've learned a lot, so I'll manage despite my lack of experience. So, do you understand mankind's norms?"

"Uh..."

She was struggling to find what to say because she was well aware of the answer.

He wasn't sure whether to be happy about that or to lament her stubbornness in not admitting it.

Neither would change the conclusion, anyway.

“There’s not really any need for me to travel over there. I mean...it’d be dangerous if stuff got out.”

“I can’t deny that, but the reason you were going to travel here is that you ended up in that village after the events of last year, so if you want to go farther, the only way you can go is in this direction, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

He sighed as she continued to grasp at straws. Basically, what he’d said was correct.

A night had passed since he had rescued Aina and Lina.

Soma and Aina were setting off on a journey through the lands of mankind.

Aina had decided on that because she didn’t want to cause trouble for the village if something similar happened again.

She didn’t have the choice to go back, but for a different reason than the first time she’d run away.

She’d gone back to the village to get her stuff, which was all in her bag.

She hadn’t seen the old couple who had been taking care of her; she’d just left a note. At least, that was what she’d told him.

She had taken longer than he’d expected to do that, and her eyes seemed oddly red, but he was probably imagining it.

“A-Are you sure you’re up for a journey right now? It hasn’t been long since you collapsed again.”

“I am sore in a lot of places, but I can handle some travel. It seems safe for the time being, and I’ll heal in time.”

Soma had collapsed at the very end after saving Aina and Lina because he’d overexerted himself out of anger. He’d improved a lot over the past year, but due to everything that had happened, his body still hadn’t been able to handle that much stress.

But he wasn’t immobilized from soreness this time, so it wouldn’t be a

problem.

He'd needed help for about half of the way home, but he'd already recovered from that. He was still sore, but it was within acceptable limits.

Incidentally, Soma was setting out because he'd heard about Aina's plan when he was already considering a journey and had figured now was the perfect opportunity. As children, they would probably be better off together than going alone...and he'd also simply been worried about Aina.

It had been a one-sided decision on Soma's part, but Camilla had endorsed it, so he'd left the rest to her, gathered up the bare minimum of what he would need, and won Aina over temporarily, but...

"Hmm... I understand. How about this, then?"

"About what?"

"You can go on a journey by yourself."

"Huh?"

Aina's face fell a little, as if, despite her resistance, she hadn't expected him to actually say that.

Soma smiled wryly in response.

"And I'll go on my own journey. We might happen to end up in the same place...but we'd just have to accept that coincidence."

"So it'd end up the same way anyway..."

"Which is why I'm saying to let it go. Why are you so against it in the first place? You agreed at first, and you understand why two are better than one, don't you?"

"Well, I do, but, I mean..."

"You mean?"

"It'd cause problems for you if it got out that I'm, you know..."

Hearing that, Soma let out a big sigh.

Seriously...

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Hey, wait!”

He was sick of this, so he grabbed her hand and started walking. Aina, who was flustered, tried to protest, but—

“It was my decision to go with you, so even if something does happen, I won’t hold it against you. Not to mention, I took too long to get to you yesterday. I won’t say it’s to make up for that...but the next time something happens, I’ll be right there to protect you.”

“Oh... O-Okay...”

She nodded in agreement and tightened her timid hold on his hand.



Soma sighed, softly enough that Aina wouldn't notice.

He couldn't help but wonder what he was doing after having gone so far as to be reincarnated in another world...but he couldn't help that now.

Unlike in his past life, he couldn't settle for just aiming for one thing.

He would be able to if he put his mind to it, of course...but he wouldn't be able to forgive himself for it.

Most importantly, he rather liked this situation and this version of himself.

He looked up at the sky as he thought. It was the same blue expanse that had been the last thing he'd seen in his past life.

This time, however, he wasn't next to someone he had to defeat but someone he had to protect.

Of course, another difference was that there would soon be three of them in total.

Things were completely different now, from the target he was aiming toward to the fact that he didn't even have a finger on where he should start.

Everything was different.

But maybe that was what made it good.

After all, if he was going to be in another world anyway...

Then this was just fine.

"God's in his heaven, and all's right with the world, I suppose."

"Huh? What?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking... I hope this adventure turns out to be a fun one."

"Oh... Y-Yeah... Me too!"

He hadn't just been saying that—he'd really thought it.

So Soma smiled as he looked behind him and saw her smiling face approaching him.

It was a short time before Soma set off on his journey.

The place was the abandoned wreck that had been left behind after Soma had done as he pleased with it.

There should have been no sign of anyone there...but there was one person.

“Hmm, I woke up just for this, but I ended up not having to do anything... That certainly makes it easy for me, but it’s a matter of honor... Huh? I don’t have any now? Well, you’re right, but isn’t it normal that part of me thinks about it? That’s why I came out here, after all.”

It was a tiny figure, apparently having a conversation with herself.

The person, who looked like a child—no, *was* a child—let out a sigh as she surveyed the area.

“And I don’t have anything left either! I guess I should have expected that, but I wanted to give him a souvenir... Huh? I couldn’t give it to him if I brought it back, anyway? Well, I might have the opportunity at some point, you know! So... Huh? He’s not interested in that kind of thing? Yeah... I should have thought of that. You’re right.”

She sighed, looking genuinely disappointed. Apparently this was actually meaningful to her. But the unchangeable truth was that it was completely futile and meaningless.

“Ahh, you don’t have to go that far! Even I feel down sometimes... I think. Why do I say ‘I think’? Well, I don’t understand myself very well! How am I supposed to know about that with just the information I got, especially when it didn’t say anything about me?”

She said it with a blank face, which made it unclear whether she really meant it, but she seemed not to care as she looked around once more, then stretched.

“Well, I know this was pointless now, so I’ll just go back... I won’t make it in time if I take too much longer. Huh? Am I okay with that? Well, not really, to be honest, but I have no choice. I’ll just look forward to the next time I awaken.”

She smiled as if she were genuinely looking forward to it.

Despite the fact that it wasn’t something to look forward to at all.

“Hey, that’s not true! I mean, I might be able to talk to him then. I’m excited for that. Huh? Even if it results in him slashing me? Hmm, well, the fact that he might even be able to do that is pretty intriguing to me!”

It wasn’t amusing by any stretch of the imagination, but it apparently fell into that category in her mind.

She smiled again and started walking.

“I wonder what it’ll be like next time... Hopefully he still doesn’t need me.”

That was probably how she truly felt.

But it was also something she shouldn’t have wished for.

So...

“Yeah, yeah, all for the sake of this world, right? I know, that’s why I was born! So I’ll fulfill my duty next time.”

She closed her mouth briefly as if to lend an air of importance to what she was about to say next.

Then...

“As the arbiter of mankind.”

In those words were her role and her reason for being.

†

It was the throne room of a certain kingdom.

The sun had long set, and it was now the middle of the night.

Nobody should have been there.

But almost in defiance of reason, there was one shadow.

No.

There were two shadows.

“Hmm... So we use that opportunity to attack them...no, to take back what is ours.”

“Exactly.”

“But is that really possible?”

“Who knows?”

“Hey, now...” In response to that careless reply, the other shadow—the man sitting on the throne—narrowed his eyes.

They only shrugged their shoulders in the face of the sharp glare, which would have sent shivers through any regular person but seemed to have no effect in this instance.

Their face wasn't visible under the black hooded robe they were wearing, anyway.

“You can intimidate me all you want, but I don't know what I don't know. I'll do what I have to, but I'm not responsible for whether your guys make it possible.”

“Hmph... You should have just said that. And that will be no concern. How could we possibly lose to them?”

“Even though they gained independence and you can barely go on the offensive against them?”

The man audibly gritted his teeth, shooting the other figure a glare that could kill a man, but it elicited no reaction except a small sigh.

“Giving me that look isn't going to change the facts.”

“You don't have to tell me that! Damn it, if only... If it weren't for him!”

“That may be true, but saying it won't change anything. He's the cornerstone of their national security, so he's not going anywhere.”

“I just said, I already know that! Besides, you’re supposed to take care of that!”

“Don’t say it like I’m doing it for your sake. I’m doing this to further my own goals, nothing more.”

“Hmph... Resurrecting that thing that got sealed away long ago, huh? I honestly still don’t believe in it.”

“That’s fine. All you have to do is overlook what we’re doing, then attack them once things happen.”

“Even if that’s the case, can you really guarantee it won’t attack us?”

“We’ve gone over this. As much as it pains me to use the term...I’ve sworn on my name as a devil time and time again. Our true goal lies beyond that, anyway. We have no time to spend messing with you.”

“Hmph, is that really so...”

The man had never seemed to believe the other’s words, although this was to be expected.

Though they were having these secret meetings, they were still adversaries. Of course they didn’t trust each other.

“Well, fine. If you’re lying, then we’ll destroy you after the fact.”

“The same goes for you.”

Each of them grunted in response, and the figure turned around. There was no need to stick around now that they’d confirmed everything they had to.

The shadow vanished as if melting into the darkness, leaving the lone man in silence.

For some time, he continued to look at the darkness where the figure had been, then grunted again.

“Hmph... Only a devil would believe in a fairy tale for the sake of some lord who perished long ago. But if they’re going to start something, then we’ll come along for the ride. It doesn’t matter whether they fail... We can just use them

for our own ends. This time, we'll take back what belongs to us once and for all...our land, and those foolish people."

As the man—King Veritas XIII of the Kingdom of Veritas—imagined what it would be like, his mouth twisted in amusement.

First Admiration

She was dreaming.

She could tell it was a dream because she remembered having been in this exact scene before, in the mansion where she lived... Also because her viewpoint was lower than normal, and she couldn't move as she wanted to.

All those things in combination made it easy to recognize that this was a dream.

She also quickly grasped what it was about because of what she saw before her—her brother's back.

There was only one thing she would dream about with this setting.

The next thing that happened was exactly as Lina had imagined.

Her brother Soma continued to walk forward with his gaze firmly ahead of him, then finally exited the mansion.

He appeared confident, which showed that he was used to this.

That was only in hindsight, however; Lina hadn't thought about that at the time.

She had been too excited to even notice how odd it was that nobody had found them thus far.

Her mother had told them sternly never to leave the premises of the mansion. Following Soma like this meant breaking that rule.

But in the end, Lina had chosen to break the rules.

That was related to the reason she'd followed Soma out here...and it was also because he'd seemed to be enjoying himself when she'd happened to spot him.

So she'd followed him, thinking he must be doing something fun in secret.

The fact that he had left the premises only served to strengthen that conviction.

She even wondered if he was doing something fun with their mother that they were hiding from her.

So she made up her mind and left the mansion along with him.

Soma was apparently headed toward the backyard.

Lina's pace faltered as soon as she realized that, because she'd heard about what was beyond there.

It was a forest where scary creatures were said to live.

She considered going back...but she kept going, half out of stubbornness.

Soma vanished into the forest as if it had swallowed him. She stopped for a moment, but then continued ahead, taking her first step into the forest.

"Whoa..."

She couldn't help but exclaim in wonder.

The forest she'd thought to be such a creepy place had sunlight cascading through the gaps in the leaves, which looked very pretty to her.

As the daughter of a duke—although she hadn't known it at the time—Lina had seen plenty of pretty and valuable things.

But the scenery before her seemed prettier and more valuable than anything she'd ever seen.

That was probably a result of the feeling of transgression from having snuck out of the house and a curiosity toward the unknown, but that didn't matter to Lina at the time. It didn't change that she thought it was pretty.

That was probably why she forgot her fear without realizing it, even half forgot that she was secretly following her brother.

She felt like clutching her head as she watched herself hum a tune and run around looking at everything curiously. It made her want to interrogate her past self about whether she thought she was doing a good job of staying hidden.

Of course, in hindsight, Soma had probably already noticed her at the very moment that she'd spotted him in the mansion.

But Lina didn't have the capacity to notice that at the time. She just followed

Soma through the maze of trees, savoring the excitement of the unknown.

She was convinced that something was going to happen ahead.

As if to confirm that, Soma finally came to a stop in a clearing. When Lina noticed, she stopped as well.

If she kept going forward, she would be caught for sure.

Having finally remembered that she was sneaking behind him, Lina hastily slipped behind a tree trunk to hide.

Then she carefully peeked out to check what Soma was—

“Huh? Wh-Where are you?”

“Who do you mean?”

Lina flinched when someone suddenly spoke behind her.

Fear ran through her heart just then, because she’d remembered a bit too late that there were frightening creatures in this forest.

If she’d stopped to think, she would probably have realized that she knew that voice, but it would have been unfair to expect coolheadedness from Lina at that moment.

She cowered and clutched her head, trembling with tears in her eyes.

“P-Please don’t eat me! I don’t taste good! Wait... Is my brother gone because you...you a-ate... No!!! Give my brother back!”

“Ahh... Mm, I’m sorry, Lina. I didn’t think you would be so startled...but that’s no excuse. This was my mistake. And don’t worry. Nothing ate me.”

“Huh?”

She fearfully lifted her head and turned to look behind her. It was Soma, as she maybe should have expected.

But that was outside of Lina’s expectations. Her jaw dropped as she looked at his face.

“D...Dear brother?”

“Yes, I noticed you following me, so I thought I would surprise you...but it

seems I went too far. I'm sorry."

As Soma dipped his head in apology, Lina finally grasped what had just happened. She puffed up her cheeks in a pout.

"You meanie."

"I have no excuse. I'm really sorry. But...why did you follow me here?"

It was a blatant change of subject, but it also reminded Lina what she had been doing. She smacked her hands together in recognition.

"You looked like you were going somewhere fun, so I wanted to know what you were doing without telling me!"

"Hmm? You thought it looked like fun?"

"Is...it not?"

"I'm doing it for no reason, really... Only because I feel like I have to. Although I would be lying if I said it wasn't fun. Hmm, I see... Perhaps I've been enjoying myself more than I realized."

Soma muttered something she didn't understand, and then a look of satisfaction came over his face. That wasn't what Lina wanted, however. She puffed up her cheeks again and glared at him.

"So what have you been doing without me?! And I don't see mother! You're not with her?"

"This has nothing to do with her. It's a secret from her, actually."

"It is?!"

Lina was so shocked because she'd never considered that it would be possible to hide things from their mother. She'd tried many times in the past, but her mother always immediately found out.

"You can keep secrets from her?!"

"Hmm, well, she is sharp, but she also has a soft spot for us, so if you can understand that, then I think you could learn to do it too."

"I could? Okay, I'll try!"

Just as she was filled with determination, she remembered this wasn't the time for that. Her objective was to find out what Soma was hiding.

"So what are you hiding?!"

"Hmm... I suppose I don't mind showing you. I could have just given up earlier if I didn't want you to see, after all. I'll tell you, or show you, now, so stay right there. You might get hurt if you come closer."

"I-I would? Okay, I'll stay here..."

Lina shrank down and stood still. Soma gave her a wry smile and returned to the spot where he had stopped before.

He looked around and walked a short distance away, as if he'd spotted something, and picked it up. Then he came back to the original spot, slowly lifted his arm, and held the object in front of him.

"Is that...a stick? What are you—"

She wasn't able to finish her sentence.

Soma had moved before she could.

He stepped forward, then swung his arm.

Without a pause, he swung it back up, by which time his body had already begun to turn. He used the momentum in a side slash, then followed it with a diagonal one.

It all happened in just a moment, but strangely, Lina was able to perceive each of the individual movements.

Swordsmanship (Special-Grade): Perception.

Lina watched silently as he began to move in what could have been called a sword dance.

Watching was all she could do.

She could hardly blink. She may not even have been breathing much.

But she was too enraptured by the performance to care.

And...

This must have been Lina's earliest memory.

However she'd tried to disparage it, it remained as vivid as ever.

It was her precious treasure, something none could defile, not even herself.

Although the part where she sparred with Soma after this and he complimented her was also important to her, of course.

It was—

"Mmh?"

Just then, she woke up.

Instantly, what she'd been seeing spilled out of her consciousness like water running through her fingers. It was only a moment before even its residue vanished, leaving nothing more than a vague feeling of contentment.

"Hmm? I feel like I just had a good dream..."

Lina muttered to herself, still half-asleep—but in the next instant, she was wide awake.

She'd remembered that she didn't have time to sit around half asleep.

"Right, he's going to leave without me if I don't hurry!"

She'd remembered that Soma was leaving on a journey. While she was being carried back to the mansion, she'd eavesdropped on him talking about it to Camilla.

Those memories were fuzzy, however. She remembered being beaten up by something or other, but she couldn't remember when she'd woken up, or why she'd been pretending to sleep.

Or even why she'd fallen back asleep.

"But that doesn't matter right now. I just have to get ready and go!"

She would leave a note, at least, but she wasn't going to tell anyone. They would stop her if she did.

It would be a problem if someone saw her trying to leave the mansion, but

that wouldn't be a concern. Nobody would notice her if she were really trying not to be noticed. She knew that from experience.

And her mother probably wasn't paying attention at this time of day.

"She used to see right through me when I tried to hide things, but at some point I learned how... I feel like there was something in particular that taught me how to do that... Well, it doesn't matter now."

For now, she had to get ready.

She'd take her sword... What else would she need?

Well, she could make do without most things if it came to that. What she needed most right now was speed.

She hastily gathered anything that looked useful into a bag.

That just left the note.

"I'm going with my brother, so don't worry about me... Done!"

That was everything. Nothing was left to do now.

She finally grabbed her sword, psyching herself up.

"No way you're going to leave without me!"

Then Lina left her room behind.

The Way Home

“Huh?”

Aina stopped in her tracks and made an involuntary sound.

The scene before her was different from anything she’d imagined.

There was only one person where she’d expected three, and that person—Soma, who was leaning against a tree—turned toward her when he noticed her.

“Oh, you’re finally back. You took quite a long time ‘packing.’”

Aina averted her eyes when he spoke before she could ask her own question.

Her cheeks were probably a little red too.

The way he’d emphasized the word “packing” showed that he knew what she had really been doing.

And of course he would know, since she’d taken far too long to have just been packing.

“Sh-Shut up. Girls take a long time to get ready,” she shot back despite that, probably because when he’d offered to give her enough time to say her goodbyes, she’d said she would only leave a note.

Well, that really had been all she’d intended to do...which just made this more embarrassing.

“Is that so? You must have made sure not to leave anything important behind, then.”

“Ah...”

His tone was gentle. She could tell he was being considerate, not teasing her, which made her cheeks redden just a bit more.

It’s not fair of you to say something like that now...

Losing the desire to keep being stubborn, she nodded earnestly.

“Yeah... I got everything I wanted. I made sure not to forget anything.”

That went not just for the things in her bag, but the things in her heart, she reflected.

Soma nodded, satisfied. “Good. That’s all that matters.”

“Yeah... Thanks.”

“What are you thanking me for? I don’t feel that I said anything worthy of thanks.”

Soma gave her a clueless look, but he probably understood perfectly well why Aina had thanked him.

Aina continued to speak, though, because she thought she should tell him anyway.

“I just felt like saying it. Don’t worry about it. Also...I remember you telling me you wanted me to thank someone.”

“I see.”

He understood after all, judging by the smile that came across his face as he replied. He seemed to know exactly what she meant by that, which only made her gladder that she’d told him.

“Let’s be on our way, then. Camilla and the others will be worried if we take much longer.”

“Oh, right, about that!”

That reminded her of the question she’d had. She hadn’t gotten the chance to ask yet.

“Yes? About what?”

“Why are you the only one here? What happened to Camilla and Lina?”

“Oh, they went home. Lina still hadn’t woken up.”

“They went home?!”

Isn’t that irresponsible? she thought for a second, but then decided it wasn’t, actually.

From Camilla's perspective, it would be best to get Lina home as soon as possible.

Also, there were no monsters here, and Soma would have been unlikely to fall behind, even if there were.

Although that was only thanks to Camilla helping him make it this far.

And Aina had no right to blame her, anyway, since it was Aina's own fault she'd taken so long to come back.

But still...

"So she just left you behind, then? And you're fine with that?"

"I actually told her to. I said you would probably take some time to come back, so they should go back to the house without us."

"Mm..."

That meant he'd known exactly what she was going to do.

Aina pursed her lips. It made her a little happy, but it was also vexing.

"Well, I guess it's fine, then... Oh, also, I won't stop us from going, but are you sure you can walk by yourself now?"

"Don't underestimate me. I can walk perfectly well, if you don't mind moving at a snail's pace."

"So you basically can't!"

"I suppose you could put it like that."

"How else would you put it?! Jeez..."

She wondered why he was being so stubborn for no reason, but then realized she would be a hypocrite if she said it out loud, so she held her tongue.

Instead, she sighed, moved closer to him, and offered a hand.

"Here."

"Hmm? You want to shake hands? Why now of all times?"

"I'm helping you walk, obviously!"

She lent him her shoulder, which he didn't protest, and helped him off the tree trunk.

But she immediately felt a heavy weight pushing her down.

"Ugh!"

"This *is* a big help, but...are you all right? I would imagine this is tough for you, unlike Camilla."

"I... I'm fine!"

She wasn't, actually, but she'd offered to do this herself. She wasn't about to quit so soon.

"Maybe you thought it would be okay because Camilla was supporting me while carrying Lina at the same time, but Camilla is actually rather strong. Don't overdo it."

Aina could feel that for herself right now. Where was Camilla hiding all that strength when she was barely taller than Aina?

The same went for Soma and Lina, however.

Considering that, Aina felt like she might just be weak.

But even still... Even still.

"My, you can be so stubborn."

"Look who's talking..."

For whatever it was worth, Soma rarely showed weakness. The fact that he was leaning on Aina's shoulder was a measure of what a hard time he was having.

And the cause of that lay in her and Lina.

It wasn't about how they'd been kidnapped in the first place.

Soma had said it was his own fault that he'd collapsed and was now in this state. He'd gone overboard when there had been no need to.

That was likely the truth.

But from another perspective, that meant he'd done that *despite* it being

unnecessary.

And if she thought about why that was...

It probably wouldn't have been self centered to say that it was because of her—or rather, for her.

So it was only natural that she would lend him a shoulder like this.

“Well, I'm sure they'll worry if we take too long, but we've taken so long already... Let's take it at an easy pace.”

“Huh?”

As soon as he said that, the weight on her shoulder drastically lifted.

Since she hadn't suddenly gained strength, it meant Soma was supporting that burden.

But as said before, Soma was struggling a lot right now.

Still, he wasn't letting it show. He was even trying to be considerate of her.

“I can't believe you...”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

Soma would only play dumb if she pointed it out, so she said nothing and began to walk.

Soma had been waiting at the entrance to the Devils' Woods.

It would normally have taken around thirty minutes to get to the other side at a leisurely pace, but they were only moving a bit faster than a snail right now. It would probably take them about an hour.

But that made Aina nostalgic. It was almost like that one day a year ago...

“This reminds me of what happened this time last year... You carried me back to the yard then too. Well, it took longer that time, I suppose.”

“...Yeah.” She took a moment to reply because she'd felt a smile coming on at the fact that Soma was thinking the same thing as her.

Well, she felt like she was smiling right now anyway, but she pretended not to

notice.

“That gave me such a scare... I heard a loud sound and went to check it out, and there I found a fallen tree, and you were lying on the ground next to it. And then you said you couldn’t move.”

“I suppose I caused you a lot of trouble then...although I still am now.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” She was obviously causing him more trouble than he was causing her.

He would probably tell her he didn’t think of it that way, but she could say the exact same thing.

Of course, that was something she could say because it was the present moment.

She hadn’t had a single reason to help Soma at the time. So why had she?

She honestly still didn’t know.

Maybe there had been no reason. Maybe she’d been happy to be needed.

All she knew was that if it hadn’t been for that, she wouldn’t be here right now.

“With that in mind, I don’t know if I should praise my past self for making that decision or scold her for not thinking harder before getting involved in some weird stuff...”

“By weird stuff, do you mean that man Albert? But getting involved with that had nothing to do with me, right? Well...I suppose in a roundabout way, I was involved...”

Aina sighed. “Sometimes I get jealous of how weirdly positive your thought process is.”

“It’s not that positive. And as for your past self, I personally would have to praise her. If you hadn’t done that, we wouldn’t have this kind of relationship.”

“Wh-What kind?!”

At those words, she suddenly became conscious that Soma’s face was right next to hers and turned away, flustered.

It was probably Soma's usual nonsense...but it bothered her that she was the only one conscious of it, so she forced her thoughts away from it.

Right... If she hadn't helped Soma, then things would have been completely different now.

She never would have met him again, and she wouldn't be able to use magic.

She wouldn't have experienced all that laughter and anger...and she might even have chosen death when Albert kidnapped her.

She didn't want that...so she had to praise her past self's decision-making.

Even though it bothered her in multiple ways.

So much had happened over the past year, all because she'd helped Soma.

She felt like most of it had been having silly conversations with him, but even those were special.

She'd become able to use magic, she'd met Lina, and although she'd been betrayed and kidnapped by Albert, she'd received a lot of help in the end.

Now she was letting Soma lean on her shoulder as they walked, and soon...

"So, um..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Once we get back to the mansion, we're going to get ready and go on a journey, right? Together?"

Soon Aina would set out on a journey with Soma.

So they'd decided.

She'd been told about the reasons they'd arrived at that decision, and Camilla had seemed to approve, but...

"Yes, that's the plan... Are you against it now?"

"I—"

I could never be! she almost said, but she felt like that would be a bit much, so she calmed down.

But she felt like there was no way she could answer that would work, so she

decided not to touch on it.

“Th-That’s not what I mean... I just don’t think you really get any advantage from journeying with me.”

“I think having two people as opposed to one is enough of an advantage on a journey.”

“Well, that’s...”

He was right. Aina knew that advantage better than she would have liked, having journeyed by herself before.

There would be a different sense of security just knowing that she wasn’t alone, even before they took turns sleeping, which would be much safer.

But it would be a problem in a different sense that it was just her and Soma.

“Hmm... I wouldn’t do anything to you, you know. I suppose all I can do about it is ask you to believe me, though.”

“I-I’m not worried about that!”

She really wasn’t, but being told that was sort of irritating...

“I-I mean... It’s, um, helpful for me to have you around, but you wouldn’t have any problems without me, right?”

It was true that two would be better than one, but she couldn’t see Soma needing that. If anything, she felt like she would only hold him back.

“I think you’re overestimating me. Well, I won’t deny that I could travel alone... But it will definitely help to have you with me. I would actually run into a lot of problems by myself... Maybe I should put it like this: if I’m going to set out on a journey right now, then I need you.”

Aina’s voice caught.

The way he put it was unfair.

It was mean.

But when she turned a glare toward him, all she saw was his usual face.

“Honestly, you...”

“Well, that said, it would help me a lot if you came with me.”

She couldn't refuse if he said it like that.

Not that she could have from the beginning.

It would have gotten on her nerves to earnestly accept it, so she just kept walking as if in place of a response.

With their conversation over, all she could hear were the sounds of their footsteps and breathing.

But the silence wasn't uncomfortable.

With every step, she felt his weight and his warmth.

As she naturally became aware of those things, she had a thought.

If they journeyed together, then things like this would happen at times.

That meant they could keep having days like this.

A small smile came across Aina's face at the thought...but she said nothing about it and just continued to move her feet in silence.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Shin Kouduki.

Thank you for picking up this book, whether this story is new to you or you followed me on Naro. Nothing would make me happier than if you enjoyed your time reading this book even a little.

It's an odd feeling, to be writing the afterword to a novel I wrote.

I wrote a bit about myself in the About the Author section, but I majored in psychology in university. I didn't end up going down that path, however, and now I'm doing a completely unrelated job.

There are a number of reasons for that, but the biggest was that I couldn't see a future for myself where I was working a psychology-related job. I enjoyed studying psychology, but when the time came to really think about my future, I just couldn't see myself making it into my career.

It's questionable whether I was really aiming for that path in the first place, but if there's one moment when I gave up on going down it, that would be it.

After some deliberation on what my next goal should be, I made the choice that would eventually lead me to where I am now. One of the options I considered then was actually to write a novel.

I don't know if what I was writing at the time could really have been called novels, but I liked thinking of stories and writing them down. It was never more than a hobby, however. I chose my current path because I didn't believe that I could be a professional novelist.

But I continued to write out of sheer self-indulgence, which was when I found Naro, although at first all I did was read things other people had written on it. In time, however, I got the urge to post something myself, which led to me eventually beginning to post. I learned about web novel competitions around that same time.

So I entered a competition, only to lose spectacularly. I kept trying, though,

which resulted in me receiving this reward.

I don't know if I could call it a dream, but this has made one of the things I imagined for myself back then come true, which I'm very grateful for and happy about.

My greatest thanks to Micro Magazine for reviewing my work.

This book is also here thanks to the help of many other people. Thank you to my editor I., who taught me when I knew nothing and looked after me. Thank you to necömi, who listened to my requests for the art and brought the characters to life beautifully, whether they were cute, cool, or sometimes shady.

Thank you to all the proofreaders, designers, and salespeople involved. This book couldn't have taken shape without you.

And most of all, thank you to everyone who's supported me and purchased this book. You have my deepest gratitude.

I hope to see you again in volume 2.

I Surrendered

My Sword
for a New Life as a Mage

<story> Shin Kouduki

<illust> necömi

1





In his mind's eye, he saw the secrets he had once learned from an old master.
The teachings that he had taken up for himself and polished to perfection—
“Hah!”

Law of the Sword / God-Killer / Dragon-Killer /
Draconic Blessing / Absolute Severance /
Gift of Discernment: Original Style /
Emulation / Iron-Cutting Sword

With a sharp breath, he swung his arm,
and the stick ended up exactly where
he'd expected it to.





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I Surrendered My Sword for a New Life as a Mage: Volume 1

by Shin Kouduki

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