

I Surrendered

My Sword for a New Life as a Mage

6

Shin Kouduki
Art
necomi



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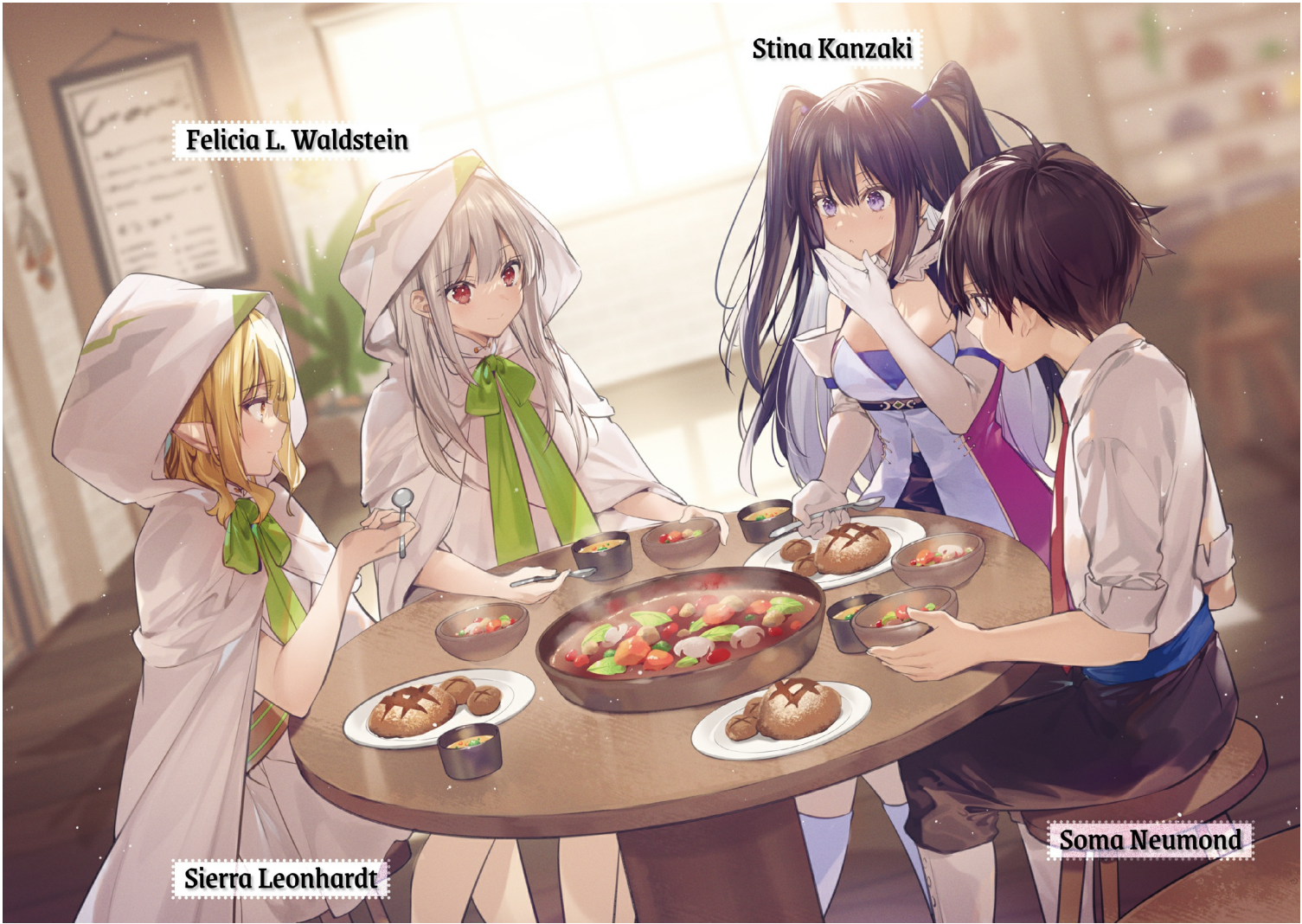
I Surrendered

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Felicia L. Waldstein

Stina Kanzaki

Sierra Leonhardt

Soma Neumond

**“Shit, they caught—or I guess not.
A kid, though...? Who are you?”**

It was a young man; he appeared to be in his teens. His hair and eyes were the same jet-black as Soma's, but there was a certain maturity in his eyes. He looked like he could be a boy, a grown man, or even older; it was difficult to determine his age by looking at him.

**And the familiar figure
left Soma speechless.**



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1

Dement, the land of the devils.

That was a name used to refer to the area controlled by the devils, but it wasn't actually an official regional or national name. The area had just come to be called that over time.

While there was someone called the Dark Lord on the devils' side, it wasn't as if he was governing the land and developing it as a nation, and simply announcing that he'd founded a country wouldn't have been enough to secure recognition from mankind.

So no matter how much land they had or what they called it, it didn't officially belong to anyone. It was nothing but unowned land.

Perhaps as a result, the overall ethos of Dement was characterized by freedom. Not being a part of any nation meant they had no laws binding them, which naturally led to each person being free to do as they wished. But while it was literal anarchy, that didn't mean it was chaos.

As Eyla looked around the area that served as proof of that, she held back a yawn.

"Mrr... So bored..." she murmured, the ears on top of her head twitching.

Murmuring that didn't alleviate her boredom, of course. While she didn't exactly like being busy, it was another matter to have nothing to do despite being surrounded by other people.

"You're all just sitting around anyway! At least order something... What a useless lot. No wonder you're prrrpetually on the bottom of the adventurer pyramid."

"Hey, we can hear you, damn cat!"

"Myeah, I'm saying it so you can hear. If you have a prrroblem with it, either order something or climb the pyramid."

“If I could, I already would’ve! And what does that have to do with ordering?!”

“It’d give me something to do.”

“So it’s just for your own sake!”

After that exchange, the man, who was relatively near her, turned back to his companions and resumed his conversation with them.

Eyla grumbled that he really was useless if he wouldn’t keep her occupied, but she didn’t mean it, of course. He was here to make a living, just as she was. They had to work to live; those who didn’t work didn’t get human rights.

“Not like devils get human rights anyway.”

Eyla shrugged at her own silly quip and glanced around once more. She was bored, but if she saw some way to kill time, that would solve that problem. All she saw, however, was the same homely and ill-spirited crowd as always.

This was the adventurer’s guild. Technically the Felgau branch, but those sorts of details were irrelevant. That is to say, everyone there, including the man she’d spoken to, was an adventurer.

There were a variety of faces there—men and women, seniors and young girls. There were beastfolk, like Eyla, and demonkin and naturally humans as well. Eyla was pretty sure there were even vampires, although they couldn’t be identified easily. She thought so because one guy had boasted to her that he’d rescued a girl who he’d thought had lost a lot of blood. She’d proceeded to suck his blood and they’d ended up going out after that.

As she checked again, she saw a real diversity of ages, races, and genders, but she thought nothing of it because this was business as usual for her. She’d actually been surprised to hear there were countries where only one race lived.

Given that Felgau was a rather large town and near the border separating Dement from the outside, a lot of people passed through. That necessarily meant interacting with a variety of people, from dwarves and gnomes to amazons. The only ones Eyla never saw were elves...and maybe witches.

Though the elves’ forest was near the border, she’d never met an elf. When

she'd realized that, it had made her wonder about them, but the explanation she'd gotten had been no wonder at all. It was just that elves almost never became devils. Part of the reason was that there were few elves and they didn't reproduce quickly, but it was also because they didn't banish their own to the devils like some other races did. They helped and protected their own kind, apparently. But maybe as the downside to that, they were rather cold to outsiders. They wouldn't let anyone touch them, and they were always formal and unsmiling. Apparently that was why elves were said to be closed-minded as well.

Regardless, given all of that, looking at the variety of people there wasn't enough to occupy Eyla. It might be another story if an elf showed up, she thought, but needless to say, that wouldn't be happening.

"Mrrr... So bored..."

So ultimately, she just slumped across the counter.

If Eyla had been working as a receptionist, she would have been facing a rush soon, but unfortunately for her, she was in the bar attached to the guild. She waited just in case someone wanted something, but she would be lucky to get even one order. It was too early, after all. It was about time for quests to be posted, and the adventurers were waiting for that. They weren't about to use the bar.

That was why Eyla, who was normally just a server, was the only one here right now, and at the same time, it was why she was able to slouch around like this.

"I can't stand having nothing to do for another hour or more... I wish we'd at least get a new face... Mrrow?"

But it happened just as she was complaining.

This guild had a typical layout with reception at the front, buyers and the like lined up on the left, and the bar at the back right. That meant it was easy for Eyla to see when anyone entered the guild...so when everyone started to grow hostile, she noticed right away that someone new had entered.

It was a group of three. One looked like a human boy...but the other two were

unclear. They were wearing white cloaks with hoods over their faces. Based on their height, they were probably around the boy's age, but nothing else was apparent.

They were plainly suspicious characters, and Eyla didn't recognize the boy. These were the new faces she'd been hoping for, at least...but in the next moment, she grasped that these kids were going to be trouble.

"Hmm... This appears to be a normal guild."

"Mm-hmm. It's normal."

"Of course it is. What are you two talking about...?"

Their voices reached Eyla clearly despite the distance they were standing at. It wasn't that they were talking especially loudly but that the room had grown unusually quiet. The men who had been ready for a fight just moments ago were now holding their breath.

It would have been a comical scene to some, but Eyla wasn't laughing. Actually, since she'd been pretending to be asleep from the instant she spotted the boy, she herself would have been laughed at, if someone had been there to laugh.

The majority of the devils were normal humans. They didn't live in disorder because of the lack of laws; instead, one simple principle governed them.

That principle was power. Those with power ruled and were superior.

That wasn't much different from the outside world, but the people here were a crowd of rough-and-tumble adventurers. They tended even more strongly that way, and they were prideful. And that was all the more reason that even Eyla was able to grasp how dangerous this boy was despite the fact that she couldn't sense his power.

Since power ruled the devils, they were all sensitive to it. When it came down to it, this was a border town. The more dangerous of the devils would go farther into Dement rather than gather here. In other words, the people here may have been hip, but in many respects, they were nothing much...so why was someone like this boy here?

He looked like a carefree boy at a glance, but that only made him more frightening. He must have been a top-ranked adventurer...or something even more powerful.

Why was another scary person here after that intimidating girl had shown up just a few days ago? Eyla broke into a cold sweat, seriously concerned that this was some kind of divine punishment for complaining about being bored after that had happened.

Wondering whether God would listen to a devil's prayers, Eyla wished fervently for this boy and his companions to go away.

2

To be honest, Soma's opinion of the place was that it was more normal than he'd expected.

No, it may have been exactly what he'd expected, since he'd already known that Dement was that sort of place.

It had been a week since they'd left the elves' forest. It had taken three days to reach the first town—village, rather—and that may have been the biggest surprise, in a sense. They'd thought it was a normal human village only to find that they'd already entered Dement.

The border was often called a boundary, but there was no barrier, so it was extremely hard for someone unfamiliar with the area to tell when they'd crossed it, and that was especially true in their case, since they'd come from the elves' forest. The elves professed neutrality even with the devils, so they didn't maintain any surveillance around the border. Not even Sierra and Felicia had known where they were now; they'd only found out after asking around in the village.

However, the village where Aina had lived had appeared normal as well, so perhaps that was to be expected, considering how the devils had come to be. That was one reason that Soma had been able to accept that fact despite his surprise. Sierra and Felicia had had no issue with that either; neither of them seemed to be prejudiced against the devils. If anything, the villagers had seemed more surprised than them, considering where they'd come from. It was ideal that they were mutually friendly, though.

The way there had been smooth. There had been few monsters; it reminded Soma of the journey he'd taken with Aina and Lina. And now, on their third day in Dement, they'd reached the first place that could be rightfully called a town, then come straight to the adventurer's guild for one simple reason.

They'd realized along the way—they had nothing of monetary value. They'd endured thus far by trading in some things Joseph had covertly given them

when they'd left the elves' forest as well as parts from the few monsters they'd defeated on the road, but they had to earn some money going forward.

They'd actually known going in that there was an adventurer's guild in Dement. Sierra had told them that a guild branch would be set up in any town over a certain size, in fact. On paper, guilds had to be affiliated with nations, so they weren't technically supposed to be able to have branches in Dement, but they must have found a way.

Regardless, it was reassuring for Soma's group. Their prediction that a town this size would have a guild had been spot-on, so they'd headed to the guild building in the center of town.

But Soma's impression upon entering was that he was surprised at how normal it was. It certainly looked like a guild. It was hard to articulate, but basically, it wasn't much different from the guilds he'd been to before.

He'd expected the guild to be distinctly different. Adventurers were a rough bunch, after all, and Aina had told him that power was law among the devils, so he'd naturally imagined it would be, you know...

Yet that picture in his mind—a quite disrespectful one in a sense—had been magnificently betrayed. Not even Soma could help but feel remorseful.

"Hmm... But whom should I apologize to in this scenario? The adventurers... No, the staff if available, and if not, then the guild representative...?"

"That's the Soma I know..."

"When it comes to Soma, you have quite the sharp tongue, don't you, Sierra? As you should..."

"I get the sense someone is saying rude things about me...?"

"Don't worry, you're not imagining it."

"Mm-hmm... Don't worry."

"Incomprehensible..."

Why would they say such things about him when he'd simply tried to express his remorse?

Setting aside such nonsense, Soma looked at his surroundings with puzzlement. He'd already thought it was oddly quiet in here, and he noticed that everyone was looking the wrong way. He glanced around to see if there was something in that direction; there wasn't. Was this some kind of strange game or trend?

"Hmm... And I see the bartender is asleep. Is everyone all right at this guild?"

"That certainly isn't laudable, but I don't imagine many people use the bar in the morning, so it should be all right," Felicia responded. "And it isn't any of our business, anyway."

"Mm-hmm... If she gets in trouble, it's her own fault."

"That's true... And I suppose we don't need anything from her."

All at once, the bartender appeared to relax, but that wasn't anything for them to pay mind to either. Regardless...

"I believe the quests should be posted soon..."

Quests available for adventurers to take were posted on sheets of parchment, and they could only be accepted after they were presented to the receptionist. That meant one couldn't take a quest without bringing it up, but they were only posted once every morning at a designated place within the guild. Soma had heard this system was common to all guilds, and it should have been no different here; it was morning now, so it would be natural to conclude that the adventurers were gathered for that reason.

However...

"It seems...peaceful here?" Sierra said quizzically.

"Huh?" Felicia said. "What are you talking about?"

"While I haven't participated in it personally—I've only watched—adventurers typically grow hostile around the time that quests are posted. Whether they can take a well-paying quest affects not only the rest of their day but their future," Soma explained.

"I see... But it doesn't seem like that here, and that's why you called it peaceful."

Power was the law among the devils; maybe they already had a pecking order, and they would take quests according to that, which would actually have been quite ironic.

“The question, then, is what we should do... For the time being, shall we wait until the quests are posted?”

“Mm-hmm... We can decide based on what everyone does.”

“I don’t understand, so I’ll leave it to you two.”

“Hmm... Let us wait, then.”

If there was already a pecking order, butting into it would cause friction. Soma thought he could handle anything that happened by brute force, but it would be best not to cause unnecessary strife.

Be that as it may, he couldn’t act without knowing how things worked here. If there really was some kind of pecking order, he would simply have to settle for a low-paying quest or figure something else out.

Finding out what to do was his first priority, so he waited for a short while. Puzzlingly, he felt as if people were paying attention to him yet also avoiding him at the same time...until finally, a girl walked out from behind the reception desk. She was holding several pieces of parchment, which must have been the quests. Nerves ran through the group of adventurers as soon as they saw that.

“Hmm... So this is the same as other guilds after all?”

“Mm-hmm, seems like it...but nobody’s moving.”

“Maybe they appear peaceful because they keep each other in check,” Felicia suggested. “Or maybe they’re pretending to be uninterested as a bluff.”

“That may be the case...”

While they talked, the quests were posted, but even after that, there was no movement from the adventurers, which Soma wondered at. In time, the quests were all posted...and still nobody was moving.

“Interesting... This leaves me at a loss as to what judgment to make.”

“So what should we do now?” Felicia asked.

“Just take a quest?” Sierra suggested.

“I see no other option. I suppose if there’s any problem, somebody will tell us,” Soma resolved, then headed up to the quest board. The adventurers remained motionless, but he decided not to pay any mind to that.

Soma skimmed the newly posted quests. The requests were written on the sheets, of course, but the descriptions were fairly basic for the most part. There was a limit to how much information would fit on a page, and some details were shared only with whichever adventurer accepted the quest. That meant they would have to make some guesses when selecting a quest.

Only the amount of the reward and the minimum rank were listed, but that was enough to make a judgment. If the reward didn’t match the quest, that meant it was likely to be a hassle, and the same was true of the rank: if the sheet said that the quest required a higher rank than standard, that meant the guild or requester had determined it was necessary, so it would probably be a hassle—or so he’d heard from Sierra, at least.

He saw how that could be the case just looking at the quests, though. There were clearly some fishy ones mixed in, but they were so blatant that they would probably be left on the board. It apparently wasn’t rare for quests to go untaken.

Regardless, after weighing several of them, Soma ultimately took the one that he thought would make them the most money. That was why they’d come here, after all, so it was the top priority in his mind.

He couldn’t say he wasn’t interested in some of the fun-sounding, adventurer-like ones...but they would have more chances in the future. Soma hoped that Aina and Lina could join him then...although it would be hard to take Sylvia and Hildegard, he thought as he headed toward the reception desk.

3

As Soma headed toward the reception desk, he picked up a sense of relaxation from behind him. The reason for it wasn't clear, though, so it simply left him puzzled. Wondering whether there was some sort of rule that newbies got first pick of the quests here, he made it to the desk.

Soma blinked in surprise when he got there, not because he recognized the receptionist but because she had nonhuman ears on top of her head.

This wasn't his first time seeing a demihuman; Ladius was a mixed nation, and demihumans were the second most numerous race after humans. Although he'd rarely gone outside, he'd attended the Royal Academy in the capital until relatively recently, so naturally, he'd seen some before.

But according to the people at the academy, even though Ladius was a mixed nation, it was mostly human. Other races were welcome to live there and did, but together, they made up less than a tenth of the population. Demihumans were only common enough that you might see one if you spent some time walking around outside.

However, that was a lot more common than they were in other countries, such as the neighboring Veritas. It was a fully human nation, so not a single person of another race lived there except for slaves. It was because Ladius had once been a part of Veritas that humans made up such a majority even though it was a mixed nation—naturally, since only humans had lived there at first, the inhabitants were mostly human. Also, it only bordered two countries, one of which was where the devils lived and the other of which was Veritas. Even though Ladius welcomed other races, they couldn't get there. Other races were increasing in number in Veritas due to the recent unrest, but it would take time before that was reflected in the ratio in Ladius.

Anyway, because of all that, Soma wouldn't say he only *rarely* saw nonhumans, but he hadn't expected the guild receptionist to be a demihuman.

Just then...

“Is this your first time seeing a beastfolk receptionist?” she asked.

“Mm...”

Apparently, he’d been staring for too long. The receptionist was smiling, but her cat ears were twitching as if in protest.

This was certainly a rare sight for Soma, but that didn’t make it okay to ogle her. He dipped his head. “It is, in fact. I apologize for staring.”

“Mm-hmm... Sorry.”

“Yes, it was rude to stare. My apologies.”

Soma was initially taken aback to hear the other two offer their own apologies in turn. However, it seemed they were apologizing not on his behalf but because they’d also been curious about the cat ears.

Felicia in particular had hardly been out of the woods. She’d been curious about a lot of things on the way here, so Soma understood why she had been looking along with him. The fact that it was understandable didn’t make it any less rude, though.

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it. I don’t mind,” she chirped. “There aren’t many of us, apprrrently, so I’m used to it.”

“Hmm... Is that so?”

“Anyway, back to work. You have a quest, right? Hand it to me and I’ll look over it.”

“Understood.”

If she said she didn’t mind, then he would acquiesce to that. He shouldn’t interfere with her work any more than he already had. The other adventurers still hadn’t moved for some reason, but they would be bringing their own quests up soon, so the sooner he could get this over with, the better.

His thoughts were interrupted by a quiet remark of surprise from the receptionist as she looked over the paper.

“This is a rank-specified quest... Rank five or higher? Why would someone bring this quest here... Oh, I remember someone mentioning a quest like this in

the morning, I guess... Um, is this all right?"

She probably meant that in two ways. Soma still looked like a child, and the other two were dressed suspiciously. They were also about the same height as Soma, so it was natural to doubt their abilities as well as whether they had the necessary rank, of course.

Soma turned to look at Sierra. He hadn't reached rank five yet; in fact, he hadn't been to a guild since he'd adventured with Sierra, so he was still at the lowest rank. It should have been fine if they submitted Sierra's guild card, though. The cards were valid here as well.

Having told Soma that herself, Sierra seemed to understand.

"Mm-hmm." Sierra nodded in response to his look and handed her own guild card to the receptionist.

†

"Ahh, that was so nerve-racking! I haven't been that nervous since I started working here... Maybe not even then..." As soon as Emily had made sure the group had left the guild, she groaned and slumped across the desk. That happened to be the same pose her sister had been in before, but she didn't have the capacity to pay that fact any mind.

"You handled it pretty well, though."

"How many years do you think I've been a receptionist? Of course I did," she replied to her demonkin friend and colleague. "But I did want to run when they came up to me, to be honest."

The demonkin shrugged. One of the wings on her back moved at the same time, lightly flapping as if in agreement. "I bet. I was glad they didn't come up to me, and when they were staring at your cat ears like that, I was hoping...uh, I mean worried they would pluck them right off."

"I don't even have the energy to joke with you right now..."

"Oh my, what a serious condition. Well, I can't blame you. Just recover as soon as you can, okay? They're being considerate right now, but they won't have the capacity for long."

“Myeah, I know...”

It had been hard on the adventurers as well. The fight over the quests had begun as soon as the three had left, and had turned into a minor brawl, probably as an outlet for the stress they’d been under.

“They were really looking at us, or scoping us out... It was like I could hear what they were thinking. The same thing must have been going through everyone’s heads right then.”

“Myeah, they were so relieved when those three came up with a quest. I was worried there was about to be a questioning.”

And that was understandable. Some people who they clearly had to watch out for had been looking at them for some reason. On top of not knowing what to do, the adventurers couldn’t make any rash moves as the quests were being posted. But even once the quests were up, the people in question still hadn’t done anything and had even begun having a suggestive conversation. The adventurers must have been in such suspense, and Emily knew just how relieved they must have been when the group had come up to her with a quest.

“So, that kid... That guy? Whatever. Anyway, what quest did he bring up? I heard you say it was rank limited... Is that the one I heard about this morning?”

“It was just a hunting quest, and it paid prrretty well. If you’re at least rank five, that is.”

“Oh, so the type where the target is nasty. You’re sure they were at least rank five, though? They definitely seemed like it, but you can’t get away with breaking that rule, even in a place like this where power is king.”

“Like I said, I’ve been working here for a long time. I know what I’m doing. The guild card was actually that...girl’s? Who was next to him. That surprised me even more.”

“Wait, really? I was so focused on him I didn’t even pay attention to the other two... I guess we should watch out for the third one too. Do you think he had her use her card to tell you that without telling you?”

“Or maybe they thought it would go over better.”

Since this place was on the outskirts, the adventurers here were all rank three at most. Emily had only barely managed to suppress her shock at actually being shown a rank-five guild card, and that was because she'd seen the same thing a few days ago. She wasn't confident she could have concealed her reaction if he'd shown her an even higher rank. Maybe they'd picked up on that.

"Yeah, shocking the receptionist would have turned into a whole thing, and they were causing a commotion as is, so it's possible they were being considerate that way. But if they cared about that, they shouldn't have caused such a fuss in the first place."

"No helping that."

Emily still didn't know what that boy was. He could have been conducting a surprise audit of the guild, or maybe he was a higher-up among the devils who had come to check on what was going on. Regardless, it had nothing to do with her as the receptionist, and she didn't want to get involved.

"It seems like every time a rank-limited request goes up, we get someone weird. It does help since they'd just go untaken otherwise... You think the guild sends people over for that?"

"Never heard of a guild going so far... Speaking of the guild, what happened to the rep? Doesn't the rep usually deal with people like that?"

"As soon as he showed up, the rep said she had a stomachache and ran off."

"God, she's useless... She's always bragging that things go well for her because she was born under a lucky star or something, but she did that last time too. I'm prrretty sure she just runs off when things get bad."

"Well, she managed to become a rep, so she must have enough ability and reputation... Oh, looks like our downtime is over."

"Mrow?"

Grasping what her friend meant, Emily looked toward where the quests were posted. A brawl was starting, as she'd predicted. They would be flooding her way shortly.

"All better now?"

“I wish I could get more rest, to be honest, but this is no time for that.”

Emily hadn't spent all these years working as a receptionist for nothing. She raised herself up, then let out a breath and put herself in the mindset she needed to overcome the rush ahead.

4

When Soma opened the wooden door, he squinted at the scenery before him. It was really no different from the scenery familiar to him, he thought.

Behind him was the adventurer's guild that he had just left after accepting a quest. Felicia and Sierra had followed him out of the guild...and as Soma had watched them come out, he'd caught sight of the inside of the guild for just a moment.

The adventurers still hadn't moved a muscle—they had remained quiet to the very end.

Soma was curious; they seemed to be waiting for something. The fact that nobody had said anything to the three of them, though, meant there hadn't been any issue with what they'd done. Maybe there was some kind of unspoken understanding among the adventurers...or maybe this was just an unusual place, since the receptionist hadn't seemed surprised that Sierra was rank five.

Speaking of unusual, it crossed his mind that everyone he'd met since coming to Dement had been quite kind to him...

"Oh? This is not a good way to think..."

"Soma? Is something the matter?" Felicia asked. "I've noticed that something seems to be on your mind..."

"Ah, well... I've realized that my viewpoint is more biased than I was aware."

"Huh...?" Felicia looked at him with confusion, seeming not to understand what he was talking about.

He didn't intend for her to understand, though, so that was okay. He just thought to himself that he needed to do some reflection.

It was normal for customs to differ from place to place; that was the same everywhere. It was more of an issue that he was wondering why people were

being nice. Devils and mankind were nothing more than categories that mankind had come up with. Remembering that basic fact, Soma sighed to himself, thinking he had room to improve.

“In any case, about what we’ll do now...”

“Aren’t we going to go fulfill the quest?” Felicia asked the other two.

“Mm-hmm... But we have to collect info first.”

“Precisely.”

They’d only just come to this town, after all. They needed the bare minimum information, such as the lay of the land and what monsters to expect.

“Right, you always started by gathering information when you arrived at a new place, didn’t you?”

“Yes, since it’s necessary in order to determine our course of action,” Soma replied to Felicia. “We’d already determined our initial direction this time, so we prioritized that...”

“But we don’t know what’s ahead. We need info,” Sierra finished for him.

It would have been more efficient to gather info first, but considering when they’d arrived in town, they’d decided they should go to the guild first so they’d be in time for quests to be posted. Thus, they’d put off info collection until later.

“I see. But this is a hunting quest, right? Wouldn’t you two be perfectly fine if you simply went out hunting right now?”

“Hmm... I suppose it would be fine, but...”

It was true that the quest they’d accepted consisted of hunting a certain monster. The rank restriction and large monetary reward were the main reasons they’d chosen it, but another significant reason was that they’d judged they were capable enough of handling it. Since they’d heard about the place where the monster appeared, its traits, and what to watch out for when they’d taken the quest, it would probably have been fine if they’d gone out hunting right then.

However...

“No absolutes with quests... We have to prepare what we can.”

“While I believe that Sierra and I would be capable of handling the worst-case scenario or anything that attacks, we may not be able to protect you depending on the situation, Felicia.”

Felicia was a complete newbie to combat. There would be no such thing as overpreparing for it.

“That may be the case... But why can’t I wait here while you two go hunting, then?”

“That would worry me in itself.”

“Mm-hmm... Don’t know what will happen.”

“I think you two worry about me too much... You’re rather overprotective of me.”

“I disagree.”

If anything, it was their responsibility to be ready for the worst-case scenario.

“Well, it doesn’t bother me... Why are you only looking for information about the area this time, though? Don’t you typically look for more information than that?”

“Yes, well, this is quite the large town, so there are a lot of things I would like to know. We’ve already accepted a quest, however. We need to prioritize that.”

“Mm-hmm... We can do more when we have the money. And we can talk later about what to do next.”

“I see... So you’re going to find out information related to the quest first and foremost.”

“Precisely.”

As they had that conversation, they decided their first priority should be to change locations. They were in front of the guild, after all; it was no place to stand around and talk.

Usually they wouldn’t have minded things like that. Guilds tended to be near the center of town, but also a bit removed from it, in places that people didn’t

typically come.

However, whether it was unique to this town or a feature of Dement, the guild here appeared to be exactly in the center of town. The main street ran directly in front of it, and there were large trade buildings on either side of the road. It had been easy to find, and they had been surprised to see it at first...but they would be in the way if they stayed here for long. Accompanied by the other two, Soma turned left in front of the guild—and began to walk down the path to the forest where the monster specified in today's quest was said to appear.

"Is it okay to go this way?"

Felicia raised the question probably because she knew where this path headed, but in fact, it was no problem.

"Well, I intend to go directly to the forest."

"Excuse me? Um, weren't you going to collect information?"

"Mm-hmm... But on-site."

"Huh? Are you..."

"Kidding? Of course not. What other way would there be to gain information?"

Felicia would have been right under ordinary circumstances, of course. It would normally have been backward to gather information on location in order to ensure there was nothing unforeseen at that location. But if they had no other way, then they simply had to see for themselves.

"The basic information-gathering process for adventurers is typically done with fellow adventurers or with the guild. In other words, you should gather information at the guild immediately after receiving a quest."

"Mm-hmm... But only for normal quests. You can't with rank-restricted quests."

"Why can't you?"

"Restrictions are typically for rank three and above... Basically, those quests are for the guild's most valued customers, so the guild is willing to put in effort

to match.”

For normal quests, you were only given a summary, a reward amount, and, in the case of requests to hunt specific targets, their location. Rank-restricted quests, however, included more specific information, such as details about the area, what the guild had learned after looking into it themselves, and what they had heard from adventurers. That meant the three of them wouldn’t be able to learn anything more by asking people. They had been spared the effort of asking around.

“Oh? You mean you already have the minimum information you need?”

“Yes, at least superficially.”

“What do you mean...?”

“It might be wrong,” Sierra replied.

Circumstances change from moment to moment. What had been correct when the guild looked into it might be different now, and the situation might not remain stable for minutes, let alone days, especially for things that required rank restriction. That meant they had to go see for themselves.

“I see... So this is more scouting than information collection.”

“Strictly speaking, it should be called reconnaissance.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re not going to stick to scouting—you’re just going to hunt it down?” Felicia said skeptically.

“Can’t rule that out...”

“If we can, I would have no problem with that.”

Their first goal was to gain more precise information—to ensure Felicia’s safety. If, having that, they decided they could hunt the monster down with no problem, then it would be fine to do so. It was likely that that wouldn’t be the case, however.

Information gained by hearsay was often lacking in accuracy; for example, Soma wouldn’t have known how many nonhumans lived in this town or that there was a demihuman receptionist without coming here.

With that in mind, Soma narrowed his eyes toward the people walking around town.

“Well, I may speak with the air of an expert, but most of what I know about adventurers, I learned from Sierra.”

“But Soma taught me that it’s important to check whether info is accurate on-site.”

“I’ve said this but haven’t had a chance to try it in practice. To be honest, this is my first time.”

“Well, I’m just glad to know I can count on you two,” said Felicia. “Although I knew that from the beginning.”

Thus, they walked through the completely normal-looking town until finally, they stepped outside of it. Grassy fields spread out before them, and at some distance, they could see the forest in question.

Soma shrugged, looking at the scenery. “I’ve heard that Dement is nothing but untamed wilderness. This is yet another difference from what I’ve heard.”

“I see... I also thought I knew what the devils were like, so I was surprised at first. So this is why it’s important to check information for yourself.”

“Mm-hmm. I realized that when I left the forest...and especially after meeting Soma.”

“Oh? Did I do something?”

“A lot...?”

“Oh, I think I understand that myself,” Felicia mused.

“I don’t believe I’ve done anything out of the ordinary... Incomprehensible,” Soma muttered as he surveyed the area once more.

He was left puzzled, because he didn’t see any monsters nor even sense their presence. He’d been told for reference that monsters would show up on the way.

“Well... I believe there are other adventurer’s guilds, so perhaps they’ve been hunted down.”

“Even then, there are *too* few...”

There was an anti-monster barrier around the town, but it was clear from the posted quests that there were monsters in the surrounding area. Soma hadn't seen all of them clearly, but several of them had involved reported injuries from monsters. There was also a perpetual quest to hunt down monsters...and no area that didn't need that could have such a thriving guild.

That meant there must have been a good number of monsters around normally, but for some reason, he wasn't seeing any right now.

“If something unusual had happened, it would have been mentioned in the quest... Perhaps too many were hunted down yesterday.”

This wasn't a dungeon, so defeated monsters wouldn't respawn at set intervals. Even so, there were enough monsters that the hunters hadn't run out, but it was possible that their population had been severely reduced.

However...

“Well, it doesn't matter for the time being. If something happened, we can find out about it when we come by the guild on the way back.”

“Mm-hmm... No use thinking about it now.”

“That's true.”

With that settled, the three headed toward the forest. While they remained alert, they continued not to sense any monsters on the way and reached their destination almost too easily. The forest lay in a vast expanse before them, but it somehow felt small due to their frame of mind.

“Hmm, this is...”

“Not challenging at all?”

“It's a good thing if it's easy...”

The three of them tilted their heads in puzzlement, but there was nothing to do except continue in.

Thinking that there must be monsters farther ahead, Soma refocused, keeping himself from letting his guard down...

“Hey! C-Calm down! You don’t want to eat Stina! I don’t taste good, promise!”

And that was when a vaguely familiar voice reached his ears.

5

It had been complete negligence—or perhaps hubris, but that amounted to the same thing. No joke: right now, Stina was in the biggest bind of her life.

“Why is this thing even *here*...?! This is stupid!”

But screaming insults accomplished nothing. She didn’t even know whether this thing understood language.

She glared at the voidlike thing before her eyes and hit the thing wrapped around her with all her might, but to no effect. If only she could pick up the spear at her feet...

“But poking around with that thing is what got me into this mess in the first place! How stupid can I be?!”

Self-deprecating words flew from her mouth, but they wouldn’t improve her situation. She clenched one hand into a fist and swung it up as if to vent her anger...but the instant she went to swing it down again, her feet slipped.

“Dang it...!”

She hastily regained her balance, but now she was not only in a weird position, she’d been pulled ever so slightly closer to it. Even if she crouched down, her spear was out of reach now. Maybe if she’d stretched her arm as far as she could, but that wasn’t possible in this situation. Picking it up wouldn’t have helped anyway, but being completely separated from her spear hit her hard—even if poking this giant frog with that spear was the reason this had all happened in the first place.

As its name suggested, the monster before her appeared to be nothing but a huge frog. However, anything thrown into its now-open mouth would be dissolved instantly, creature or monster; Stina would be lucky to last a few seconds.

But her attempts to escape were thwarted for the simple reason that its tongue was currently wrapped around her and pulling her in.



The giant frog's tongue was coated in a mucus that had a glue-like effect on its prey. It also caused attacks to slide off, so blades had little effect on it. Maybe if Stina had attacked with perfect form, she could have wounded it, but she couldn't hope for that at this point.

It was also highly resistant to magic, which made it a formidable monster. Even a high-ranking adventurer, let alone a mid-ranking one, would have been annihilated by it if they weren't careful.

But despite their power, giant frogs weren't generally regarded as dangerous. That was because they had a docile nature. They were typically curled up asleep, and they wouldn't do anything when you walked past them.

However, if you accidentally hit one with a strong impact, it was over. The giant frog would immediately awaken, and its normally closed eyes would open for a few seconds.

The giant frog's eyes had a powerful binding effect. Even if you had strong resistance, that was irrelevant; it bypassed that resistance and rendered its target immobile for those several seconds. The rest was simple: the frog wrapped its tongue around the prey while it was unable to move and ate it.

Stina had barely avoided that fate because she'd leapt backward as soon as she'd noticed the giant frog. Its eyes had immobilized her right after, but the giant frog had closed its eyes before pulling her in. Although she'd still been caught by its tongue, she'd managed to brace herself on the ground.

But now they were in a stalemate. It would come down to which of them ran out of strength first.

Stina was at a disadvantage, especially given her position, but this was no time to say that. If she didn't want to die, she had to push through however she could.

It would be over for her if the frog used its magic eyes again, but she didn't have to worry about that. Those eyes used an immense amount of power proportionate to their strong effect. That was why the frog usually kept them closed.

Also, it became completely defenseless while it was using its magic eyes.

Therefore, if you could attack it then, defeating it was quick and easy. That was why giant frogs weren't regarded as dangerous in spite of their power.

On top of that, giant frogs wouldn't let go of their prey once they had it caught, so they used up their concentration on that. They weren't completely defenseless, but they also wouldn't attack, so if someone else were here, they could have defeated it with relative ease simply by repeatedly attacking it.

"Well, no-allies Stina can't hope for that. And nobody's about to walk by coincidentally..."

That would have been too good to be true. It was possible that somebody had already found the frog and submitted a request to hunt it down...but the question was whether there was anyone who could defeat it.

A party of adventurers would either need to have perfect resistance to its magic eyes—that is, to psychological attacks—or they would have to split up into decoy and attacker roles and attack it as soon as the decoy was hit with the magic eyes. The frog would be relatively easy to defeat that way, but it was easier said than done.

But complete resistance to psychological attacks was rare, and the frog would only have been relatively easy to defeat for a high-ranking adventurer. High-ranking adventurers would have found it a comparatively easy monster to defeat with proper preparation, but no amount of preparation would have prevented mid-ranking adventurers from meeting defeat, and most of the adventurers in the nearby town were low ranking. Given the scarcity of mid-ranking adventurers, the guild had been surprised to see Stina's card, so there probably wasn't a single high-ranking one.

A high-ranking adventurer happening to show up after someone happened to submit a quest to hunt this giant frog, then taking that quest and just happening to show up right now? What a contrived series of coincidences that would have been.

"If I was that lucky, I would've been able to lead a better life. Although...I did feel like luck was finally on my side until about now."

She'd thought about how lucky it was that someone had already submitted a request to hunt the monster she'd been looking for in the town she'd been

passing through. It had taken her two days to find it, but she'd managed to collect the ingredients she was after and gotten a step closer to reviving the Evil Spirit, which she'd been happy about.

But since she hadn't been sleeping much, she'd gotten a bit of a big head and thrown her spear at what she'd thought was a boulder, only to find out it was a giant frog...

"Is it just that I'm dumb, luck aside...?"

She went limp at that realization but quickly tensed again. She'd already known she was dumb; she couldn't accept dying over something so obvious.

"So, I guess I may be really dumb in a lot of ways, but I can't die now...! Its pull has been getting weaker, so maybe—geh?!"

A quite unladylike sound had escaped her mouth, but this was no time to worry about that. The eyelids on either side of the giant frog's wide open mouth were twitching and beginning to rise.

"It's gonna use its eyes again?!"

Had it decided that being defenseless was better than letting its prey escape, or had it figured that if nothing had happened so far, it would be fine?

"Either way, I'm cornered for real...!"

But maybe that was better than continuing on like this. It was seriously starting to hurt; if she lost focus for a second, she would fly right into its mouth.

In that case...maybe it was worth gambling on that split second. Its tongue would go completely limp the instant it tried to use its magic eyes. She could escape the tongue in that instant, grab her spear, and throw it. Then, as its eyes activated, the spear would pierce it. Even if that didn't defeat the frog, it would give her an opening.

"And if I can get away right then...that'd be applause-worthy."

She didn't think she could do it, frankly. But she had to if she didn't want to die.

It was a self-centered idea, and it would have been too good to be true. She knew that.

But even still... Even still...

“Stina can’t die here! Not yet...!”

She had more left to do. Not until she’d carried those things out.

Just as her determination hardened, the frog’s eyelids lifted enough for its pupils to become visible. The grip of its tongue loosened, and Stina pulled herself free. Flipping around, she stretched as far as she could. By that point, she couldn’t see how wide the frog’s eyes were, but she didn’t care. She grabbed the spear, turned back around, and—

“Oh—”

—saw a pair of red eyes.

The magic eyes.

The giant frog’s tongue stretched toward the immobilized, helpless Stina, wrapping around her once again. Ruthlessly, it drew her toward its open mouth —

“Flash.”

Just when she thought she’d been tossed in, her field of vision opened. A ray of light shot through the blackness, and she saw the scenery behind it: earth, and grass, and sky, and clouds...and...

“Whew... That was close. Oh, and I had a sense that it was you. Your voice sounded somehow familiar. I suppose it’s been a while. Well, it’s been one week, to be specific.”

...a familiar boy casually raising a hand toward her.

6

Strong sunlight entered her eyes, making her squint reflexively. She turned her gaze toward the sky; there was a flat expanse of blue and a hint of white. Wondering how it appeared blue despite the red of her irises, she let out a sigh.

It was perfect weather for a trip. Well, to be more precise, it was slightly too warm, but it was on the better side—better than the cold that had once been there.

“Well, I hardly remember anything about that time,” she muttered, letting her gaze fall upon a pathless path. Only grass, earth, and rocks surrounded her, and she saw something like a forest in the distance.

She’d walked in this same place about two years earlier, but it was like she’d never seen this scenery before.

“Although it was a different time of year then, and I was going a different direction... But even so, how come I don’t remember this at all?”

It had felt nostalgic at first, but she’d been feeling like this for a while now. She couldn’t help but wonder why. Maybe it was a silly question, though, since she’d only felt nostalgic until she arrived in that village.

“I don’t even remember what I was thinking about on the road... Maybe I wasn’t thinking anything at all.”

She just remembered carrying despair in her heart. It would never have gone away if she hadn’t met him; it may even have stayed with her until death.

She didn’t feel even a trace of that now, however. In its place, something else had taken up residence in her heart.

“I must have way too much time on my hands to be thinking that...”

She only vaguely knew the way, and she reached a village or town once every three days or so. With all that extra time on her hands, her mind ended up wandering places it wouldn’t have usually.

Also, she felt like she'd been talking to herself more often. It would pose a problem if she stayed that way even after her journey was over...

"Well, it's too early to worry about that, I guess."

Her final destination was a bit farther away, and that would also be her turning-back point. She could wait until she got there to think about such things.

"All right, then..." she muttered. She noticed she'd stopped moving her feet and began to walk again.

Just then, a strong gust of wind lifted her red hair. But as she held it down, she smiled softly at the pleasant feeling. Her friends' faces crossed her mind.

"I wonder if they're feeling this wind...him too."

Smiling wryly to herself and shrugging at her own silly remark, Aina resumed her journey.

†

The girl sitting on the ground looked up at Soma with a dumbfounded expression. Her face looked as if she'd seen something unbelievable.

Was this really that shocking, though? Soma certainly hadn't thought there would be a girl here, but...

"Well, that isn't important right now. You appear unhurt...but are you all right?"

He extended a hand to her. The girl looked at his hand, mystified...until she gasped as if coming to a realization. She alternated between looking at his face and hand, furrowed her brow as if in concern, and at last reluctantly took his hand.

"Nah, I don't think I'm hurt. And, uh... Thanks."

"Of course. You helped me recently, after all. I don't consider this proper repayment for that, but I'm glad to have helped you, if only a little. This also helped me in a sense, however, so it doesn't constitute repayment either way. Here..."

Just as he was helping the girl to her feet, the trees rustled behind her. She reflexively dropped his hand and assumed a defensive stance, but Soma gave her a crooked smile. Sierra and Felicia appeared immediately afterward.

“Made it in time...?” Sierra asked.

“Yes, thanks to you.”

That was correct in a sense. He’d left the rest—mainly watching Felicia—to Sierra, which was how he’d made it in time. It had been a close call, so if Sierra and Felicia had come with him, he would have been late.

“That’s wonderful to hear.”

“I was also able to complete the quest while I was at it.”

“Oh, you were?”

“Yes. It’s right there, as you can see.”

“Mm-hmm... It is.”

Yes, the target they had agreed to hunt for their quest was a giant frog. Soma had been able to help an acquaintance and complete the quest—truly killing two birds with one stone.

“Oh... You did say this helped you ‘in a sense.’ So that was what you meant.”

“Indeed it was.”

Since the girl had effectively acted as a decoy, he had been able to defeat the giant frog with ease. While he had helped her, she had also done him a favor.

“But you could’ve beaten that frog with or without a decoy, couldn’t you?” the girl asked. “So I think that was just you helping me out.”

“There was no guarantee of that, so you helped me all the same.”

“Well, if you say so, I guess I don’t care. Anyway...”

The girl had relaxed her stance, but the look she gave Sierra and Felicia as she muttered to herself was wary.

But Soma couldn’t blame her. Two suspicious-looking people had just appeared. It would have been stranger not to be wary.

And the same went for Sierra and Felicia. They had only just met this girl, and she was clutching a lance. It would have been odd if they hadn't been wary of her.

However, Soma shrugged at both reactions, knowing they were unnecessary.

"I understand why you're all wary, but there's no need to be. However, I can't blame you, considering appearances."

"I can understand why you would tell her that *we're* not dangerous, but the way you put that makes it sound like you're also telling us that *she* isn't dangerous. You may have helped her, but do you really know her well enough to state that with confidence?" Felicia asked.

"I do, in fact. We've met before, and she helped me recently."

"She did...?"

"Wait, really?"

"Why would I lie about that? I might even say that *we're* only here right now thanks to her."

When he said that with a quizzical tilt of his head, both Sierra and Felicia seemed awfully surprised for some reason. He couldn't see their faces, but he could tell at a glance that they were shocked. Not only that, the girl seemed surprised as well.

"Huh... I thought maybe... Really?"

"Yes. Is something the matter?"

"Uh, no, it's nothing... Just recognized how ridiculous you are again."

"Hmm...?"

Soma didn't quite get it, but she seemed impressed with him—or rather, weary. He didn't know why she'd had such a thought...but there was something else he had to do right now.

"On that note, shall we introduce ourselves?"

"Is that necessary? I appreciate the help, but what reason is there for me to give you my name?"

“And Soma, you said you’ve met her and been helped by her, but you don’t know her name?” Felicia asked.

“No, hence why I want to know. I missed my chance to ask last time.”

“I didn’t even really do anything thankworthy, and we’re not gonna meet again anyway.”

“That only gives me more reason to want to know. Regardless of how you think of it, I’m indebted to you.”

“Well, I guess I don’t mind giving you my name now that we’ve met...”

“Mm-hmm... Maybe it’s fate?”

“But what would I get out of giving you my name?”

“You have nothing to lose by doing so. To be honest, though, I already know your first name, at least. Stina, yes?”

“Wha...?! How’d you know my name?!”

After shouting in surprise, the girl—Stina—shut her mouth as if something had clicked for her, then sat in silence for several seconds. At last, timidly, she questioned Soma.

“Uh... Did you...hear me?”

“Well, it was because I heard you talking to yourself that I came to help.”

A wordless exclamation escaped Stina’s lips. Her face immediately turned bright red, and she clutched her head where she sat. Soma heard her muttering something about being dumb...and ultimately, she let out a huge sigh. She slowly stood, looked him in the face, and sighed loudly once again.

“This is getting so freaking stupid. Fine. I’ll tell you my name. I’m Stina... Ahh, well, I guess I don’t mind. Stina Kanzaki.”

“Kanzaki...?”

Soma met eyes with Sierra. That last name was familiar—it belonged to someone he was quite close to, in fact.

There was one other thing that caught Soma’s attention...but that could wait for the time being. More importantly...

“Hmm... Is Kanzaki a common name around here?”

When he'd asked before, he'd been told that wasn't the case. He was pretty sure the unique-sounding name meant something particular here in Dement.

“Oh, you know, huh? One of the reasons I didn't wanna give out my name was to avoid this hassle...but now I already have, I guess.”

That was the king's name—one that only members of the royal family could bear.

In other words...

“Well, you get the gist of it. I'm the Dark Lord's daughter.”

The girl shrugged her shoulders as she declared herself the daughter of the Dark Lord.

7

Stina wondered what to do now. Giving out her name was fine, but there was no doubt that making the wrong move would be a one-way ticket to trouble. She'd half left it up to the flow of events, what with her stupidity in multiple ways...

"Hmm... So that would make you Aina's sister, correct?"

Of course he'd ask that. How could he not ask that? She already knew that Soma knew Aina. The question was how to respond.

It might have been easy to get through the conversation with a lie, but lying would also have put her at high risk of digging her own grave. In that case...

"Yeah, sure am. And wait, how come you know Aina?"

"I have no explanation other than that we met by coincidence."

"Mm-hmm... School friends?"

"Ah, I suppose I could have said that as well."

"Huh? School? You mean...she's going to school?!"

"Hmm? You didn't know...? Aina is currently attending the Royal Academy."

"How would I know...? No wonder I couldn't find her. What's that girl been up to...?"

Stina was asking in earnest. She'd known from the injuries and whatnot that Albert had kidnapped Aina once, but she hadn't known where Aina had gone after that. She'd considered the possibility that Aina had gone with Soma...but she'd never imagined her sister would go all the way to the academy.

And that was perfectly reasonable. Why would Stina ever have considered the possibility that a devil would be able to attend the Royal Academy?

But now that she thought about it, she saw it wasn't such a bad plan. It was precisely because she hadn't been able to predict it that she hadn't been able

to trace Aina's whereabouts. If she had been somewhere Stina expected, Aina couldn't have known how things would turn out.

But anyway, it was too late for that.

"Aina... I have heard that name several times," Felicia mused. "She's your friend, right, Sierra? Your first one."

"No need for the last part... And she wasn't the first."

"She wasn't? I haven't heard about any other friends of yours...and the people in the forest are a bit too removed in age to call friends."

"I had Doris."

"From what I've heard, this Doris woman sounds more like your guardian than your friend."

"Hmm... It seemed that way to me as well, based on what I saw."

"Mmh, even Soma..."

"Your first friend, huh? Now that you mention it, Aina never talked about anything like that either, so you might've been her first friend too."

"No, that isn't the case, since Aina's first friend is me."

"What's with the smug look? And I can't see her face under the hood, but she seems kinda sad...?"

"No..."

Now that the conversation had drifted in that direction, Stina remembered it wasn't the time for this. She wasn't especially in a hurry...but it definitely wasn't right to stand around casually chatting with them.

But as she was hanging around, unable to grab onto a reason to leave, Soma addressed her out of nowhere.

"The fact that you said you couldn't find Aina must mean you were looking for her. As far as I could tell, though, you seemed not to be very involved in her life."

"Oh, yeah, you're not wrong. It's just that there was a lot of commotion until recently—that's the main reason. It was just more convenient for me to leave

Aina alone and make her think I wasn't interested."

"Aina seemed quite mature for her age when I met her... Did you make that decision because she was nevertheless a young child?"

"It was just the kinda situation where I figured I'd be better off that way, you get me?"

Stina was telling the truth about this too, at least mostly.

Right after Aina left the castle, some discontented individuals among the devils, including Dark Commanders, had revolted. In fact, considering the timing, they'd most likely realized there would be a revolt and allowed Aina to escape without letting her know about it. That would have been safer considering her heritage. Many people had been unhappy that Aina was on the side of the current Dark Lord, but they wouldn't have objected to her leaving.

If there had been any miscalculation on their part, it was that the revolt had been far larger in scale than anticipated. Not even Stina and her group, the inciters of the revolt, had expected the first and second Dark Commanders to participate.

However, neither had they expected the current Dark Lord to be so strong. They'd never thought the first and second Dark Commanders would be assassinated. Those who had doubted the current Dark Lord's power had swiftly changed sides, and those who couldn't accept that had been forced to switch to guerrilla tactics, so the revolt had been drawn out to no end.

Stina had actually intended to blend into that chaos in order to carry out her own plans, but she couldn't do that now, after everything that had happened. She'd successfully stolen from several treasure vaults, but that in itself didn't accomplish anything.

Yet she'd continued to gather bits and pieces of information and figure out opportunities...only to be foiled by the boy in front of her.

As she remembered that situation that she couldn't talk about, she let out a sigh, thinking at the same time how absurd it was that she was talking to him like this right now.

"Hmm... Well, this is none of my business. It should be up to Aina to make

that judgment.”

“Well, you don’t gotta tell her the little details. Just tell her to come back. We probably have a lot to talk about.”

She had no ulterior motive in saying that. It was simply how she felt.

There was nobody left who could do anything to Aina when she returned, so Stina was just saying that as someone who had once spent time with her as family.

She couldn’t guarantee that this place and its people would be all right by the time Soma told Aina that and she returned home, however.

“I would tell you to say that to her yourself, but I suppose that wouldn’t do.”

“Nah, I certainly couldn’t go to the Royal Academy.”

Maybe if Kurt were still alive, she could have gotten a message through...and when she had that thought, a question occurred to her.

If Aina was at the Royal Academy, why hadn’t Kurt contacted Stina about it? Even if it had been too late by then, he could have at least let her know...

But no, right, maybe he hadn’t recognized her. He wasn’t a devil in particular, so that was likely. Stina would’ve wanted him to learn the faces of important individuals...but it couldn’t have been helped, since he’d been a musclehead who was only interested in power. He’d started using his head a little at the end, but too late.

And that thought reminded her in turn, she probably hadn’t heard from Tobias for similar reasons. From what she’d heard, Tobias had met Soma and probably spotted Aina, but Tobias wasn’t technically a devil. He’d only seen the objective, apparently, so it would make sense if he didn’t remember Aina’s face.

But if she thought about it like that, how had they managed to pull off such an outrageous insurrection? They’d had no unified purpose. They’d just happened to join forces...and Stina had been carried along.

Yet they’d still thought such a thing was possible at one time...so there really was nothing she could have done.

“All right, then. We should head back rather than continue talking here,”

Soma pronounced.

“Right... There’s no need to stay here now that we’ve completed our quest,” Felicia agreed.

“Mm-hmm. I took the parts we need for proof.”

“Oh, when did you do that, Sierra? I appreciate the help.”

“Mm-hmm...”

It looked like they were finally preparing to depart. Stina let out a soft sigh of relief. She felt like soaking in this lukewarm atmosphere had been dulling her resolve.

So...

“Yeah, well, I was actually about to finish up a quest and go back too. So I’ll just—”

“Oh, before you go—since fate has brought us together, would you like to journey with us?”

“Huh...?”

When Soma made that unexpected proposal, Stina looked back at him dumbfounded.

8

When he opened the wooden doors, he saw a familiar scene. To be more precise, however, there was something missing compared to the scene he was familiar with: people.

This was the guild, so in other words, the missing thing was adventurers.

It was only natural that there weren't any adventurers there, however. Although Soma and his companions had completed their quest with no difficulties, it had been an hour since they'd left. That was enough time for adventurers to take quests of their own, finish the proceedings, and head out to execute them.

Therefore, the demihuman receptionist's reaction to them entering was inevitable in a sense. She must not have expected anyone to show up at this time, as she'd been completely sprawled out. Then she'd reflexively tried to straighten up, only to use too much force and fall over backward.

That was her own fault, though, so it made sense that the other receptionist gave her an annoyed look. All Soma's party could do when they saw it was smile wryly.

"Are you all right?"

"Y-Yes...! I apologize that you had to see that!"

"No, I don't particularly mind..."

Soma didn't think this warranted an apology with head bowed, but perhaps this place was strict like that. It was said that the atmosphere and policies of a guild depended on the staff and guild representative. That was certainly a possibility; the process of taking the quest had felt quite stiff.

But that aside...

"Mrr... So, what brings you here? Did you miss something earlier?"

"Hmm? Not at all. We only came to report that we've finished the quest."

“Finished...? You’re already done?!”

Soma wondered briefly whether it really warranted such surprise, but then he remembered that quests typically took a day at the very least. It wasn’t uncommon for hunting quests to take multiple days in certain locations, and Soma himself would typically have started by gathering information. Perhaps finishing in an hour was worthy of shock.

It had largely been due to coincidence this time, however...or perhaps he should have said they’d simply been lucky, including the fact that they’d encountered *her*.

“Well, we were blessed with good fortune, I suppose.”

Soma looked behind him and saw that the girl in question was still staring at him distrustfully. She still didn’t believe him, apparently. But the fact that she had come this far with them was probably a sign that she was willing to consider joining them on their journey, so the rest depended on their conversation going forward.

“Good fortune...? Mrrow! Are you...?!”

The receptionist had finally noticed Stina, apparently. Given her start, she’d probably been too flustered to check at first.

But seeing her reaction, Soma wondered again whether it warranted such shock. He’d heard from Stina that she had completed a quest she’d gotten in this town and was on her way back, so it wouldn’t have been surprising if she’d met this receptionist before. In fact, Stina had mentioned along the way that she was a high-ranking adventurer, so it was natural that the receptionist would recognize her.

It shouldn’t have been so shocking that she was with Soma’s group either. Surprise was one thing, but the receptionist’s was far too dramatic.

Did the adventurers around here not help each other out much? According to Sierra, even high-ranking adventurers cooperated when the need arose, but...

“Yes, we completed the quest smoothly with her help. But on that note, why are you so surprised? I wouldn’t think that it’s uncommon for adventurers who cooperate to be together... Did Stina herself do something shocking, perhaps?”

“So rude. I didn’t...uh, I don’t *think* I did anything like that. I just took the quest like normal. Well, I was gone for two days, but that shouldn’t be surprising considering the place and target.”

“R-Right... Um, I was surprised for prrrsonal reasons. Please don’t pay it any mind.”

“Hmm... I understand, then.”

“Anyway, I wouldn’t call it cooperation,” Stina retorted.

“You wouldn’t? I suppose the phrasing may be somewhat misleading, but there was little difference in practice.”

“It’s more than misleading, You guys think so too, right?” Stina asked the two on either side of her. She seemed to be expecting agreement, but Sierra and Felicia both gave her confused looks.

“I’d like to agree...but that would make me nothing more than a parasite, as I haven’t done anything, so it’s hard to agree,” said Felicia. “Well, I think you cooperated more than I did, so why not leave it at that?”

“Mm-hmm... I didn’t do anything either. So we can say you cooperated.”

“Dang it... So you two are the same as him. I guess I should’ve realized that when you agreed to that farce of a suggestion that I journey with you.”

“‘Farce’ is certainly one way to refer to it. I don’t believe it was a bad deal for you.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly why I said it. A good deal always comes with a catch. It’s natural to doubt it.” Stina glared at Soma through half-lidded eyes.

All he could do was shrug. Everything she’d said...well, maybe not everything, but most of what she said wasn’t wrong.

Soma had invited her to journey with them as she’d made to leave. It had been after he’d defeated their target, the giant frog, so he’d had only one reason for doing so: to repay her. That was all.

He didn’t know how she felt about it, but the tip she’d given him in the elves’ forest had been more than enough for Soma to consider it a favor. Saving her from a giant frog wasn’t enough to repay that, of course, so he could overlook

some shadiness on her part.

Yes, as a matter of course, Soma had keenly sensed that Stina was a shady individual. She was more than just a *little* shady, in fact.

But he'd made his decision with those suspicions in mind. Even knowing that she was shady, he'd reasoned that he was in her debt and should repay her, so he'd invited her to travel with them. If he thought she was suspicious, that just meant he had to watch her more closely.

However, that didn't reflect how he felt deep down. She was certainly suspicious...but he didn't think she was a bad person at heart. He thought there must have been circumstances that explained her shadiness. That feeling had grown stronger after he encountered her again.

Maybe he was greedy for thinking that he might want to find out if he could. Maybe it was arrogant to think that that might serve to repay his debt.

But Sierra and Felicia were clearly suspicious of Stina as well, and they weren't indebted to Stina...or at least weren't aware of any debt. That was natural, since he hadn't told them about what had happened, but that meant they had no reason to agree to travel with Stina.

Yet they'd expressed agreement, which must have meant they didn't think Stina was a bad person any more than he did; they'd surmised what Soma was thinking—

"Well, I think your concerns are warranted," Felicia said to her. "I mean, I would rather not be lumped in with the likes of Soma."

"So why'd you agree, then?"

"I thought resistance would be futile. Knowing Soma, I think if I did disagree, he would find some explanation for why he should follow his own will regardless."

"Mm-hmm... Same."

They'd...surmised what Soma...?

"Oh, I kinda get that, I think. My bad for lumping you in with him, then."

"It's all right. I'm just glad you understand."

“Mm-hmm... This is Soma. So it can't be helped.”

“Oh? I get the sense that nobody is on my side...”

Incomprehensible, he muttered...but he sensed Felicia and Sierra smiling, so they were probably half joking. Even if they were also half serious, it was enough as long as they ultimately consented.

All he had was his intuition, their judgment...and his faith in Stina.

With that in mind, Soma shrugged his shoulders, by which he meant several different things.

9

Well, in any case, they couldn't keep talking in front of the reception desk forever. They were in the process of reporting back about a quest here.

After smiling wryly and shrugging at the receptionist, who was watching them intently, they finished the quest completion report. The receptionist seemed to have questions, but she must have understood they were outside the scope of her duties. She kept it strictly business related, and once Stina finished her own report, she and Soma's group left the guild.

"All right, what shall we do now?" Soma asked.

"In a lot of ways, it'd be the least hassle for me if we split up now," Stina replied.

"I suppose so."

She'd probably emphasized "a lot of ways" intentionally. She couldn't be optimistic enough to believe they weren't suspicious of her, but she wasn't running or hiding—either because she was sure those suspicions wouldn't be confirmed, or maybe out of desperation. It would have been great for Soma if the actual reason was the goodness of her heart...but nevertheless.

"Regardless of what you ultimately do, you have leeway to consider traveling with us, don't you?" Felicia asked.

"Well, if I didn't, I would've left already."

"Then how about we go somewhere we can relax? It will be easier to talk that way...and it might also be good to decide where we're staying tonight while we're at it."

"Oh, that might be good," Soma agreed.

It wasn't even past noon yet, but they had been camping out for the last two days. It had been a foregone conclusion that they would rest in an inn tonight to recover from their exhaustion.

They'd also been able to take a more lucrative quest than they'd expected, so they had some room in their pockets. It wouldn't be good to linger too long, but considering what lay ahead, they had to take a breather.

And since it was not yet afternoon, it would be easier to get a spot in an inn. It also wouldn't be a problem to do whatever they were going to do after that, so Soma, at least, had no objections.

"Well, I was gonna take it easy today too, so I don't mind..." Stina said.

"Mm-hmm... Settled?"

"Yes, it's settled," Soma declared. "Let's look for an inn. Do you know of any good ones, Stina?"

"I took a quest right after I got here, so I dunno. Maybe I should've asked at the guild."

"But it would look silly to go back and ask now, wouldn't it?" Felicia asked.

"Well, we can look as we walk," Soma said.

None of the others seemed to object to that, so for the time being, they began walking around the area.

The guild faced the main road. They had gone down it three times to get to the guild—once down the east side, twice down the west side—but hadn't looked closely since it had been early. But some time had passed since then, and now that they gave the area a closer look, it was actually quite lively. Adventurers were glancing at the storefronts, probably to prepare for whatever quests they were about to undertake.

"Hmm... So there are a lot of stores frequented by adventurers here. That's logical, but this scene feels somewhat uncanny to me."

Higher-end stores aside, the stores that ordinary adventurers used were usually hidden away in alleys. The issue wasn't the stores themselves but the kind of people who frequented them. The question was what ordinary citizens would think if the kinds of stores where adventurers gathered were on the main street, so this scene seemed more than a little unusual to Soma.

"It does? I think it's normal for any town larger than a small village," Stina

said.

“Pardon?”

“What...?”

Soma looked at Stina with puzzlement, and she returned a similar look. Although each could tell that the other wasn't joking, that only raised more questions.

But just then, Soma realized something, and at the same time, her statement clicked for him.

“I see. So this is normal here. That must mean adventurers have high standing...or at least not low.”

When Soma said *here*, he wasn't referring to this town but to Dement. If power was the law, then it wouldn't be strange if adventurers, who made a living by power, were on the same level as regular citizens by virtue of that fact alone. Adventurers were looked down on elsewhere in part because many of them were rowdy and violent, but mostly because they didn't pay taxes, so they didn't get civil rights. If power was the basis for society, however, then being violent wasn't a negative. They were probably given civil rights by default in spite of their lifestyle.

It also made sense that the guild was in such a conspicuous place. If it was used and respected by the general public, there was no reason for it to be hidden away at a remove from the center of town.

“Oh, okay. So adventurers are low status where you're from.”

Stina seemed to have realized, looking at him, that common sense differed from place to place. An obvious fact, in other words.

But that also gave away that Soma and his group weren't from Dement—that they weren't devils. It was a bit late to worry about that now, however. They had no reason to hide it from Stina, and Sierra and Felicia seemed to have realized that.

That moment of confusion didn't obstruct their conversation; Stina was even nodding her head in understanding.

“Yeah, I guess I’ve heard that. I just forgot ’cause I wasn’t interested.”

“Not interested? Aren’t you an adventurer, Stina?” Felicia asked.

“I am, but what does it matter to me if I never go to where you’re from? I didn’t plan to go then, and I don’t now.”

“Hmm...”

When she said it like that, it made sense. Anyone, if presented with information that they considered uninteresting or irrelevant, would forget about it.

“Well, I can see why this area looks the way it does, then, but I don’t expect we’ll find lodging nearby.”

The stores mainly in this area had miscellaneous goods on display—weapons and armor and the like. Soma could tell at a glance that there weren’t any inns.

That meant they had to go elsewhere, but...

“Hmm... Does anyone have a preference on which way we go?”

“I don’t care. You guys can choose.”

“I don’t have any particular preference either...”

“Mm-hmm... Up to you.”

“You all lack initiative...”

“You say that after *you* asked which way to go? It doesn’t matter, ’cause we’ll end up looking everywhere anyway,” Stina retorted.

“No, I plan to settle on an inn as soon as I find a good one, so we won’t necessarily look everywhere.”

“The outcome will be the same regardless of where we start, then. We have no leads either way,” Felicia pointed out.

“I suppose that’s true.”

That was why Soma had asked in the first place, in fact.

Incidentally, the main street split the town into four parts. There were roads that ran through the center from east to west and from north to south. The

guild was situated right at the crossroads, so it was literally in the very center of town.

That meant that it wouldn't be hard to get anywhere in town from where they were now, but it also meant they needed a clear direction, which they didn't have.

Just as Soma was considering something like dropping a stick and going wherever it pointed, Stina spoke up.

"Oh, you can go basically anywhere, but there's one part of town you should stay away from."

"Hmm?"

"I don't think you should go south."

"Oh...? May I ask why not?"

Soma didn't think Stina would say that without a good reason, which made him especially curious. She hadn't named a specific place but a general direction, so he thought she must have some reason for doing so.

"No particular reason. Just that a lot of no-goodniks around here have been getting pushed into the south for a while, so I think it's mostly places for those kinda people...basically, inns for adventurers."

"If there are inns, then shouldn't we go there?"

"Adventurers stay in inns matching their ranks. For multiple reasons," Sierra added. "Badly behaved people can't stay in good inns."

"Yeah, what she said. It's all bad-quality inns—I don't think there'll be any good ones there."

"I see..."

Even if adventurers had civil rights here in Dement, they were still treated mostly the same, Soma gathered. Maybe he should have assumed that much as a matter of course.

It also meant that while some pieces of common sense differed depending on the place, others were the same everywhere—though this was another obvious

fact.

Nevertheless...

“Then that means we’ll be picking from the other three directions...but that doesn’t change our situation significantly, I suppose. Will I have to rely on a stick after all...?”

“Oh, then how about this, Soma? Since there are three directions, we could split up three ways,” Felicia suggested.

“Hmm...”

That meant they wouldn’t have to think too hard about which way to go, and it would be efficient. The only question was whether they really needed to be efficient about looking for an inn right now, but...

“I’ll look in the north, then. Stina, you take the east, and Sierra and Felicia, you go west. How about that?”

“That’s all right... But why did you group me with Sierra without my input?”

“You wouldn’t know how to look around this town on your own, right?”

“I guess I wouldn’t...but I’m still not happy about it.”

As Soma shrugged at the scowling Felicia, a slight smile came to his face. It occurred to him that this was a positive change. Although she knew she couldn’t search on her own, she’d wanted to give it a try in order to challenge herself. That was why she’d made the suggestion. But although Soma knew that, he certainly couldn’t let her go on her own, so he’d put her with Sierra.

The change was still positive, though. When he’d first met her, Felicia had been rather weak willed. That had been especially obvious whenever she’d been faced with things that were totally unfamiliar to her; at the beginning of her journey, she’d acted almost entirely according to what he said.

But now she’d made a suggestion of her own and attempted to grapple with the unknown. That seemed to him like a change that had happened because he’d brought her along, and that made him happy.

As he thought about it, though, he noticed someone else looking at him—Stina.

“Is something the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter. Just...are you sure about this?”

“About what?”

“If I go looking for inns on my own, I might up and disappear, you know?”

Soma thought someone who was really planning on that wouldn’t mention it beforehand...but maybe Stina still couldn’t read his intentions thoroughly. She was probably suspicious of his reasons for wanting to travel with her.

But Soma wasn’t about to tell her those, so he simply shrugged.

“Well, if that happens, then it happens. I would have no choice but to let it go. In fact, you’re free to do so if you wish. The choice is ultimately yours.”

“Hmph... Fine, then.” Stina turned away, sulking.

Soma smiled wryly. It didn’t seem like she would disappear right away, at least.

“When do we meet up? And where?” Sierra asked.

“Ah, right...” Soma muttered, looking up at the top level of the guild. Standing tens of meters off the ground, it was the tallest thing in town, and atop it were a large bell and clock as if to mark it. The bell apparently chimed to mark the hour. Soma had a pocket watch, but this would ensure the others didn’t lose track of time.

“Well, considering lunch, why don’t we meet here at twelve?”

“Mm-hmm... And I’ll take care of my sister.”

“Yes, you’re in charge.”

“As the older sister, I feel odd about not being in charge...but I suppose it can’t be helped. Thank you, Sierra.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I’ll go look and see, then. Anything else I should look for?” Stina asked.

“Nothing in particular. There is something personal...but I can look for that personally.”

“So as long as I look for a good inn, then. Got it.”

“All right, I’ll see you all later.”

Soma began to head north. Amid the bustle of the adventurers and shopkeepers, he walked in search of an inn...and a particular something.

10

As Soma had known it would, the hustle and bustle decreased little by little as he moved away from the town center. There were still buildings around him, but he couldn't tell what most of the shops sold. He could tell they were shops because they had signboard-like things hanging in front. However, there were no words or pictures on them, so it was impossible to determine what kind of shops they actually were. Maybe those who knew knew, or maybe the shopkeepers were just lazy. Either way, it had nothing to do with Soma, so he glanced at them briefly and continued down the street.

"Hmm... Have I picked the wrong direction?" he murmured as his surroundings began to change. There were fewer and fewer signboards and more plain buildings.

Maybe this wasn't the wrong place in the sense that people lived here...

"I suppose this is a residential district. Depending on the place, I feel like it would be good to have inns as well..."

But unfortunately, he didn't see anything that looked like one, and the gate that led outside the town was already visible in the distance. He probably wouldn't find what he was looking for if he kept going this way.

Rather...

"Should I go off to the side now?"

This town had two wide streets running through the center, but naturally, there were other streets too. Several small ones branched out from the sides; there were narrow roads to his right and left right now. Each of them twisted and turned, however, so he couldn't tell where they led.

Based on conventional wisdom, though, they would lead to more houses. If the people who'd built this city had taken convenience into account, it would have been logical to put similar things in the same place.

But...

“Well, continuing to walk this way would amount to nothing.”

It would be better to gamble on his sliver of hope, then, Soma reasoned as he looked right, then left...then headed toward the right. He had no particular reason, only his intuition. If he had to give a reason, though, he'd thought for a moment that this was the direction Stina had headed...

“Oh?”

As he was thinking to himself, he noticed the scenery changing again. At first, there had been nothing but homes, but he was beginning to see signboards here and there once more. Now, however, it was no longer impossible to tell what was inside. As before, the signboards had nothing written on them, but the stores' doors were open.

The first thing he saw made him somewhat nostalgic. It was a gigantic pot, and a man was intently stirring its contents. Soma initially thought the man might be a witch, but his hair was green, so he was probably an alchemist.

Soma had never used one himself, but supposedly alchemists made medications with special effects, such as potions, and they did it in that creepy-looking way.

They'd actually been confused with witches in the past, apparently, but unlike what witches made, alchemists' potions were science based. Anyone could follow the same procedure and end up with the same product. It wasn't necessary to have a practitioner execute the last step.

The man must have been concentrating hard. He didn't spare Soma a glance as he passed, and Soma continued forward without doing anything. He wasn't interested in alchemists, nor did he have any business that required one.

As a result of passing several such shops, Soma gathered that this area was the so-called artisan district. People who created things gathered here and created whatever they liked. Maybe the shops on the main street had actually been the same sort of shop; several of the signboards he spotted here were similar to the ones he'd seen there. But given the location, they couldn't leave the doors open on the main street, so they'd been closed. It made sense if he thought of it that way.

“In that case, I have no way of knowing what they are except by checking personally...”

But it was possible that they turned away new customers who appeared without an invitation.

Regardless, Soma proceeded ahead. Inside the next shop he passed was a man brandishing several swords, each as tall as himself. If that had been all, it would have looked like trouble, but Soma understood when he saw what was in the swords’ path.

It was a log.

“Kiyaaaaaa!”

“Does this require a report after all...?”

That thought occurred to Soma in the instant that he heard the strange shout, but when the swords came down, the log was cleanly cut up. Several pieces of wood sat neatly in a line. The man’s swordsmanship was splendid, but maybe he was using it for the wrong task...

“Well, everyone is free to use their sword as they wish, I suppose.”

He was concerned whether that would chip the blades, though...

“Oh? I see—so that worry was unnecessary...” Soma muttered as he came to a halt. Before his eyes was the man in the shop next door. He had a heated iron rod at his feet that he was hitting with a hammer—in other words, he was a blacksmith. Even if the woodcutter(?) chipped his tools, he could have them fixed next door.

However, that realization wasn’t the reason Soma had stopped. He’d had adequate reason to—that man was what Soma had been looking for. He had been searching for a blacksmith, albeit for personal reasons, which was why he had continued to walk this way despite the clear absence of any inns.

He didn’t approach the man immediately, though, because it wasn’t as if he would go to just any blacksmith. He watched the man intently to take stock of him.

The man didn’t seem to notice Soma. He must have been that focused. He

swung the hammer single-mindedly, shaping the rod at his feet. He truly looked like a professional.

At the same time, simply focusing on one's work and not getting distracted didn't make one a pro; those were only the rudiments of craftsmanship. The important thing was the quality of one's work—that is to say, his skill at smithing.

Actually, Soma had been trained in blacksmithing. He'd gotten the idea that in order to perfect his skill with a sword, he first needed to step into a sword's metaphorical shoes, so he'd become an apprentice blacksmith. His skill was far from pro level, but he didn't think it had been a waste of time. He had come away from the experience able to perform a certain level of maintenance on his own, and while he hadn't learned how it felt to be a sword, he thought he understood a little of how it felt to make one. It had also made him think more deeply about the meaning of swinging a sword.

Regardless, because of all that, Soma was confident that he could roughly gauge a blacksmith's skill by watching them at work...

"Ngh..."

But as he tried to assess this man's skill, he could only make a low growl.

It wasn't that he was good—but it wasn't that he was bad either. It was that Soma couldn't tell.

He'd gotten to the point where he could tell that the blacksmith who had mentored him had been extremely skilled, but he couldn't tell how skilled this man was.

A greatness that could only be reached by perfecting an art...Soma had thought he could sense that, but perhaps it was only in his mind.

In any case, one thing was certain. Soma, who had meant to gauge the man's skill, had become entranced by the sight of the man swinging his hammer.

Even though what he was making appeared to be a knife, the man was displaying what it meant to do first-rate work. Well, he probably wasn't actually showing off to anyone, but Soma felt that way, at least.

So once Soma had watched the man finish his final swing and let out a long, deep breath, he began to walk slowly toward the man.

The reason for the pleased look on his face was simple and clear—he was sure that this man could fulfill his request.

No...he even thought that he might not be asking enough of this man.

11

Gustav Balling was what they called a first-rate blacksmith. In fact, it wouldn't have been an exaggeration to call him the best of the best. When the current Dark Lord had taken power, Gustav had even been tasked with forging a sword to serve as the emblem of his ascension. Just based on the facts and his accomplishments, he was definitely worthy of being called the best blacksmith currently living.

But Gustav didn't think of himself as anything special. He was confident in his smithing skills, of course; he acknowledged that he may even have been the greatest of his time. But that wasn't enough to satisfy Gustav. The peak of blacksmithing that he was aiming for was far above his level. Maybe he could say he'd perfected his skills to some extent...but Gustav knew better than anyone that that wasn't the pinnacle.

So that must have been why.

Once he finished his work—complete, but far from perfect—he let out a sigh...and then opened his eyes wide in shock at the boy who entered his shop right at that moment.

He felt intuitively that this boy was a master.

Gustav's instincts immediately told him that this boy, although surely in a different field, had reached an absolute pinnacle.

He only looked about ten, but that didn't matter. In another scenario, Gustav might even have knelt and begged him to answer one question.

How had he reached that pinnacle?

The answer would surely exceed all of his own experience.

But he didn't ask, and not because he was too proud.

He understood as soon as he saw the boy's eyes—he was a customer. That meant it was Gustav's responsibility to take the boy's request, not the other

way around. Even if he was far from the pinnacle, he couldn't get that wrong as a blacksmith.

"I apologize for the intrusion."

"No... I just got done with a job. No problem. But what do you want from me?"

That was why he treated the boy curtly. Gustav couldn't afford a lax attitude even toward someone who'd mastered a field. Depending on the boy's objectives and attitude, he intended to take a firm stance.

However...

"Yes, well, I apologize for my rudeness, but I find your skills promising, so I have a request of you. Here..."

When the boy made to draw a sword from his sheath, Gustav saw that his suspicion had been correct and let out a small sigh of resignation. That determined that he would refuse the boy's request.

Gustav had originally specialized in swords, so whatever the boy's request was, he would have heard him out as long as it had to do with swords. It was unclear whether the boy had perceived that...but that was in the past now. As of now, Gustav was never to forge a sword again. That was also why he was holed up in an area like this, forging knives, despite being confident in his first-rate skill.

To make a long story short, Gustav had lost his confidence in forging swords. While he was proud of his skill as a blacksmith, he'd grown dissatisfied with the swords he created.

There had been warning signs for a long time. Even the sword he'd presented to the Dark Lord hadn't been up to his standards. He'd managed to push ahead by telling himself this was the best sword he could forge right now...but about a year ago, he'd completely lost the ability to forge them.

That was because his customers always seemed extremely satisfied when they received the swords he forged.

As a blacksmith, he should have been grateful to forge things that pleased his

customers, but since the swords weren't up to his own standards, Gustav didn't feel right seeing them satisfied like that.

But each customer said the same thing.

That it was perfect.

They took a look at the blade, gave it a swing to see how it felt, and said it was the best sword ever.

He could tell by their faces that they really meant that.

But it wasn't true.

Those weren't the best swords ever. They should have had complaints about them. If they didn't...they must not have had enough skill.

That was the root of Gustav's dissatisfaction with the swords he made. No matter how far they were from his own standards, his customers were all pleased and said they were the best.

So he thought...maybe *he* was the one who was mistaken. Maybe there was nothing beyond this. Maybe these *were* the absolute best swords.

As if to prove that, whenever the swords were returned for maintenance, they were as good as new.

It wasn't that they hadn't been used. He could tell they had by looking at them. They'd remained as good as new *despite* being used.

Swords, when it came down to it, were consumable goods. They would eventually break down with use. If they didn't, then they weren't being used enough to wear them down, even though his customers were all famous, mighty warriors.

So Gustav had run to this remote location and quit forging swords.

No doubt about it, it was an escape—before he got burned out on the thing he'd devoted his entire life to, before he gave up and concluded he'd been mistaken.

He'd run away.

And even after a year, his feelings hadn't changed one bit. So no matter what

this boy said or did, he was certain he would refuse—

“I’d like you to take a look at this.”

But he gasped as soon as he saw it.

The boy had pulled out a plain, ordinary sword.

But that only described its appearance. Nobody with any discernment could possibly have said that the sword itself was ordinary.

In fact, it was more than just extraordinary.

Before he knew it, Gustav was half unconsciously reaching for it with his mouth open wide.

“Can I...feel it?”

“Yes, feel free.”

The sword he picked up really was bare-bones. It didn’t need anything more.

Exactly—swords were for cutting down foes. Nothing additional was necessary.

This truly made him feel that on a gut level...however.

“This is awful,” Gustav found himself muttering, turning to look at the boy. It was like a glare, but the boy shrugged, seeming to understand why he’d been told that and given that look.

“Ah, as I thought.”

He must really have understood—he had an expression of true comprehension as he said that. Therefore, Gustav skipped the detailed explanation and simply asked what he wanted.

“How long has this gone without maintenance?”

“Let me think... I haven’t had anything done to it since I got it, so at least one year.”

“Makes sense. Really, it’s awful...” Gustav groaned, looking at the blade.

Contrary to his words, it was a good-looking blade, or at least most people would have said so. But Gustav wasn’t saying that to be mean, and the boy

appeared to fully grasp that.

The blade was covered in countless nearly invisible yet distinct cracks. Gustav lightly ran his finger along it, and the sound changed depending on the place. It was ever so slightly warped, although not enough to be apparent.

While the blade wouldn't break or anything of the sort if left in this state, it was in terrible condition relative to its high quality. It couldn't have anything close to its intended sharpness.

This was a good sword. No, good didn't cover it. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it one of the finest.

That was exactly why this damage was fatal. An inferior sword wouldn't suffer from a crack or two, but since this was a quality item, these slight cracks made a significant difference, especially for someone who could use it as much as this.

Yes, the damage to this sword wasn't because it had been used improperly. It had probably come about because it had been used to its utmost extent—this sword that even Gustav couldn't have forged.

When that occurred to Gustav, a slight smile came to his face, and at the same time, he wished he could punch his own foolishness.

How vain had he been?

He'd never seen a sword better than the ones he'd made, so even though he'd thought he knew that his swords weren't the best, he'd gotten the wrong idea just from hearing that they were the best from somewhat skilled individuals—even though he'd known *they* weren't the best swordsmen either.

Or maybe discouragement was discouragement, but this was something else. Maybe it was about nobody understanding him, nobody being on his level...the thing he wanted not being anywhere.

But it was the same regardless. He'd been so foolish. He'd thought he knew it all. More than arrogance, it was plain idiocy.

Yet even as he put himself down, he couldn't hide his smile.

It was clear what the boy was asking of him. Since this sword was of the highest quality, it required equivalent skill to repair. An unskilled hand would

not only damage the sword but break the tools it held.

It hadn't been repaired until now because nobody had been capable of it.

So the boy must have come to request that he repair this sword...and he was genuinely happy to be able to do that.

He didn't know whether he could do it perfectly even trying his best. But that thought was followed quickly by another.

The sword was in this condition because the boy was using it to its full potential, and at the same time, this sword wasn't good enough for this boy. Gustav could tell just by looking at it.

In that case...if he made the best sword he could make for this boy who was capable of fully realizing the potential of a sword like this, how good could it become?

That was the idea he had.

Seeing this sword and this boy, Gustav realized something. Until now, he'd never done everything he was capable of in the true sense.

Gustav was a blacksmith. Every sword he forged was created with a particular customer in mind.

He really had been mistaken. The swords he'd forged had definitely been the best possible swords—for them. That was one thing, and the ultimate sword he was aiming to make was another. He'd been a fool to equate the two.

But now that he realized that, he was sure. If he could forge a sword for this boy, he could make a never-before-seen masterpiece.

That would be too good to be true, though. He couldn't just tell the boy to order a sword from him.

But still...

"So? You want me to repair this?"

"Yes. I've looked at several blacksmiths, but you are the only one who seems capable of it. I'd be glad if I could ask that of you."

Gustav himself was glad to hear that, but he knew he shouldn't rush to agree.

Maybe it was unnecessary pride, but for a craftsman, nothing warranted being seen as easily bought, so Gustav nodded gravely, adding an air of undue importance to his words.

“I don’t mind, if that’s your request. As you can see, this is a remote place. I have no reason to turn down any work that’s come to me.”

He wasn’t being fully honest. This was a remote place, yes, but it was also the farthest from the ravages of war, with the elves’ forest nearby. Plenty of rather wealthy people hid out here, so it wasn’t uncommon for people to come requesting the services of a top craftsman. That was related to the reason Gustav was allowed to live here.

In other words, it was just pointless pretension. Someone familiar with the circumstances would have seen that easily, but the boy didn’t seem to know. Seeing his relief, Gustav was relieved in his own right.

“Is that so...? Thank you.”

“Pleasure’s mine.”

Gustav once again nodded with an unnecessary air of solemnity...and as he looked at the boy, he smiled ever so slightly.

It was plain to see now that he got a good look at him—this boy had definitely reached a level that he couldn’t hope to, and it must have been with swordsmanship. It was unmistakable from the way he’d seemed when he picked up and looked at the sword.

Gustav deeply regretted that he couldn’t forge a sword for someone like this. However...

“On that note, I’d like your advice...”

He could never have anticipated what the boy said to him next.

12

Soma walked cheerfully down the back alley. The reason was the exchange he'd just had with the blacksmith, of course.

As a result, his usual sword wasn't in his sheath, but there was another in its place. In other words, it was a substitute sword. He'd borrowed it until the repairs on his usual sword were finished. When he received it, he'd taken a look at it and given it a practice swing, and it was a rather good sword. It was a step below his usual one, of course, but it was good enough that he didn't think he would have found anything like it at the average shop.

His perception had been accurate after all. That increased his anticipation all the more.

Not his anticipation for the repairs, of course. He'd never doubted the man's ability to carry out repairs in the first place. He was sure the smith would do a perfect job.

What he was anticipating was his other request.

"Hmm... He told me not to get my hopes up, but that would be unrealistic. I can't imagine he truly believed that himself, after all."

The smith's words had been modest, and maybe they had genuinely reflected his thoughts. But deep down, he must have had faith in himself—faith that he could forge a better sword than that one.

Yes, Soma's second request had been that the smith forge a sword better than the one he ordinarily used. That was the real reason he'd been looking. He had certainly also been looking for a blacksmith who could repair that sword...but if he was honest with himself, he had been starting to feel like that sword was holding him back slightly.

He'd only begun to feel that way relatively recently, though. He'd thought it sufficient up until he started school, at least. The initial reason he'd wanted a better sword, even though his sword hadn't broken or anything, was probably

because of the powerful monsters he'd fought in the dungeon.

In any case, he'd definitely thought it would have been handy to have a better weapon when he'd slashed the Archdevil's power as it went berserk. Maybe then he could have completely subdued it.

However, if he'd succeeded in that, he may never have gone to the elves' forest, or to the Witch's Woods for that matter. Then Felicia would certainly have died...and he didn't know what would have become of the elves. He got the sense that sacrificing Felicia wouldn't have solved everything. That was nothing more than a sense, though.

Regardless, he was only in his current situation because he'd failed to cut away the Archdevil's power.

In any case, it wasn't all bad not having a proper sword, but he was certainly feeling dissatisfied. That was why he was looking for a sword that satisfied him, but it wasn't easy to come across something like that.

So he'd looked for a blacksmith instead...and while he hadn't expected to find one of those easily either, he'd conveniently happened to come across one, so he'd made the request. That was why he'd visited the blacksmith today.

"Oh, and speaking of Felicia..."

Thinking of her reminded him of his current situation—that they were looking for an inn. He'd only ordered a sword for his own self-centered reasons.

The repairs weren't a problem. They would be complete the next day, and he could simply go pick the sword up then. The new sword, though, would take at least a month whether it was ultimately a success or not. Just forging a sword wouldn't usually have taken so long, but since the smith wanted to give it his complete devotion and make the ultimate item, it would take time to match.

Soma hadn't been able to say no when he received that news. He wanted a better sword too, after all. But that meant he would have to stay here for a month. It wasn't a decision he should be making without asking the others.

"Hmm... Well, I suppose if it comes down to it, I can come back to pick the sword up at a later date."

He wasn't exactly happy about it, but he could fight just fine with his current sword. He'd been able to slash the Archdevil's power fragment, although only partially, and he hadn't had any problem against the forest god. It would have taken quite the exceptional opponent to survive that sword. Something like Hildegard in her past life, or maybe...

"Perhaps if that so-called forest god took a fragment of the Archdevil's power. That might require the full extent of my potential strength..."

But now that he'd blown it to pieces, that wouldn't be happening. It wasn't worth considering, so he would have no problem with that sword. He could come back to get the new one after returning to the academy.

In that case, however, he would surely have to wait until the next long break, which would be in half a year or more. It was a long time away, but he had no other choice.

"For the time being, I should discuss with them and then make my decision. It would be highly inconvenient to stay here for a month, however..."

It would be unreasonable, actually. They could earn the fees for the inn, so that wasn't the problem. It didn't even have to do with their own circumstances.

It was that the academy break would be over in a month. Soma didn't really care, personally, but only in the sense that he didn't care about missing class. He was confident he could catch up—in fact, he'd already learned the material, so he didn't have any catching up to do. But Sierra needn't concern herself with his sword, and she had to return to the academy as well. That was highly unfavorable.

In addition, it would mean he'd have to delay giving notice that he was all right for another month...

"Well, that certainly wouldn't do."

He'd spent plenty of time away already. And while he'd had good reasons, he knew he would receive a scolding if he told them he'd spent an extra month away because he'd wanted a new sword. Not even Soma intended to go that far.

In that case, he would tell the blacksmith about those time constraints when he went to pick up the repaired sword tomorrow. He would most likely be willing to be flexible if Soma paid in advance.

But before having that discussion, he needed to find an inn...if the girls hadn't found one already.

"I wasn't exactly shirking my duty, but..."

Well, maybe he had been. Either way, he hadn't found one. He wouldn't be able to blame them if they were upset with him for that.

He'd prioritized his own business and taken a personal request to a blacksmith. If he'd used that time to look, he could have searched a wider area.

"I ought to use the rest of my time to search a different area so they don't point that out as well... Oh?"

Soma paused when he heard a sound. It was coming from an alleyway where some people were standing.

He heard several sounds from the alley, of course, but that wasn't why he was stopping. If he wasn't mistaken, he'd heard a child crying.

Not only that...

"Hmm... That voice..."

It sounded awfully familiar to him. He couldn't make out what she was saying...but he wasn't callous enough to ignore it.

He could tell where the voice was coming from, and it happened to be one of the places he'd been heading toward in the first place. The path split into two before him, and he heard the sound from the left.

As he proceeded forward without hesitation, the voice became clearer.

Just as he'd thought, it was a child crying...

"Ugh, come on, quit crying! And you call yourself a big girl like Stina?! That's just sad!"

...and a voice he knew saying that at the same time.

13

Soma headed toward the voice, and when he saw the scene, he reflexively tilted his head in confusion. He couldn't tell what was going on at a glance.

He saw a little girl crying and an older girl he knew in front of her. The little girl looked about three or four years old. The older girl was shouting something at her. To be honest, this was the type of situation a stranger would be prone to misunderstanding, and it was needless to explain what kind of misunderstanding that would be.

"I told you, stop crying— Oh."

He met eyes with her. The older girl—Stina—opened her eyes wide in shock, no doubt accurately grasping how this looked. Her face froze and she hastily turned toward him.

"Wh-Why'd you have to show up *now* of all times?! I mean, this isn't what it looks like, got it?! I'm not—"

"Hmm... It's hardly laudable to bully young children."

"I-I'm telling you...!"

Stina became more flustered at Soma's words. A slight smile came to his face as he watched her.

Naturally, he hadn't really meant that. This scene would have looked different if that were really the case, and he wouldn't have invited someone to travel with him who he thought would do something like that. So he was just teasing her, and Stina seemed to have picked up on that. She closed her mouth in the middle of trying to vindicate herself and glared at him.

"You..."

"As you appear to have realized, I was joking."

"And it was in bad taste! I was really freaking out there!"

"Yet you quickly realized and recovered from your shock."

“You’re not wrong...” Stina glared at Soma, seeming not to accept that as a justification.

He shrugged, then shifted his gaze to the side. He and Stina weren’t the only people here. The girl had already stopped crying now, though. It seemed less like she was done crying and more like she was afraid of the stranger who had just shown up.

“Hmm... She seems wary of me.”

“Of course she is, since you’re the type of guy who makes jokes in bad taste.”

“I don’t think that factors into it. In any case, just to confirm my understanding of the situation... I take it you were in the middle of attempting to help her.”

He was guessing that based on what he’d seen. The two hadn’t been walking when he’d spotted them, but they had been holding hands. Posture-wise, it had looked like someone guiding a lost child. It seemed to him like the girl had started crying during that and Stina had been trying to stop her. Her words had been rough, but that was simply what her personality was like.

The two weren’t holding hands right now, but that was because Stina had let go when she’d turned to face Soma. That was likely intentional, and also probably part of why the girl appeared nervous.

But...

“T-Trying to *help* her?! Of course not! I just heard her crying and it got on my nerves, so I came over to tell her to shut up!”

Soma sighed when Stina blurted that out. He wasn’t about to take her word for it; that didn’t even serve as an excuse.

In the first place...

“Hmm... So I take it you weren’t attempting to help her in any way?”

“Obviously not! I just came and told her to shut up! I was *mad* at her!”

“So this child came to this alley on her own?”

“Wh... Why should I care?! She probably did, but what does that have to do

with me?!”

“I understand... She seems more attached to you than I would expect based on that, however.”

“Huh...?”

Stina hadn't seemed to notice, but the girl was standing in a different place now. She'd retreated for protection from the stranger—Soma—behind Stina's legs.

And the second Stina realized that, the girl clung to her leg.



“Ah! What’re you doing there?! Get off me! I came over to yell at you, you know?!”

“Don’ wanna...”

“Don’t give me that!”

As Stina insisted she move away, the little girl desperately clung to her leg, refusing to let go. It was like a child afraid to be left behind by a parent.

“Hmm, a child who gets attached to someone who’s done nothing but yell at her... I don’t suppose she’s a masochist; you don’t see children like that often.”

“What’s it to me?! She’s just randomly being clingy or something! Come on, get off me!”

Could he really believe she was telling the truth while looking at that scene? She could have just given up and admitted she was lying.

Even as she told the girl to get off and feigned lifting her hand to swat her away, Stina wasn’t bringing that hand down. The girl must have picked up on that reflection of Stina’s true nature; she wouldn’t have become so attached otherwise.

The question was why she was afraid of Soma, then...but Soma as a person was rather like a naked sword, so that must have been overwhelming to a child.

“Hmm... Well, since you only came over because she was bothering you, it doesn’t seem my help is required. Is it all right if I leave this to you?”

“Leave what to me? I just came over to yell at her, and I’m done now... Suit yourself, I guess. That’s what I’m gonna do... And *you*, get off me for real!”

As Stina continued to be obstinate, Soma watched with puzzlement, thinking maybe it was more than simply an attempt to cover up her embarrassment. That was what he’d assumed initially, but something about it looked like a facade of meanness as well.

He hadn’t gotten to the bottom of it, but now that he thought about it, he’d noticed bits of that in her behavior this whole time. There was probably a reason behind that... He would find out when the time came, though.

In any case, it didn't seem like this situation required his intervention, so Soma went to turn on his heel—and just then, he spotted something.

It was on the head of the girl clinging to Stina's leg—two horns, partially hidden in her hair, but definitely there.

Most people didn't have horns. There was only one race that did: demonkin.

That should have been the case, at least...but something gave Soma pause about concluding that decisively. While it was nothing more than a gut feeling, Soma felt like she was more than the child she appeared to be.

Soma hadn't interacted with any demonkin, though. The most contact he'd had with them was seeing them every so often in Dement. This could just have been a trait of demonkin.

Well, while he sensed something unusual, it didn't give him a bad feeling. There shouldn't have been any need to worry about it.

More importantly, learning she was a demonkin made one more thing clear about this situation: why the two had been walking in this alley.

Common sense said this wasn't the kind of alley one should take a child into. It would risk unnecessary trouble, all the more so if the child got lost there.

But it was different if that child was a demonkin. Demonkin had monstrous traits at times; horns were on the tame side. Some were covered in scales, and others even had four arms. They were often disliked for that reason, even becoming targets of persecution. It was another story if they had enough status or a good career, but that in itself was a high bar to clear.

Because of that, it was said that if you wanted to see a demonkin, you should go somewhere people didn't often look, like an alley. And judging by this...

"So things aren't all that different here, I take it."

"Yeah... They're not." Stina seemed to have grasped what he was thinking from the look in his eyes. She responded with a nod but refrained from going into the details.

Discrimination still existed even among those lumped together as devils. That was their unspoken understanding.

“None of my business, though!”

She was still sticking with that story, apparently. Soma smiled wearily and shrugged, then turned to go for real this time.

And...

“Oh, that reminds me. How is your search for an inn going? I couldn’t find any where I went.”

“What were you even doing? I found one, of course. A pretty good one too!”

By the way she puffed her chest out, it didn’t seem like she was just posturing. Soma let out a sigh of relief—both because things would be fine even if he couldn’t find one, and because she’d been taking the search for an inn seriously...so he hadn’t misjudged her.

“Is that so... You can give your full attention to what you’re doing here, then.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about... But yeah, I thought I was all done with that, but apparently I still have more to do. Not only would she not shut up, she won’t get off my leg. What a pain. I have to tell her off, so I might be a little late.”

“Understood. I’ll explain to the others if you’re late, so no need to hurry.”

“Got it. Well, I’m just scolding her, so I think it’ll be fine!”

Soma smiled wryly again, seeing that she still didn’t intend to admit it, and continued to walk away.

“Look, he went away! So get off me already!”

Soma chuckled to himself with a sigh as he overheard her shout.

14

After parting with Stina, Soma decided to look in the east quarter of the city this time. As he'd continued down the alley, he'd found himself closer to the east than the north. That was why he'd encountered Stina, after all.

That was half exactly what he'd been aiming for. The roads were somewhat complicated, but he'd known what area she was in and which way she was heading, so he'd deliberately come this way.

As for why he'd given up on searching the north, it was because he didn't think there were any inns there. That was likely given that there wasn't a single one facing the main road, and the same was probably true of the alleys, considering what he'd found there. Therefore, he'd thought it best to try a different place entirely instead of searching a wider area in the north.

The issue was that he didn't know how successful Stina had been...but it was no real problem if their searches overlapped. They weren't competing or anything. It was fine as long as they found a good inn.

Of course, if he could find a good inn, that would both fulfill his objective and satisfy his pride, killing two birds with one stone...but nothing good ever came of greed. A lot of time had already passed; he only had about an hour left. With that in mind, he couldn't ask for too much.

"I suppose as long as I end up with something to show for my efforts..." he muttered as he continued forward, glancing around him.

Just then, he turned to look into the distance, toward the center of town or even past it. He narrowed his eyes as if looking for someone in that direction.

"That reminds me... I wonder how those two are doing."

Although he thought they would be fine, he couldn't help being slightly concerned.

The people in this town seemed relatively laid-back, and Sierra was unlikely to be delayed even if something did happen. He hadn't seen any monsters around

that could pose a threat, so he knew his concern was unnecessary, but...

“Oh...? Monsters...”

Soma realized something just then. Apart from the target of that request, he hadn't seen any monster that could pose a threat. In fact, he hadn't seen any monsters at all.

Monster encounters were luck based in a sense, so he hadn't paid it any mind until now...but it was strange now that he thought about it.

“Hmm... Well, if something happens, I can deal with it then.”

With that in mind, Soma resumed his search for an inn, still wondering how the two were doing.

+

Sierra narrowed her eyes at the scene before her. It was a wide, flat field of grass—something you would never see inside a town.

But that was to be expected in a sense. She wasn't in a town right now, so it was no wonder she would see something you wouldn't see in a town.

So she had another reason for giving it a suspicious look. It was literally nothing but a field of grass... She didn't see a single monster.

“Weird...”

“I certainly don't see any monsters... But is that so strange?” her older sister, Felicia, replied with puzzlement from beside her.

Sierra didn't think her sister was ignorant for asking that, though. There were times she didn't know things she should have, but this was something a lot of people weren't familiar with.

“It's rare to not see a single monster...except in particular places or situations,” she answered.

“Particular places and situations? Like what?”

“A town with an anti-monster barrier.”

“Oh, I see... That's a place, right? What about a situation?”

“Like...if something really strong nearby was intimidating them.”

But that was truly unthinkable outside of extraordinary scenarios. Monsters didn't fight each other as a rule; if something got in their way, they either ran around it or hid. The only reason Sierra could think of for this situation was if something was acting in an indiscriminately destructive way.

It couldn't be that they were hiding from Sierra. The monsters never ran from her when she walked around, no matter how much stronger she was than them. In fact, the greater the gap in strength between them, the clearer that tendency was... To put it simply, most monsters weren't that intelligent. They couldn't sense how much weaker they were than her.

So there would have to be some extraordinary circumstances to explain why she didn't see a single monster.

“And that would be true even with Soma?”

“Mm-hmm... Maybe not if he tried to intimidate them. But he hasn't so far.”

“Not even when he defeated that monster?”

“He doesn't need to intimidate monsters of that level.”

“That's strange in a whole different way... But I understand. That explains why you wanted to check on this.”

“Mm-hmm... It's definitely weird.”

Yes, it wasn't because Sierra had lost her way while looking for an inn that she'd come here. After failing to find an inn, she had ended up at a loss for what to do, but she'd left the town because she hadn't been able to put this state of affairs out of her mind. She could have come after deciding on an inn with the others, and in fact, that had been her original plan, but she'd happened to have some free time now.

“And it isn't just because the area around this town is always like this?” Felicia asked.

“Can't say for sure without asking... But in that case, there wouldn't be a guild here.”

In fact, she'd seen a large number of adventurers in town, and all of them had

been gone when she'd returned. She couldn't imagine they were all making a living just on odd jobs and collection quests.

That meant that monsters should be appearing here like they normally did in other places. But they weren't right now. This was clearly abnormal.

"So now we know that something is wrong...but what should we do? Should we head back and discuss this with Soma?" Felicia asked.

"I wanted to look around... But maybe it would be easier to do that afterward. Don't know what's here."

It would be ideal to see what was going on with her own eyes, but if this was truly abnormal, then it was likely that the guild already had information about it. She didn't see any adventurers either, which meant that they'd either gone elsewhere or gone back to report this. It was probably because she'd been looking for an inn in the alleys that she hadn't crossed paths with any adventurers.

In any case, it wouldn't be too late to come back after checking that.

"Then why don't we make our way back? I would only get in your way if something really went wrong, after all."

Sierra didn't think so, but she refrained from responding. It was partly because she couldn't think of the right words, but also because no matter what she said, her sister would probably think she was only saying it as family. It wasn't her role to say something. That was for someone who had more influence over her sister.

As she thought about that, she realized he'd done it again. She'd heard he'd only lived with her sister for about a month, and yet he'd affected her so strongly in that time. That feeling was apparently even stronger after they'd been separated for a while.

Regardless, everything came down to having the right person in the right place. People should just do what they were most suited for, and each had a role to fill.

That was all it was...but Sierra sighed as she looked at her older sister. She wished her sister would show more awareness that she'd been released from

her bonds, that she would be willing to take up more space.

She turned her back on the scenery before her, and she and her sister began to walk toward the meeting place.

15

Soma reached the meeting place about five minutes before the agreed-upon time. The time being what it was, there were more people here than when they'd split up, and the area was now rather busy. It made sense for a town center, Soma thought as he glanced around.

Neither Stina nor Sierra and Felicia were there yet. Soma wondered what to do in the meantime...but he didn't have to wonder for long. As he looked around once more, he saw two familiar faces coming from the west. They seemed to have spotted him as well.

As they approached him, they dipped their heads.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Mm-hmm... Sorry."

"No, I only just arrived. This is the time we agreed to meet, so it's no problem."

Soma smiled wryly, thinking that way of putting it made this sound like a date. Everyone around in this town was a so-called devil, but the atmosphere felt little different than the other towns Soma was familiar with. He'd apparently gotten used enough to it to have silly thoughts like that.

But then Soma tilted his head in confusion. Something about Sierra and Felicia seemed off.

"Hmm? Did something happen to you two?"

"Huh? Why do you ask?"

"Something feels unusual about you. Did you fail to find any inns at all, perhaps?"

"Well, we certainly did...but if you sense something unusual, I think that's something else."

"Mm-hmm... We just checked outside the town."

Soma immediately knew what Sierra meant. It had been on his mind as well.

He nodded. "So you didn't see a single monster, then."

"How could you tell all of that from what she just said...?"

"Mm-hmm... Impressed."

"Well, I had the same thought earlier, so I can't claim too much credit. However, this makes it unlikely that we simply got lucky earlier..."

"Mm-hmm."

That didn't really mean much for them, however. They didn't have any particular attachment to this town, nor did they plan to make it their home base. Even if there were ominous signs, it was none of their business as long as it didn't impact them personally.

But if something bad happened after they'd become aware of the situation but chosen to ignore it, they'd have a hard time sleeping at night, and besides, Soma had ordered a sword here. It would be an issue for him if this town were wiped out or something.

In any case...

"Hmm... Well, if we are to delve into that matter, it should be after Stina returns."

"Right, we shouldn't discuss any further without her," Felicia agreed. "And she hasn't decided what she's going to do, for that matter."

"Mm-hmm... But what about you, Soma?" Sierra wasn't asking if he'd seen anything intriguing but simply whether he'd found an inn.

He gave her a crooked smile and shrugged. "What I found in the direction I went was the same as what you found. I changed direction when I realized, however, so I found a few."

"You changed direction? That was allowed?" Felicia asked.

"Well, the purpose of this exercise was to find an inn, after all. Stina apparently found a good one, though, so I can't say if it was necessary."

"Stina...?" Sierra asked. "She came?"

“Oh, no, I haven’t met her here. We crossed paths while searching.”

“Crossed paths” wasn’t technically the right term for it, but the details were irrelevant.

And...

“Oh...”

Just then, the bell rang. The sound echoed out of the tower and reverberated to the core of their bodies. This was their third time hearing it, but it always made Soma stop in his tracks.

When Soma looked around, though, he saw that most people didn’t seem to care about the sound. It couldn’t have been that it sounded different to everyone else, so they must have simply been used to it. Sierra and Felicia were paying attention to it as well, so everyone who was surprised by it must have been new to this town.

“This makes it easy to tell the time, but it will take a while to get used to.”

“It certainly will,” Felicia agreed. “We don’t know if we’ll be here long enough to get used to it, though.”

“Mm-hmm... But what about Stina?”

The intervals between the chimes were short; the bell had rung twelve times before they knew it. Even then, however, Stina was nowhere to be seen.

“Hmm... She’s late. She’s run into a delay, I suppose.”

“While looking for an inn? But didn’t you say she found a good one?”

“No, it has nothing to do with the inn. I told you we crossed paths, didn’t I? Stina seemed to be helping a lost child.”

“And that’s why she’s late?” Sierra asked.

“Precisely.”

“I see... It can’t be helped, then,” Felicia concluded.

“Indeed. Well, she refused to admit it herself... Oh, and speak of the devil.”

Soma saw Stina running toward them. She seemed to be in a hurry because

she was late. As Soma smiled wryly, thinking there was no need to rush like that, she came up to them.

“S-Sorry... I ran late...”

“There was no need to hurry. I was just telling them about your circumstances. On that note, did you get her to her destination?”

“Heh, of course. Who do you think— Wait, what do you mean ‘get her to her destination’?! I told you I was just gonna scold her! Then I left her right there!”

“Oh, is that so? What kept you so long, then?”

“I-I... I got too focused on looking for an inn!”

“But I recall you telling me you’d found a good inn when we last spoke.”

“I-I figured I could find a better one! We need one that’s good enough for me!”

“Hmm... Is that so?”

“It is!”

Stina was desperately stringing words together, but Soma ultimately just shrugged. It would have been obvious to anyone which of the two of them was lying. In fact, even though Felicia and Sierra weren’t familiar with the situation, both had weary smiles on their faces.

“She’s kind of like Aina... You can tell they’re sisters,” Sierra commented.

“Aina wouldn’t be so needlessly stubborn... Well, no, I suppose they are similar,” Soma conceded. “Hmm... Perhaps their family produces personalities like this.”

“What kind of family would that be...?”

“Forget about that! How’d your search go?!” Stina hastily changed the subject. “I found a good inn!”

“I found several as well, but none were anything special. They weren’t bad inns, but it would be hard to describe any of them as good inns either.”

“We didn’t find any...”

“Well, there were no inns in the direction we searched in the first place,” Felicia explained.

“Heh, so you’re a bunch of amateurs, huh? I guess I have no choice but to show you to the inn I picked out!”

Stina triumphantly began to walk away, but Soma stopped her there. It would have been all right to go to the inn first, but it would mean making two trips.

“Can we do one thing first?”

“Yeah?” Stina turned around. “What’s up?”

“Can we stop by the guild before we go to the inn?”

“The guild? Do you need something there?”

“Ah, I see... It would certainly be best to ask at the guild before going to the inn,” Felicia agreed.

“Mm-hmm... Would save us a trip.”

The two had immediately understood what Soma meant and agreed with him. Regardless of what decision Stina came to, they needed to discuss the monster problem. It would save them time to check the guild first and then talk at the inn.

But Stina couldn’t understand what they were talking about, not having been told, and she seemed unhappy about that. Her eyes said it loud and clear without the need for her to open her mouth.

Soma smiled wryly at that and began to explain everything to Stina, including what he had just heard from Felicia and Sierra.

16

As a rule, the adventurer's guild had a lot of time to kill around midday. The reason for that was simple: little to no adventurers came to the guild at that time. That didn't mean absolutely none came, but there were so few of them that the guild could still be called inactive.

On the flip side, the guild was busy in the early morning and from evening on. That was necessarily the case because adventurers dropped by the guild in the morning to accept quests and in the evening to make reports. On rare occasions, there were adventurers who returned the next morning to report on a quest, or who finished early and came in the afternoon, but given that Felgau was a border town, that was extremely uncommon. In fact, the guild had so little to do during the afternoon that even the bar was busier.

That would usually have been the case, at least, but things were different today. Adventurers were filling the space that would ordinarily have been deserted.

But that was only natural.

"But all they're doing here is freaking out about something that we don't even know the reason for," Emily complained. "I wish they'd help out and not just get in the way."

"That's too much to ask. I mean, I know how you feel, but this is our job."

"Myeah, I know, but still..."

It was only human to want to say that. Even if she was a devil, not part of mankind.

"Is that joke trendy with you guys or something? Or are you trying to make it a trend?"

"You don't like it? I think it's a prrretty versatile one that any devil could use."

"Stop trying to make it a thing. It's just gonna bomb. And if you have time to

joke around, why don't you get to work? Complaining won't make things any less busy."

"I know, but I can't help complaining a bit..." Emily said with a sigh as she picked up a document.

It was a list of the quests that adventurers in this town had either completed or failed to complete. The receptionists had compiled it with the thought that it might come in handy if something changed.

However...

"There's no prrrecedent for the monsters suddenly disappearing."

The monsters had disappeared—that was the news the guild had received shortly beforehand. And they hadn't only vanished from one particular area but from the entire area surrounding the town.

That would have sounded like a mere rumor if just one or two people had reported it, but everyone who'd taken a quest had come back as soon as they could and said the same thing, so it was more than a joke. In fact, the guild had checked, and nobody had managed to find even a single monster. This was clearly abnormal.

And even Emily, who would normally have been working as a receptionist, was digging through guild documents because she was at a loss for how to handle something like this.

"I mean, if there was a prrrecedent, I think we would've heard of it."

"True, but you don't know for sure that there's no information."

"Mrrr... I wish I could gossip about it without a care in the world like they are. Instead I have to be responsible for it."

"Well, they may not be responsible for it, but they're not exactly carefree. Their source of income might be gone... Actually, as of right now, it is gone."

"That goes for us too, though."

One would have assumed that not having monsters around would have been cause for celebration, since it would mean less danger, but it wasn't actually such a good deal for them. The majority of adventurers made a living by

defeating monsters and collecting rewards for it, which included selling parts. For them, it would be more than just bothersome for that source of income to disappear.

It would also be trouble for the town if there were no longer adventurers around, and for the guild, of course. Actually, the guild would be affected even more directly by the absence of monsters, because monsters were how the guild made a profit too.

On paper, guilds were managed by the countries they belonged to, but they weren't nonprofits. They had to make enough money to support their employees, and that was especially crucial for a branch like the one in Felgau that had no definite nation behind it. There were no subsidies, so they had to make all that money themselves. However, the processing fee the guild took was small.

The guild took some requests from residents of the town, but most of those were odd jobs. Few adventurers accepted them, and given the small rewards, the processing fees were small as well. The guild couldn't get by on just that, so most of the guild's income came from wholesaling monster parts to other guild branches.

They sold to people in this town too, of course, but the markup was small. If they sold at too high a price, merchants would simply buy directly from the adventurers. It would only hurt their profits if they raised the processing fee far above what guaranteeing product quality was worth.

But it was another story with remote branches. If someone went out of their way to put in an order, that meant it was for a material they couldn't obtain on their own. Although there was a limit, the guild could get away with overcharging a bit.

However, if they overdid it, the other guilds would overcharge them right back, which would make it too expensive to buy wholesale and resell to craftsmen. Everything had to be done in moderation.

Regardless, with that being how they made a profit, the monsters disappearing was a very serious matter. Since this meant trouble for them on top of the fuss the adventurers were making, they were working hard in the

afternoon when they normally would have had free time.

“Even the guild rep is working, and she usually just slacks off. Really drives home how serious this is... Not sure how I feel about her playing receptionist while the actual receptionist has to do this, though.”

“She said she’s doing that in case the adventurers blow up, but she obviously just wants the easy job. She isn’t doing anything right now, after all.”

“One of these days I’m really gonna punch her, I swear.”

As for why the rep wasn’t currently doing any work as receptionist despite all the adventurers, that was because the adventurers were just talking among themselves for the time being. They’d already gotten information, and anyone who’d planned to go out for another quest had already gone. There was nothing for a receptionist to do.

There was no guarantee that would continue to be the case, of course, since other adventurers could show up, but this fuss had started about two hours ago. Most adventurers had already returned, and the ones who hadn’t were probably prioritizing their quests and wouldn’t be back until evening.

Basically, the rep, who was currently slouched over the reception desk, must have taken that into consideration when she took the role...

“Well, she’ll get what’s coming to her. I mean, I’ll be praying she does, at least. I wouldn’t be satisfied otherwise... Huh?”

“Mrow? What’s up?” Emily tilted her head in puzzlement when her coworker, who had been glaring in the direction of the guild rep, froze in place.

Thinking maybe the rep had done something wrong, Emily looked up from the document in her hands. As she did, she realized she didn’t hear the adventurers fussing anymore...then all at once, she understood her coworker’s current state painfully well.

“Huh...? Wait... Mrow?”

The rep seemed to be attending to some adventurers now.

Emily was in the reference room on the third floor. She was able to look at what was going on downstairs, but only if it occurred to her to deliberately

check, so it was no wonder she hadn't noticed the new arrivals.

But there she saw *those* adventurers. While she hadn't seen his guild card, she remembered them calling the boy Soma...

"Wow, that surprised me... But I like the look of that."

"For sure..."

Emily's coworker was referring to the way the rep looked like she was at wit's end. She'd tried to step back, but nobody was available to take her place. They were all busy looking into the incident, just like Emily was.

Emily completely understood feeling uneasy about the prospect of making a wrong step with those adventurers...which gave her all the more schadenfreude.

"I'm glad she's getting her comeuppance right away...but do you think that'll end up being trouble for us too?" her coworker asked.

"I don't think so, or at least I hope not... We can just let the rep take care of it. Like, she should do some work for once."

"Yeah... It doesn't pay to only work when things blow up. Let's focus on our own stuff for now. Although...I get the feeling we won't accomplish anything."

Emily could understand that. In fact, she'd been thinking the exact same thing. It was nothing more than a hunch...but she felt like whether or not they managed to figure something out, those people would resolve the issue regardless.

At the same time, she noticed something. This situation was definitely abnormal, as was clearly established, but it didn't really feel like a crisis to her. She'd been working as normal despite her complaints...and maybe that was because subconsciously, she knew there was no reason to work any harder.

"Well, the question is whether they'll stick around long enough to solve it..."

"That's where the rep should come in, right? I mean, being the rep, she'll have to pick up on that and do something to make them stay."

"Oh, looks like it. She's frantically explaining something to them down there. I feel like they might leave if she makes too big a deal of it, though..."

“And that’s another place for her to use her skills.”

If that went well, maybe it could make up for the rep’s laziness, Emily thought as she continued to look through the documents to do her own job, still conscious of what was going on below.

17

“Mm, this sure does sound fishy based on what we heard. I honestly thought we just got lucky...but of course not. That would be too good to be true,” Stina said.

After Soma’s party had gotten the gist of what was going on from the guild, they had quickly left and proceeded down the main street toward the east, with Stina in the lead. She seemed to be thinking back on their conversation as they walked.

In order to discuss what they’d heard, they first had to go to the inn. However, they hadn’t gotten much information. The guild had been aware that the monsters were gone, of course, but they hadn’t seemed to know any more than the party did. They had only just confirmed it as fact and hadn’t completely determined the current state of things, let alone why this was happening.

The guild rep had attended to them for some reason, and while they’d discussed the matter for a bit, she’d ultimately asked *them* to let her know if they found anything out. It didn’t seem like they could expect much from the guild, as rude as that way of putting it sounded.

“Well, of course we can’t. Border guilds like this just use adventurers to take care of whatever happens,” Stina explained. “And those adventurers aren’t the best either.”

“Hmm... So you’re saying they have enough manpower but can’t utilize it in the right places.”

“Right. They could use adventurers to look for documents, but then they couldn’t count on the documents being safe... Not like they would get stolen—like they would get destroyed. I’m sure they could help with grunt work...but the guild doesn’t even know what to do yet.”

“I would think there are things they could do, such as investigating the area in

detail.”

“There are...but are they able to?” Sierra asked.

“They don’t know what might happen, and I doubt the adventurers would do anything they don’t think they can handle,” Stina said.

“I see...” Felicia said. “So those things factor into the situation.”

“Well, it seems that they carried out a basic check of the area. I think it would be harsh to ask anything more of them.”

That also seemed to be the reason that Soma hadn’t encountered any other adventurers while searching for an inn. There were hunting grounds in each cardinal direction from this town, but since they hadn’t found any monsters, they’d quickly moved to other locations. Because of that, they’d happened to go back at the same time that Soma had been exploring the alleys, so they hadn’t crossed paths.

That also meant that if his timing had been a little different, he might have noticed this earlier...but it didn’t make much of a difference. Finding out earlier wouldn’t have changed anything, anyway. They would have had to find an inn to discuss this either way.

Although, maybe if they’d started looking at a different time, Stina wouldn’t have found that girl, so it would have been different in that way...

“So, Stina, may I assume you’re leading us to the inn?”

“Huh? Why’re you stating the obvious? What else would I be doing?”

“Right... Now that I think about it, Stina seemed to naturally take the lead as soon as we left the guild. And she didn’t say where we were going... Has something caught your attention?” Felicia narrowed her eyes with suspicion, wondering whether Soma thought Stina may be up to no good and trying to lead them somewhere shady.

But Felicia was overthinking it. That wasn’t the reason that Soma had explicitly confirmed with Stina.

Soma shrugged with a crooked smile. “Well, I suppose something has caught my attention. However...it’s only that this area seems rather familiar to me.”

“Familiar...?” Sierra asked. “Like you were just here?”

“W-Well, all the buildings around here are built the same, so you’re probably thinking of somewhere else,” Stina said. “And so what if it’s familiar, anyway?”

“It isn’t anything important. I don’t think it necessarily means anything if I’ve seen this area before.”

It was just that...he thought this might be where Stina and that girl had been before. And Stina’s reaction just now had answered his question of whether it had been nothing more than *déjà vu*. That is to say, it hadn’t.

And as for what *that* meant... Soma could imagine, but he said nothing more about it. He thought he would come to understand soon enough.

And his hunch proved to be true.

“So this is the inn that you thought was best?”

“Not the best out of every inn I’ve seen, but definitely the best I saw in this town!”

“So this is the place... To be honest, it isn’t what I expected,” Felicia commented.

“Mm-hmm... Looks old.”

The place Stina had stopped in front of was certainly an inn. There wasn’t much positive to say about its exterior, though. Sierra’s comment summed it up concisely, including the signboard reading “Glass Stop North.” If one were to choose words carefully, one might say it was quite an interesting building. It gave off an impression that would make one hesitate for a moment even if one had been recommended it. While it didn’t seem shady, exactly, it looked old enough that it made Soma wonder whether it would be all right.

It didn’t stand out as exceptionally old-looking, since the other nearby buildings were the same, but that did nothing to assuage his fears. If anything, that made it look desolate, only worsening the effect.

“H-Heh heh, you won’t be saying that for long! You’ll eat your words when you see the inside!”

“Hmm... If you insist, then I expect good things.”

“Yes... It certainly isn’t good to judge it without seeing the inside.”

“Mm-hmm...”

With that said, Stina led them inside...and Soma let out a sigh of relief when he saw it wasn’t what he had expected—in a good way.

The interior still gave an overall impression of great age, as the outside had. Right when they walked in, they saw a wooden counter in a not-so-large room, probably the reception desk. The walls were made of wood as well, and the discoloration spoke of how long they had been there.

It was easy to tell at a glance that everything here was old, but it seemed to be well utilized, because it gave Soma a sense of comfort and stability.

Inns were places to rest. If the atmosphere felt suited to that as soon as he walked in...he could see how he’d misjudged the place.

“I apologize,” Felicia said. “It looks like I didn’t trust you enough.”

“Mm-hmm... Sorry. I see it differently now.”

“Yes... I must admit I thought you were half, no, eighty percent bluffing, but my opinion has certainly changed.”

“Come on, have more faith in me! But anyway, you see my good judgment now, right? Compliment me more!”

As they talked in the lobby, someone came out without them having to call. They heard footsteps from the back, and the person who appeared was a man in his middle age or slightly younger. He must have understood they were customers without being told.

There was a smile on his face, but the moment he saw Stina, that smile became mingled with surprise.

“Welcome... Oh, you’re here?”

“Heh, I came just like I said I would!”

“I see... I didn’t think you would really come, but thank you. Thank you again for what you did earlier as well.”

As the man dipped his head, Sierra and Felicia exchanged looks of confusion.

That was only natural, as they had no way of guessing the reason behind that first sentence, let alone the second.

As for Soma, hearing that only served to confirm his suspicions. And just then, something else gave him more evidence.

There were quiet footsteps from the back, and a figure just as small as the sound suggested appeared from behind the man.

“Oh... You’re really here.”

“Hmph... I made a promise, so what choice did I have?” Stina said, turning her head away.

And the girl she was talking to was, without a doubt, the same one from before.

18

As Stina blustered that she hadn't led the lost girl here, she'd only found this place that happened to be the girl's home while looking for an inn, Soma's party ignored her and gathered in a room.

They were there to discuss Stina, the monsters, and their plans going forward, of course. But at the same time, they'd only just arrived in this inn, so their natural reaction was to look around the place and comment on how they felt about it.

"Hmm... This really is a nice inn."

"It is," Felicia agreed. "It's well maintained, so the age gives it a comfortable atmosphere. And the owner seems like a nice man."

"Mm-hmm... And I don't know about nighttime... But it's quiet right now."

This inn was relatively far back in the alley, so it was removed from the hubbub. That wouldn't have been possible in an inn facing the main street.

They'd unanimously decided to stay here after seeing that the interior was fine, which meant...

"Thank the heavens for that girl."

"Mm-hmm... Sounds like we wouldn't have come here if not for her."

"I hate to say this is all thanks to her getting lost, but from our point of view, it really is," Felicia agreed. "And thanks to Stina as well for bringing her here."

"I told you I didn't bring her here! Just compliment me for finding the place!"

"We are."

Regardless of whether it was in the way Stina wanted. After all, it was true that she had found the place; it was just that finding an inn hadn't been her objective at the time.

Apparently the girl had been out shopping with her father, the owner of this

inn, when she'd gotten separated from him. He'd brought his items home before going back out to look for her, but just then, Stina had come along with the girl. He'd only lost sight of her for a second, he said, and he'd thanked Stina profusely.

The man was a widower, and he ran this inn by himself. He appeared human, unlike his daughter...but that was nothing more than his appearance. Apparently some demonkin looked no different from humans, so he could have been one of those, or perhaps it was his late wife who had been the demonkin. It was also possible that neither were...but that was none of Soma's business.

Soma did wonder why the man was running an inn in a location like this, but when it came down to it, he was a guest. He'd refrained from asking unnecessary questions like that and simply informed the owner he would be staying here, which brought them to this moment.

"Well, time is of the essence here, considering both Stina and the monster situation. It would be best to reach a conclusion as soon as possible, so with no further ado, let's start our discussion."

"I'm still not happy, but I can't argue with that, so fine," Stina grumbled.

"We'll have to prepare different things depending on what we're going to do, after all... Although I usually leave that to you two," Felicia said.

"Mm-hmm... I'll take care of it."

The four of them sat down. This room wasn't large, since it was a single room for Soma, but there happened to be three chairs in it. After Soma sat on the bed and the other three sat in the chairs, they were ready to start their discussion.

But first, Stina turned a puzzled look to Felicia and Sierra and asked, "Why do you two keep your hoods on inside?"

"Uh... Well..."

It was an understandable question. In fact, it was even rude of them to continue hiding their faces from someone who was going to be traveling with them. That was something Soma had decided without consulting them, though, so they didn't necessarily have to go along with it, but...

“Such callous words,” Soma chided her.

“I can’t deny that, but you guys were going to go on like this if I didn’t bring it up,” Stina retorted. “I don’t want to talk if I can’t see your faces.”

“Hmm... But you must be able to guess what looks are on their faces, right?”

“People can only do that with people they know, and you’re about the only person who it’s easy for.”

“Um... Soma...?” Felicia piped up, probably because she didn’t see any sign of Soma refusing Stina’s request.

While Sierra was hiding her face to match Felicia and to avoid some minor inconveniences, it would be a problem for Felicia if even her hair color were visible, let alone her face. Felicia thought so, at least...and Sierra seemed to feel the same, based on the way she was staring at Soma. Their looks told him what they intended.

But Soma simply smiled wryly. It made sense, since he hadn’t talked to them about this, but...

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t create any unnecessary trouble.”

“Heh, if you want me to travel with you, you’re at least gonna have to accept that.”

Soma smiled wryly again and shrugged, wondering how much to tell them and how...

“Well, you two, I think it should be fine for you to show your faces. Stina is aware of what both of you are.”

“Huh...?”

“Really...?”

“It’s true. But I’m not gonna tell you how, all right? I’ll just run away if you try to force me to talk. I’m confident I can at least run, even from a Special-Grade swordswoman.”

“I see... Sounds like you do know?”

Sierra pulled her hood down without any further hesitation.



Her golden eyes were now revealed, and she was staring directly at Stina as if to tell her that she wouldn't allow any funny behavior.

Felicia sighed. "I understand. It is impolite, after all."

She removed her hood in turn. Her white hair swayed, free again after a long while, and her red eyes, which were pointed toward Stina, blinked several times.

"So you were telling the truth."

"Yeah, of course I was, but how could you tell?"

"You weren't surprised," Sierra explained in Felicia's stead. "However calm you tried to be, you'd never expect a witch... So you would have been surprised to see one if you hadn't already known."

"So you can tell all that just by looking... You're pretty confident. Not sure whether to call that scary or dependable."

Despite what she said, Stina didn't seem scared. Either she was used to this kind of thing, or she was confident that she could handle Sierra somehow, as she'd said before.

But it was the other descriptor she'd used that interested Soma more.

"Hmm... When you say dependable, are you implying...?"

"Well, we don't have much time, so I'll get to the point. I've decided I'll go with you for now. I thought about it, and it seems more convenient for me. That is, if you're still willing to travel with someone as suspicious as me."

Soma simply shrugged at Stina's statement. As he'd told her several times, he was well aware she seemed suspicious.

And then...

"Mm-hmm... Glad to have you, then."

"Yes, I look forward to traveling together."

"Wait... Huh?! Are you sure?! I mean, Soma aside... I'm pretty suspicious, you know?!"

Stina must not have been expecting them to agree at all. She grew flustered, and Felicia returned a crooked smile.

“Well, you certainly are... But even in this short time together, I’ve seen what kind of person you really are.”

“Mm-hmm. And Soma wouldn’t suggest taking you if you were nothing more than suspicious.”

“You flatter me... In any case, Stina, there you have it. I suppose I underestimated these two.”

“Ngh... I never thought they’d accept so easily. But of course they would, considering they’re *your* companions.”

“I don’t believe it has anything to do with me.”

But Soma did consider himself a good judge of character, and these two were up to his standards too.

Also, it was as Felicia had said. Soma had seen her nature and wanted to travel with her based on that. If it turned out to be an act, then he was willing to accept that.

“You guys are so weird. Well, then, thanks for having me...but I-let’s move on! About the monsters...”

She immediately changed the subject, probably out of embarrassment. It wouldn’t have been a good idea to point that out, so Soma limited his response to a wry smile and went along with it. That was the focal point of their discussion, after all.

“Hmm... Well, the guild didn’t seem to know very much. We wouldn’t have gone there if we’d figured out what was happening, after all. Do you have any ideas, Stina?”

“I get why you’d want to ask Stina the pretty detective, but I don’t, sadly. I’ve never heard of anything like this.”

While she said it jokingly, it was probably the truth. It didn’t seem like she was lying, at least.

“After all, if monsters had ever suddenly disappeared in the past, people

would have talked about it,” Felicia said. “But I’ve only heard of that happening in fairy tales and myths...”

“Oh, well, it’d be another story if those were within our scope, but that doesn’t really help us.”

“This discussion doesn’t seem to be going anywhere...”

“Mm-hmm... I don’t think we have enough information.”

“Indeed, we do not.”

They’d talked about it a bit on the way, and they really didn’t have enough information to go on. It wasn’t nearly enough to make any decisions. Even though it was the main focus of their discussion, they didn’t actually have any material to discuss.

However...

“Well, that actually isn’t much of a problem, I would say.”

“It...isn’t? What do you mean?” Felicia asked.

“If we don’t have anything to talk about, how’re we supposed to talk?”

“No, we have something to talk about. Just one thing, but it’s the most important one, and it will ultimately be our only problem.”

“Whether we stay here and get involved...?” Sierra asked.

“Precisely.”

If they’d had more information, it would have been easier to make a judgment, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t make any judgment at all.

“Regardless of the nature of the problem, if we decide we don’t want to involve ourselves, we’ll simply leave tomorrow. On the other hand, if we decide to get involved regardless of the nature of the problem, then that becomes our conclusion. Personally, however, I’m not involved enough with this place to say that for sure.”

“Me neither,” Felicia agreed. “But I also wouldn’t say I’m completely unwilling to get involved no matter what.”

“Me too... If I had to say, it would just be too much to stay a month or more,”

Sierra said. "The break will be over."

"Ah, the same applies to me, now that you mention it. Well, it seems the three of us basically don't mind either way... How about you, Stina?"

When Soma pushed the question to Stina, she started to say something, then shut her mouth. After a few moments, though, she opened it again.

"I... I guess I don't care. I'm not, like...attached to this place or anything."

"Hmm... But this leaves us undecided. If you had to pick, which would you say, out of curiosity?"

"You could just pick yourself..." Stina grumbled. "But, well... If I had to say... I guess I'd stick around."

"Then let's make that our decision for now. As for what specifically we'll do, we can decide based on the information we find and the judgments we come to based on that."

"I have no objections," Felicia agreed.

"Me neither..."

"Huh...?" Stina was dumbfounded at how easily they'd arrived at a decision. Her face said she'd put her opinion out there without thinking they would really listen to her. "Y-You're deciding that simply? And based on what I think?!"

"Well, we all made our stances clear: we don't care either way. You were the only one who said you would prefer to stay, so the decision necessarily falls to you."

"That argument doesn't seem very sound to me... I mean, I'm the only one you pushed for an opinion."

"You're imagining it."

Soma had been curious about the situation in the first place, but at the same time, he hadn't much cared how it turned out. If nobody had given any reason to stay, he would have readily left.

But despite her attempts to cover it up, Stina seemed concerned about this. He'd just made her voice that before he decided to stay.

It had nothing to do with Soma's goal, but he owed Stina. This accommodation was perfectly acceptable in that light.

With that in mind, Soma shrugged at Stina, who was looking at him with something like a glare.

19

Now that they'd decided on a direction, their next move was obvious: a good meal.

"I apologize for the lack of space," the owner said with a bow after being informed of their desire to have lunch and taking them to the dining room.

It was behind the reception area, and it certainly couldn't have been called spacious. There were only three tables and only three chairs at each one. The room's size matched that; it could almost have been called compact for an inn.

"No, it doesn't pose any problem for eating...and in fact, I wouldn't call it particularly small."

Soma responded that way because that was the simple truth. While it was smaller than other inns, it was a suitable space. It was more than adequate for Soma and his party to have a meal, at least.

"Yes, it would be hard to relax in a dining room that was too large," Felicia agreed.

"Mm-hmm... This matches the atmosphere."

"Yeah, it'd be weird if the dining room was huge in a place like this."

"I'm glad you think so. Your food will be out right away."

After making sure Soma's party had taken their seats, the owner dipped his head and went into another room. Apparently there weren't any other workers.

Based on the little Soma had heard, this area was relatively old compared to the rest of town. That went for the buildings, of course, but also the stores and whatnot; it was where things and people had been left behind who couldn't move to the newer areas. Only travelers with particular tastes would have gone out of their way to stay here, which meant few people used this inn. That meant the innkeeper had neither the need nor the resources to hire workers.

"It's no wonder he's so thankful, considering we not only helped his daughter

but became customers.”

“I keep telling you, I didn’t help her!”

“Well, that aside, this place feels quite relaxing,” Felicia said. “I haven’t stayed at many inns, but I can tell this is a nice one. Since even I can tell, I think more people would come if the location was better...”

“I’m glad you feel that way, but I earn enough to get by even if I can’t afford employees, and I’m rather attached to this building...although I do wish I could give my daughter a better life.”

When Soma picked up on the reason for the owner’s complicated expression, it made sense to him. He had been thinking the same thing as Felicia, but the owner was thinking of his daughter. They were able to lead a relatively calm life here, and he didn’t know whether they could if they moved. He had to consider the townspeople, of course, and the guests who would be staying at his inn.

It now made sense that the owner had seemed slightly nervous when the girl had come out. Felicia came to the same realization and gave the owner an apologetic look.

“Oh, I apologize. I shouldn’t have been presumptuous about your situation.”

“No, I apologize for interrupting your conversation. And here is your food. I hope it’s to your liking.”

The owner had brought out some plain and simple food. There was vegetable soup, bread that was neither too hard nor particularly soft, and some vegetables and mushrooms that had been boiled and arranged on a large plate. It was more than enough for lunch, especially considering the price. Food was included in their lodging fee, so it had been slightly pricier than other places nearby, but if they got all this, then it was actually better value.

“Hmm... And I wouldn’t go so far as to call the taste exquisite, but...”

“It’s good,” Sierra agreed. “It feels relaxing. Like the atmosphere.”

“It certainly does.”

It tasted like home in a way. It wouldn’t win any awards, but it was a comforting flavor. Combined with the atmosphere of the inn, it was very

relaxing.

And...

“Here you go...”

A cup was placed on the table, accompanied by a voice so quiet they might have missed it. The cup appeared to be filled with water, and when Soma looked over, he saw a small figure stretching both hands up. The table was apparently too tall for her. Well, to be honest, it was even too tall for Soma.

As he was looking at her, their eyes met. She quickly looked away and went to hand a cup to Sierra.

“Ngh...”

“What’re you groaning for?” Stina asked.

“Well... I don’t recall doing anything to make her afraid of me...”

It couldn’t have been helped at their first meeting, but he thought she should have warmed up to him by now. It was mildly shocking that she was avoiding him so blatantly.

“That’s pretty normal for someone she’s only met once or twice, isn’t it? It’s her reaction to *me* that doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t seem at all strange to me. But...her reactions to Sierra and Felicia too...”

Naturally, the two were wearing hoods here, so they looked quite scary. It would have been understandable for the girl to act reserved toward them. In fact, she seemed like she was actively avoiding eye contact...which seemed like overdoing it. She looked more frightened than just wary.

As Soma thought about that while chewing on some bread he’d dipped in soup, he noticed Sierra looking at the girl, who was retreating into another room. He wondered if Sierra had some thoughts about the girl...

“Mmh... A rival?”

“Where in the world did that come from...?” Felicia sighed wearily at the sudden comment.

Sierra responded with a tilt of her head. “An...impostor?”

“Soma...?”

“I wish you wouldn’t assume the fault lies with me whenever Sierra says something unusual, even though that is the case this time.”

He didn’t remember when or why, but he recalled jokingly describing someone as an impostor in front of Sierra after school one time. The academy was a place where a variety of people gathered, so there were plenty of similar personalities.

And now that he compared the two, Sierra and the girl were alike in some ways. They were both quiet and expressionless, although the girl seemed to be acting that way out of wariness.

While they were similar in terms of traits...

“Well, I wouldn’t call her an impostor, so I think it’s fine.”

“Okay... Good.”

“I’m more worried now, if anything... What are you teaching my little sister, Soma?”

“I didn’t intend to teach her that.”

“Well, she remembered it, so what’s the difference?” Stina retorted.

“Ngh...”

He seemed to be at an overwhelming disadvantage, so he considered whether there was another topic he could shift the conversation toward, which was when he remembered the blacksmith.

“That reminds me—as you can see, my usual sword is undergoing repairs right now.”

“Huh? Well, I didn’t know until you told me, and I can’t tell even now that I look...” Felicia replied.

“Oh, I thought it might be. So I was right.”

“Mm-hmm. I knew.”

“This makes it sound like I’m weird for not noticing...but you’re the unusual ones, right?”

“You think so? I did borrow a rather similar one, but... You would notice if that girl were wearing Sierra’s robe, wouldn’t you? I think the difference is similar to that.”

“That isn’t a good analogy at all.”

“I’m not sure if I’d call it good or not... It’s not quite the same, but it makes sense to me,” Stina said.

“It...actually makes perfect sense.”

“So based on this, we can conclude that Felicia is the unusual one after all.”

“I still don’t think so...”

But at least among this group, it was a fact that Felicia was a minority, so she would have to live with that.

“In any case, what I meant to say wasn’t that but that I also ordered a new sword.”

“Do you need one...?” Sierra asked.

“That one was sufficient but not perfect. This is half to ensure I have all possible situations covered.”

“I only saw it once, but it seemed really sharp,” Stina said. “You’re really something to want an even better one.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Well, I don’t know much about that, since I’m apparently a minority, but will it take long to complete?”

“He said a month at the very least.”

“A month...” Felicia muttered, giving him an irritated look.

Soma shrugged. She was right to be irritated, since he’d made that decision without asking, but...

“I’m sorry for making that decision without consulting you. I would have left

and come back for it later if not for the current situation, though. The repairs should be done tomorrow. I just thought I would let you know since I may go and get it, depending how long we stay here.”

It probably wouldn’t actually be an entire month, so he didn’t think it was necessary to say, but sharing information was important. As long as he couldn’t guarantee there would be no consequences for failing to share, it was best to do so regardless.

“Well, it doesn’t affect me, so suit yourself,” Stina said.

“Mm-hmm... It’s good Soma is getting stronger. Although I’m jealous.”

“All right, then,” Felicia relented. “And since we’re on the topic, why don’t we talk about what our plans are?”

“Hmm... Good idea.”

As of now, they’d only decided on a direction; they didn’t know what they were doing after this. They had to figure at least that much now.

After coming to that conclusion, they began to discuss as they ate their meal.

20

Per their midday discussion, they decided to survey the town first thing that afternoon. There were still a lot of things they didn't understand even after asking people, and they'd reached the conclusion that it would be best to see what was going on with their own eyes.

However, unlike during their search for the inn, they would all be acting in tandem this time. Since they didn't know what was going on, they had to take the utmost caution.

However, to be honest, Soma probably would have been all right on his own; if anything, the others would get in his way...

"...And that's exactly why," Felicia muttered.

"Hmm? What are you referring to?"

"Oh, I was only talking to myself. It's nothing," Felicia replied with a sigh to the puzzled Soma.

Apparently she'd been thinking out loud by accident. Her voice had been very quiet. Sierra hadn't seemed to hear it; she and Stina just looked confused.

That meant that Soma had been paying close attention to Felicia, which proved that her supposition hadn't been wrong. She would have been lying if she'd said she was unhappy, but she felt more sorry than anything, since she was the most likely out of all of them to hold Soma back.

It was questionable whether she would be able to contribute at all. If she could use witchcraft, she would have a way of helping, but Soma had told her to use it as little as possible after they'd left the elves' forest. That was so that she wouldn't be outed as a witch, of course.

Because of witchcraft's unique nature, those who knew about it could easily detect traces of it. That had been written in the Witch Book, and Soma had confirmed it himself. According to him, anyone who knew of the existence of witchcraft and had High-Grade Sorcery or above could probably sense it with

relative ease. They might even be able to trace what direction it was coming from if they tried.

Felicia didn't intend on letting others around her know that she was a witch, of course; it would cause unnecessary trouble for her group. So she could accept that it was best not to use witchcraft...but that made her nothing more than an ordinary person. Probably even less than an ordinary person, actually. It was inevitable that she would hold him back and be unable to do anything for him.

But Felicia didn't disparage herself for that. It would have been an insult not only to herself but to Soma and the others. Soma, at least, hadn't helped Felicia with the intent of making her feel that way, so she didn't intend to—but facts were facts, and she had to acknowledge them. Sierra didn't seem to want her to even think about it, but nothing good would come of avoiding the truth.

However, if Felicia only acknowledged she was of no help and stopped there, the end result would be the same. She needed to think about what she could do.

Well, usually Soma and even Sierra lacked common sense compared to Felicia, although she couldn't claim to be an expert in it herself. It wasn't bad to think of that as her role.

The issue was when things like this happened.

What could she do? She needed to think about that and discern something.

And there was another thing about this situation that was occupying her mind as well.

"I really don't see any monsters," Stina commented. "I don't see anything else weird either...although this is plenty weird in itself. But there must be something... Huh? Is something up?"

"No, it's nothing. I apologize."

"I mean, you didn't do anything to me. I don't care." Stina shrugged.

Stina must have been able to tell Felicia was looking at her with suspicion. Of course she would be able to.

But what did it mean that she didn't seem to mind it?

At the very least, she didn't seem to see Felicia as an enemy. That wasn't enough to clear her name, though.

Really... What in the world was Soma thinking?

Felicia hadn't objected to acting alongside Stina, but that was only because she'd thought nothing she said would make a difference. She hadn't approved of Stina... Well, maybe that wasn't the clearest way to put it. Basically, she was still suspicious.

Sierra had probably accepted this turn of events already. She was the type to act based on gut feelings, and it was clear to see that she wholeheartedly trusted Soma. Maybe she had some doubts, but Soma had made that judgment, and she was probably willing to accept Stina's presence based on that alone.

But Felicia couldn't tell what Soma was thinking. Sometimes she thought he might not be thinking anything at all.

That probably wasn't true...but not even Soma was perfect. Maybe he overlooked important things sometimes.

So, hoping to avoid a bad outcome, Felicia turned doubtful eyes toward the girl they'd welcomed as a companion. It was possibly the only thing she could do right now.

And...

"Hmm... Nothing unusual here either."

"Mm-hmm...apart from the lack of monsters."

"I think that's a completely different kind of unusual, but we already knew that, I guess."

Now that they'd finished checking the area, the three others sighed. Felicia turned to look as well, but all she saw was the same vast field. There was no sign of any monsters, not even a shadow.

This was the fourth area they'd visited. They'd started their investigation in the east, then gone north, west, and finally here to the south.

Yet they hadn't found anything...

"I thought we would find at least a clue of some sort, but I suppose that would be too easy."

"Yeah, someone would've already found it."

"Maybe if there was a mage...?" Sierra suggested.

They certainly might have some kind of detection spell, and maybe this was something that could only be found that way. Something similar was possible with witchcraft...but when Felicia looked over to Soma, he told her no with a look, and she sighed softly.

Maybe it would have been different in a scenario where they absolutely had to find something, but this wasn't the place to use witchcraft. She knew that, but even so, she couldn't help sighing, and she reflexively looked over at Stina. It wasn't because she was thinking anything in particular...but just then, she was reminded of something.

"How far do you think this effect reaches?"

"What do you mean?" Soma asked.

"There were monsters where we met Stina, weren't there? I think that must mean the effect doesn't extend that far."

What she'd just remembered was their first encounter with Stina. Soma had saved her from a monster, which meant there had definitely been monsters there, even though there wasn't a single one in this area.

"Yeah, I guess so," Stina said. "So it must not go that far...or maybe there were still monsters at that point?"

"I doubt the latter is true," Soma responded. "We didn't encounter a single monster until we reached where you were."

"Mm-hmm... And I don't think the former is either. That was the only monster we saw," Sierra added.

"So... This is happening there as well, and it had already started when we went, but that one monster was an exception?"

That was possible, and it would explain this situation. But in that case...

“That begs the question of why that was the only exception,” Stina said. “It seemed just like a normal giant frog to me when I was fighting it. But I guess I haven’t fought any other giant frogs, and I’m not even sure I can really call what I did ‘fighting’...”

“I’m not familiar with any other individuals either. However, now that I think about it... That quest was posted just this morning.”

“Should we ask when the frog was spotted and what was going on then?” Sierra asked.

“I don’t know whether they’ll have records of that...but it wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

“Then let’s,” Soma declared. “We’ve nearly finished investigating everywhere regardless.”

The only place left to look was the path from here back to the east, but they didn’t think they’d find anything there. Nobody objected to Sierra’s suggestion, so they turned away from the field to return to town.

They began to walk...but instantly, a chill shot up Felicia’s back.

She didn’t know what it was. She had no Skills, so it couldn’t be that she’d detected danger... It must have just been an instinctual response.

And at the same time, Felicia knew that it was too late.

Before she could move, Sierra caught the thing Felicia had reacted to out of the corner of her eye, but that was too late as well.

After having encountered the being called the forest god, Felicia could tell that there was nothing she could do when faced with this approaching threat...

“Mine is the sword that slays evil.”

Just then, she heard the sound of shattering glass behind her. Holding her breath, she turned around, but it was as if nothing had been there in the first place. The only things proving that wasn’t the case were Sierra’s pose, still reaching for the hilt of her sword, and Soma standing with his blade still swung down. That told her what had just happened.

Stina sighed wearily. “I only saw it for a second, but that thing that just came at you looked like a shadowtaker.”

“A...shadowtaker?” Sierra asked.

“They’re really nasty monsters. Incorporeal with shadowlike forms. Apparently you can only handle one if you wear special armor and gather multiple High-Grade adventurers to take it on, and a sneak attack is supposed to be able to wipe out even High-Graders... They shouldn’t show up around here, and if one did, it should’ve taken all the local adventurers getting together to do something about it.”

“Hmm... It was that dangerous? That was a close call, then.”

“More than a close call... But whatever.” Stina sighed. “I guess you already slashed it away without a trace. You’re completely absurd, blasting it away before I can even react.”

“Mm-hmm... Always strange.”

“I saved Felicia, so why are you insulting me?”

“You’re imagining it... It’s a compliment.”

As Felicia listened to one of their typical exchanges, she let out a huge sigh, cold sweat dripping down her back. She’d known Soma would handle it, but that had been quite bad for her heart.

She sighed once more, and just then, she met eyes with Stina, who smiled crookedly and shrugged.

“I bet if we do find something fishy, Soma’ll just do away with it instantly.”

“No turn for us...” Sierra agreed.

“Well, there is a limit to what I can do on my own. You will have your turns when something shows up that I can’t take care of.”

“You’re the last person who should be saying that...” Stina said with a sigh.

Felicia couldn’t help a small smile coming to her mouth too. She knew exactly what Stina meant.

No matter what Stina tried to plan, Soma would do away with it in one flash

of his sword—that must have been what she meant.

And Felicia felt the same. Seeing this—although she hadn't really “seen” it per se—only served to confirm that further.

But Soma had also said just now that what he could do on his own was limited, so Felicia would continue what she had been doing.

Stina, whose eyes were still on Felicia, smiled wryly at her...and Felicia, too, fixed her face in a grim smile once more.

21

The shadowtaker hadn't posed any problem, since Soma had instantly killed it, but that itself created a new problem.

There was still no sign of any other monsters, and yet that monster had appeared. However, it had been an extremely powerful monster.

There was no way that wouldn't be a problem...

"Huh...? A shadowtaker? You must be joking..."

The guild rep's face went blank out of shock when they reported it to her. The last time Soma's group had come seeking information, she'd kept appearances together, even if she had been a little flustered, but all that had fallen away now. She'd known something grave was going on, but she hadn't expected *this*.

"Please tell me you're joking...whether you are or not. That way I don't have more work to do."

"Shut up and do your job!" the demihuman receptionist hissed from the sidelines as the rep exuded an aura of pure laziness.

Soma hadn't been sure how to respond to the rep, who seemed to have given up on keeping up appearances, but now the receptionist seemed to have dropped her mask as well. He thought it should have been necessary for the receptionist to maintain that mask with the rep, but maybe the rep here was just that kind of person. Ultimately, as long as the guild was recognized as competent, it was up to the rep how she ran the branch.

"Hey, I don't want to hear backtalk from my receptionist—"

"Would you rather do your job now or do your job after I kick your ass?"

"Ngh... Too harsh, our receptionist. You could stand to have a little more sympathy."

"I would if you did your job most of the time, and I will once this is all over, so get moving!"

“Tch... Yeah, yeah, heard you loud and clear. Well, I’m going to do my own job, so good luck over there.”

“Huh? Hey, wait...!”

Having backed down relatively quickly, the rep waved as she went into the back, leaving only the one receptionist. The other receptionists were probably busy as usual...but this one must have been busy herself, and now, after coming over to scold the rep, she’d had more work shoved on her.

That was what Soma surmised, and he didn’t seem to be wrong. The receptionist looked fed up for a moment but collected herself right away like a professional. Her smile was slightly strained, but it would be kindest to pretend not to notice.

“Uh, so... What brings you here this time? I overheard something about a shadowtaker...”

“Yes, that is indeed what I was telling the rep. We encountered a monster called a shadowtaker. I’ve already defeated it, however.”

“You...defeated a shadowtaker?!”

“There was nothing left of it to take as proof, so I won’t be able to provide evidence...”

“Oh, it’s not that I don’t believe you. Don’t worry... I was just impressed. And I already thought we had a really big problem on our hands.”

“I bet,” Stina said. “Not only did the monsters disappear, what we found in their place was a powerful one that shouldn’t have been there.”

That summed up the new problem. It was clear now that this situation was more complicated than there simply being no monsters. They couldn’t assume this was unrelated by any means.

“So you came to report that?”

“And one more thing... We wanted to know when the giant frog was found,” Sierra added.

“The giant frog? Why do you... Oh, I see what you mean.” This receptionist seemed quite intelligent and quick on the uptake, seeing as she’d grasped what

they were thinking based on nothing but that short exchange. “But I apologize... We created that quest when an adventurer reported finding a giant frog, but that adventurer was only here on a quest for another town, and they’ve already left.”

“Is that adventurer’s status certain? I don’t mean any offense by this, but...can you really trust them?” Felicia asked.

“Well, they’re rank four, so I think they’re fine in that regard. Apparently they’re a salaried adventurer, and they come here periodically. They went into that area on a collection quest for us, so I think it was just a coincidence.”

“Hmm...”

Soma didn’t think that adventurer was completely beyond suspicion, but he would set that aside for now. The more important thing was that they still didn’t know whether the giant frog was related to this incident.

But they didn’t really need to know any more, frankly. The shadowtaker, at least, was definitely exceptional. Soma didn’t know what about it had been different from normal ones...but it did give him a significant hint in assessing what was going on here.

“So that’s all we can accomplish here. We weren’t able to share much information, but...”

“Oh, any information you can share helps, and that was a pretty important piece. Thank you for your cooperation.” The receptionist dipped her head.

Soma smiled wryly, thinking there was no need for that, and turned around.

“Now, the question is... Where do we go from here?”

†

After leaving the guild, Soma’s party returned directly to the inn. A lot of time had gone by, and the sun was beginning to set. Whatever they were going to do, they needed to discuss it first, so they had no time left to take action today, hence their return.

They gathered in Soma’s room once again. He sat down on the bed as he had earlier and waited for the others to take their seats before opening his mouth.

“To make a long story short, we can assume that someone has summoned a powerful monster in exchange for various other monsters, yes?”

“We don’t have enough information to be sure, but that seems likely as of now,” Felicia agreed.

“Mm-hmm... That’s most likely.”

“If another appeared, it would all but confirm our suspicions, but that could become a disaster if not handled correctly, so we shouldn’t hope for it.”

“If you’re right about this, we’ll eventually see another one whether we hope for it or not,” Felicia replied.

“We certainly will.”

The problem was that they still couldn’t do anything now that they knew that. They had no idea who would do something like this or why.

In fact...

“Are we sure this is the work of a person?”

“It’s hard to imagine this happened naturally...but we also couldn’t find any evidence,” Felicia responded.

“And if someone did do this...all they’d accomplish is bothering the people here,” Sierra said.

“Well, even if that is all, it affects a lot of people, so that may be worth it to them, but...”

This town had a ward against monsters. No matter what powerful monsters appeared nearby, the locals could simply stay in town if they had to. They would eventually run out of food, of course, and that shadowtaker would have caused injuries if another adventurer had encountered it, but ultimately, that would have been all. It didn’t make sense that anyone would cause something on as large a scale as this.

“Well, I for one definitely think a person did this,” Stina said.

“Oh? Why do you say that?”

Common sense would dictate that this wasn’t a human act. Not only was it

implausible that someone would do this, they couldn't find any evidence for it. To declare this a human act, they needed, at the very minimum, to know a way that was possible.

But then...

"Well, you see... I know a way that someone could do this."

That was what Stina said next as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

22

“But it’s just that I know of one. That doesn’t mean it’s easy. I couldn’t do it, at least.” Stina shrugged.

That was the truth. She’d actually tried it before and failed. But she didn’t particularly enjoy boasting about her failures, so she wasn’t about to mention that.

“Hmm... May I ask how you know about it?”

“Sure. I mean, it’s nothing much. My dad just taught me.”

She didn’t know how *he* knew about it. It wouldn’t have been exactly accurate to say that she hadn’t been interested at the time...but that was basically it. She couldn’t know what she hadn’t been told.

“So what is this method specifically? Knowing that would make it easier to investigate who is involved.”

“Oh, well, the people who can do that are pretty limited. You have to step into God’s domain, after all.”

“God’s...? What do you mean?” Sierra asked after a pause, apparently having been shocked into silence for a moment. That was probably simply because Stina had used the word “God...” but Stina pretended not to realize that and continued.

“It means what it sounds like. Soma said it was probably someone sacrificing miscellaneous monsters to summon a powerful one, but I don’t think that’s technically correct. Technically, they probably made it so that powerful monsters appear in place of those common monsters. That’s only if my guess is right, though.”

“Oh? The way you put it... Are you familiar with the ecology of monsters?” Soma asked.

“Nearly nothing about it is confirmed, right?” Felicia asked him.

“No, not even how they reproduce...or whether they have a need to.”

That was certainly the general perception. All that was known for certain was that monsters never went extinct, no matter how many were killed. They would always return to their prior numbers over time. However, if enough were killed, they would not be seen for a while, so it was said that maybe that number of monsters lived in hiding somewhere.

But that didn't mean anything, really. Simply...

“Yeah, I know about it. I mean, all it is is God's power. Monsters work like that because God manages them.”

More specifically, God's power made it so that they were managed that way, but it was as Stina said for all intents and purposes. Either way, it was God who managed the monsters.

“So you're saying that that power creates monsters?”

“How should I know? Probably, I guess. I don't know how else they'd respawn like that.”

“If that's true...why don't people know?” Sierra asked.

“I dunno. What's it to me? I can kind of imagine why, though. Actually, that power used to belong to the Archdevil. And then there was a time when it was illegal to speak the Archdevil's name, so a lot of documents got lost then. This was probably in those.”

“Hmm... It 'used to' belong to the Archdevil.”

“Ah... *That's* what you react to? You were supposed to let that part go.”

This was just another Soma moment—he picked out precisely the information he needed from within a slew of it. Sometimes he seemed to act on nothing more than on intuition, but he could be sharp at times like this, which made him hard to get the better of.

“Well, based on what you've said, I gather that there are conditions, but it can be done. Someone, or something, would have to inherit that power and use it somehow. It isn't especially hard to reach that conclusion.”

“No, it's pretty hard. I mean, those two can hardly keep up.”

“I’m sorry... I’ll come to an understanding when I have time to put all of this together, but right now it’s all I can do to keep track of this new information.”

“Mm-hmm... I only kind of get it so far.”

If anything, *that* was normal...no, not even normal. Being able to achieve that much made them gifted.

Stina could only talk about the subject like this because she was familiar with it, but it had taken her years to internalize that knowledge. She wouldn’t have been able to keep up if she hadn’t already known about it.

But that was normal. She was talking about divine powers, after all. Most people wouldn’t know about that, and they wouldn’t be able to understand it quickly.

It was Soma, who could not only keep up with her but even get ahead, who was abnormal.

“Well, I already knew that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind. And your guess was right, by the way. That power is in the form of a magical tool now...well, maybe it’s too powerful to be called that, but it’s an object either way. But using it takes an inborn power that’s separate from Skills.”

“And you said you weren’t able to do it, so you mean that you weren’t able to use that object?” Felicia asked.

“Exactly.”

“Where is it...?” Sierra asked.

“I last saw it in storage at the Dark Lord’s castle. I doubt it’s there anymore, though.”

“In other words...the Dark Lord is involved with this?” Soma asked.

“I don’t think *he* has anything to do with it personally. It probably got stolen.”

“Excuse me...? *Stolen?*” Felicia gave Stina a look of shock.

Stina just shrugged. She would have thought the same thing if she hadn’t

known about the circumstances.

“Oh, right, just for context—a year ago...no, two by now, there was a revolt at the castle.”

“There was?”

“Devils aren’t a monolith, after all. The people behind the revolt were the former Dark Lord’s faction. They attacked because they didn’t like the current regime.”

“Directly...?” Sierra asked.

“Directly. It was plain to see they were going to fail doing that...but they stuck with it longer than expected. And some of them attacked the storage in the confusion. So they didn’t succeed, exactly, but they stole a few things.”

She was unsure how much to tell them as she proceeded, but she figured it was fine as long as she didn’t touch on the heart of the matter. Not even all of the devils knew about this, but Aina was on Soma’s side. When Aina came back, someone would naturally tell her about it, so there was no point hiding it. In fact, it would be best to give them an overview rather than look suspicious by hiding it.

“Do you know what was stolen?” Felicia asked. “It sounds like there was at least one thing that really shouldn’t have been stolen...”

“Everything in that storage was just as dangerous, after all.”

“As expected of the Dark Lord’s castle...”

“Hmm... That makes sense. May I ask what other things were there?”

“Oh... Let me think...”

Stina had been into the storage, but she hadn’t been able to tell what most of the objects were by looking at them. She’d only identified the item in question because she’d seen it before. She thought there were other things like it, though...

“I think there was something that could give you a Skill you didn’t have before or something?”

“A Skill you didn’t have before? Could that possibly include...magic?”

“Interesting...”

Soma and Sierra seemed unusually interested as soon as the words left Stina’s mouth; they looked like they wanted to lean in close. She shrugged them off.

“Well, it’s possible, but I wouldn’t advise trying it for any reason. Making the impossible possible requires an equivalent price.”

“Oh? I’m willing to accept that.”

“Even if you’re not the only one who has to pay the price?”

That seemed to make Sierra think twice. “Then...I wouldn’t.”

“Nor would I. I’m prepared to do anything if it gives me the ability to use magic, but that would be different.”

“I see...” Stina sighed softly, feeling a slight relief at their answers. Then, when she noticed her own reaction, her mouth twisted slightly into a self-mocking smile. This was quite convenient for her, after all.

With that in mind, she continued. “Back on topic... Seeing as they threw a bunch of things in haphazardly and the succession didn’t go well, they didn’t really have a good grasp on everything in the first place. Also, their direct attack got crushed, but some of the group survived, including some of the thieves.”

“Ah... Did they transition to guerrilla warfare?” Soma asked.

“Something like that. They started harassing us just when we were about to forget about them, so we’ve had to deal with that, and the succession wasn’t very smooth anyway, so we’ve had to put off handling the storage situation. We don’t even know what exactly happened, so it’s impossible to tell what was taken.”

Stina had been estranged from her family at that point and had only heard secondhand, but it had actually been quite a hard time.

Well, the revolt had happened when things had just begun to calm down. Although that had been by design, it must have been difficult for the other side.

As Stina was thinking back on that, Felicia put up a hand. “Um... I’ve had one

question in mind. Do you mind if I ask?”

“Sure, what is it? I mean, it’s just a general overview, so I’m sure there’s a lot you don’t know...but was there something you feel the need to ask about in particular?”

“Well, you’ve mentioned a ‘succession’ a couple times... Who was that succession from and to?”

“What? The winners take over from the ones they defeat. Isn’t that obvious? I mean, the Dark Lord’s supporters couldn’t just leave it at him being defeated. Someone had to take over everything they’d been doing. And it’s not like the Dark Lord commands the devils, technically. He’s more of a symbolic figure.”

“Wait... The Dark Lord was defeated?”

“Yeah, but that was over ten years ago.”

That meant it had taken over ten years for things to calm down, but that was only natural. Someone from outside the devils had defeated the Dark Lord and taken the position for himself, after all. They’d used the power of the Dark Lord’s bloodline and done a lot, but it was impressive that they’d managed to settle things down in that time.

Of course, it was because that process hadn’t been entirely complete that a revolt had been allowed to occur.

“Sierra... Have you heard about this?”

“No... First time hearing it.”

“Huh...?”

Now it was Stina’s turn to be confused. It had been a pretty big story, so she’d thought they would know about it as a matter of course.

“Soma, did you know?”

“Well, I suppose I didn’t, but I imagined that was the case. We were certainly never informed of it, at least.”

“Huh...”

Did that mean the devils had deliberately refrained from letting outsiders

know?

Well, that made sense now that she thought about it. Letting them know things were unstable would have been asking to be attacked. Keeping quiet until things calmed down had been their best course to avoid that risk.

“Sorry about that. Well, there you have it.”

“Yes... I understand now. Thank you,” Felicia said.

“No problem. I’m the one who didn’t mention it. So, uh, where was I?”

“I believe you’ve gone over just about everything.”

“Really? Huh, maybe I have... Well, basically, my idea is that somebody used something that probably got stolen then.”

Stina let out a sigh, tired from talking so much all at once.

Now that she’d told them all that, she wondered how much they’d gotten out of it. To be honest, the second half had been an unnecessary addition...

“Hmm... Well, if your guess is true, what do you think they’re doing with such a thing here?”

If Soma was asking that, he must have understood everything, which meant it had been worth talking about. Stina was glad...but she also let out a sigh.

“I’m only guessing, but I think it’s an experiment. This is a border town, so it isn’t a bad place to try things like that.”

“An...experiment, huh... So what would happen if someone used that power?” Felicia asked.

“Oh, I guess I never went into that. Well...the areas monsters spawn in are separated into blocks. We can’t see them or feel them, but they exist, and there’s a set type and number of monsters that will spawn in each one.”

The magical item with this power was capable of changing those values. However, it couldn’t do so at will; each area had a set capacity. Weak monsters used less of that capacity, so they could spawn in higher numbers, but stronger monsters took up more capacity and thus were limited.

“So...that’s really happening now?”

“I think so,” Stina replied to Sierra. “But I don’t see the point in doing that here, so I think it’s probably an experiment.”

“But why conduct that experiment?” Felicia said with disbelief.

“It’s probably the former Dark Lord’s faction that has it. Maybe they’re scheming to mess with the monsters around the castle and cause chaos that way or something. I doubt they could accomplish much that way, but if that was enough to stop them, they wouldn’t have revolted in the first place.”

“And you’re saying that they can use it because...there happened to be someone with that capability in their ranks?” Soma asked.

“That’s my best guess. Maybe they’re grasping at straws and got lucky with it.”

Stina was half making things up as she went along, but that was actually plausible. If they’d known for a long time that they could use it, then she would have known too.

“So this tells us that they’re likely using this item,” Felicia said. “Does it have any distinctive characteristics?”

“Well, it’s a black sphere about the size of your palm... I think I’ll know it if I see it, at least. Oh, and it can only influence nearby places, so it must be close. It’s probably in town, actually.”

“So...as long as we find it?” Sierra asked.

“Indeed. I was unsure what to do from here, but now that we know all of this, perhaps we should go so far as to do something about these troublemakers. The issue, then, is whether we should also notify the guild.”

“Well, we could...but that might make our job harder,” Stina replied.

“How about we take action on our own first and speak with the guild if we find we can’t do it ourselves?” Felicia suggested.

“Mm-hmm... Sounds good.”

“No objections here.”

“Got it. But what action exactly...”

After they had decided what their course of action would be starting tomorrow and had eaten dinner, a pleasant exhaustion had come over Stina. Once she'd returned to her room, she surrendered herself to it and collapsed into bed.

A sigh escaped her then, because along with her tiredness, she had the feeling that a lot had happened. This day had been unusually eventful.

And that wasn't just a feeling, she realized. It was a fact.

She'd obtained the thing she'd been after, been attacked by a monster, and had her life saved by Soma. Then he'd invited her to travel with his group...and before she'd made her decision, she'd gone back to town, looked for an inn, and had a strange encounter.

Soma seeing part of it; the girl getting oddly attached to her; deciding to travel with Soma's party; encountering an experiment by the former Dark Lord's faction...

"Too much has happened, actually."

That would have been a lot even for a month, and yet it had all happened in one day. She felt at risk of dying from event overdose.

And if she wasn't careful, things like this might happen again in the future.

"Honestly, what am I doing..."

By that, she meant multiple things. It was about everything she'd done today, herself for getting into it...and how she'd caught herself feeling a tiny bit content with this.

"Whatever," she said with a sigh. *"I'm really tired, so time to get to sleep."*

With that excuse to herself, she closed her eyes. Since she had genuinely been exhausted, her mind quickly drifted into darkness.

23

“Failed?” The man furrowed his brow, ruminating on the word he’d just heard. As he looked at the lowered head before him, he narrowed his eyes at this unthinkable outcome. “You don’t mean...there was interference?”

“I apologize... That is in fact what I mean,” the woman replied. “We attempted the abduction when the man lost focus for a moment, but when we entered the alley, we encountered a woman who we believe to be an adventurer...”

“Tch, yet another unlucky... Wait, a *woman*? Not multiple *women*?”

“Yes... One woman.”

That shocked the man, because they had sent at least three people. One of them had a Middle-Grade Skill and the others had Low-Grade Skills. They’d already made sure that there were no powerful adventurers in this town, so they shouldn’t have lost to a single person—in fact, they shouldn’t have lost even to multiple people. He’d assumed they must have abandoned the mission because of the attention it would inevitably draw, but...

“Don’t tell me...”

“We were helpless against her. It was over before it started—for all five of us. I think she must have had at least a High-Grade Skill.”

“There aren’t supposed to be any adventurers like that in this town... Does that mean she happened to be visiting? Tch, just our luck...”

If she really did have a High-Grade Skill, though, it was a godsend that they had managed to escape. Not even four Low-Grade allies would have been of any use against a High-Grade user.

“I’m impressed you got away unscathed, in that case. You don’t seem to be hurt.”

“It was for the best that we immediately abandoned the payload. She focused

her attention on that, which gave us a chance to slip away. The others sustained injuries, however, though not serious ones.”

“Considering she was High Grade, it’s enough that you all escaped with your lives.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He fully meant that; the failure was painful, but it was preferable to losing subordinates. And this mission couldn’t be called a complete failure either.

“Well, so be it. We may have failed, but we communicated our intent. And the fact that they haven’t shown themselves until now tells us that negotiations have broken down. What fools.”

“Honestly. Why not simply hand over a child who isn’t even yours? Fools, the both of them.”

“Especially seeing as he forsook his wife’s life to run here, only for us to find him anyway. Hmph, I guess in that sense, he’s unluckier than us.”

“And we were lucky to come across them when we came to do our experiment.”

“As well as to be able to use this.” The man took a black sphere from his pocket and idly spun it in his palm.

He’d thought it would all be over if their revolt failed...but life had brought many surprises. If they could use this and get what they were after, there was a lot left that they could do.

“But we can’t expect everything to go as planned. We can take this failure as a lesson in that regard and call it even. A lesson at the others’ expense, though, which is regrettable.”

“No, it’s true that we weren’t being careful enough after our recent successes. This was a good opportunity to refocus.”

“I see... How long do they need to heal?”

“Three...no, two days should be enough.”

“All right. Then in two days, we go in.”

“Are you sure...?”

She seemed surprised at his decision, probably because this would risk making enemies of not only the town but the guild itself. That was what it meant to attack the townspeople.

However...

“What’s the problem? I’ll go along with you. Even if that woman shows up again, logically, I shouldn’t lose as a fellow High-Grade user.”

“That does make me feel better about it, so thank you...but are you sure?”

“It’ll be fine. Two days will be more than enough for the experiment, and once we get what we’re after, we have no more business here. Even if it causes some disturbance, it’ll be better for us if we’re together.”

“Thank you. In that case, though, I almost pity the man.”

“Hmph. That’s what he gets for betraying us and ignoring our goodwill.”

“I suppose so. That reminds me... I think he’s running an inn now. What if there are guests?”

“No need to worry about them. If they get in our way, we can kill them, and if they run, we can let them go.”

It could potentially make a scene, but there was no need to be concerned about that either. If they used this thing to deploy some monsters, the locals wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. Making a scene might even make it easier to escape afterward.

If there was one thing that concerned him...it was the possibility that the town guild rep and the woman his underling had encountered would show up together. He couldn’t be sure of the outcome then.

But that wouldn’t happen. The idea was too pessimistic. They were on a winning streak right now; it would be dumb to get discouraged over one or two failures.

As the man convinced himself of that, he stood up.

“Well, we may have two days, but there’s a lot to do. You’d better get to

work.”

“Yes, you can count on me. I’ll make up for our failure.”

“Hmph, will you, now? Then I’ll hold you to that.”

“Yes, sir.”

He continued to walk, his underling alongside him, and left the area.

†

It was the morning of the next day.

After eating breakfast and heading out into town, Soma tilted his head at the atmosphere he was met with. It felt more on edge than the day before.

But even as he wondered about that, he turned to head away from the center of town. He was by himself right now as a result of the discussion yesterday, and his role didn’t include worrying about things like that.

However, Soma immediately learned the reason for the tension without meaning to. When he attempted to leave town from the east, he found two armed men blocking the exit. If they hadn’t been doing that for a valid reason, Soma naturally would have brushed them aside, but he could tell that wasn’t what was going on.

As the two watched him approach, they shouted at him.

“Exiting this town is currently prohibited! If you would like to know why or insist on leaving, see the adventurer’s guild! They will provide an explanation and permission to leave if deemed necessary! Nobody without a permit may leave! No exceptions!”

The crowd shouted objections to that sudden and unreasonable declaration, but the two just repeated the same words. Some people were attempting to leave, since it was morning, but none of them were being allowed through. When one man shouted that he was in a hurry and tried to force his way through, he was met with the tip of a spear. The guards seemed prepared to use force of arms if necessary.

“Hmm...”

Soma could tell the guild was responsible for this based on what the guards had yelled. However, while the guild was fundamentally a state agency, its job was, put simply, to manage adventurers. It didn't have the right to govern the town, especially not in a place like this with no definite nation. They couldn't possibly have the right to do this.

But there were a few exceptions. If the town had requested that the guild do so...or if the guild had deemed it necessary.

However, neither of the two would happen often. The latter in particular would require the guild to assume full responsibility. They wouldn't do that unless they deemed there was a severe emergency...so they must have determined that was the case here.

And Soma didn't have to think long about what had prompted that judgment.

"This escalated faster than I imagined..."

The catalyst must have been that shadowtaker that had appeared the day before. The guild must have deemed that there was a continued risk.

That judgment was correct, but Soma hadn't expected them to make it the very next day. He'd thought it would take two or three days. And if they were already so on top of things by now, maybe they had already made the judgment yesterday and recruited adventurers to bar anyone from leaving the town.

Yes, the armed men were clearly adventurers. Soma even thought he might have seen their faces the day before. There were a limited number of people the guild could use, so that was the correct choice considering that they may require military force.

"I suppose I underestimated them."

The guild rep had seemed lazy for the most part, but no average person could have accomplished so much so soon. This meant she was worthy of recognition as a rep.

"Well, for the time being..."

Soma couldn't leave now, so he had to visit the guild first. Under different circumstances, he would have checked outside town first and fought any

shadowtakers or similar monsters that appeared, but it didn't seem like there would be any huge problem if he didn't do that right now. It was also possible that the guild had more information now, so it wouldn't be a waste of time to stop by.

Well, he'd planned to go to the guild after looking around outside anyway, so he would just be switching the order. No problem.

With that judgment made, Soma turned his back to the continued commotion and began to walk down the path to the guild.

24

When Soma reached the guild, it was unusually crowded; there was a line stretching out the door.

Apparently, all of the exits and entrances to this town were blocked off. Soma could tell that a lot of the people in line weren't adventurers; many seemed to be merchants. The situation inside of the guild was so heated that he could hear screams and shouts from the outside.

But if the guild were quick to grant exceptions, it would defeat the purpose of taking such large-scale action. As Soma watched for several minutes, person after person left the guild looking either dejected or ghastly pale.

"All right, then..."

This wasn't the time for Soma to look on as a bystander. He had to get in this line and gain permission one way or another.

They'd come to several conclusions during their discussion yesterday, including the roles they would play, which weren't especially complicated. Soma's role was to keep an eye on the area just outside town and exterminate any monsters that appeared. The other three would search for the culprit. They'd split up like that because Soma alone could handle lookout duty and monsters, while the rest needed as much man power for the investigation as they could get.

That said, the other three were already investigating, so Soma couldn't dawdle here. While he was reluctant to get in line and wait, this was no time for complaints. In fact, the line had grown even longer as he watched.

"Well, I suppose I'd—oh?"

Soma stopped just as he was going to stand in line. Someone he recognized had exited the guild at that exact moment. He knew those cat ears—that was the receptionist. And she seemed anxious. As Soma looked and wondered what had happened, her eyes darted around frantically until they met his.

“Oh, so it *is* you. Um, sorry to bother you, but would you mind coming with me?”

She seemed to be speaking to Soma, but it would be embarrassing if she wasn't. Just to be safe, he glanced around and checked behind him, but he didn't see anybody else he thought she might be addressing.

“Hmm... Am I correct in assuming that you're speaking to me?”

“Yes, you are.”

So he'd been right, but he still couldn't gauge her intent. He didn't recall doing anything that would lead to him being summoned...but if she would let him skip the line and come inside, that was exactly what he wanted. Since he had no reason to refuse, he obediently nodded, and the receptionist took him inside as the adventurers standing in line shot him doubtful and envious looks.

†

As Soma had suspected, he was taken not to the reception desk but into the back. They proceeded into what seemed to be an employee-only area and reached a room of considerable size. There was one table with two sofas on either side of it, facing each other; this was probably a drawing room.

But nobody was in it at the moment. Soma wondered whether the receptionist who had brought him here would sit down, but then...

“Hey! Sorry I'm late. I didn't think you'd show up so early. I was just chill—uh, working.”

Soma turned to face the familiar voice. It was the guild rep. Although he wouldn't have called that completely unexpected, she'd been low on the list of people he had expected to show up, so he was surprised to see her. The rep was meeting with him in private while the guild wasn't letting anyone leave town—Soma wasn't too dense to pick up on what that implied.

“No, I only just arrived as well, so this is perfect timing.”

“Oh, you did? Good. Kind of makes it sound like we're meeting up for a date, though.”

“Hey, rep... Remember our talk?” the receptionist hissed.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’ll take this seriously. So, as you can see, I can’t mess around too much or I’ll get a scolding... Isn’t it weird that I’m supposed to be on top here and yet I get scolded? But whatever. Go on, have a seat. This won’t be long.”

Soma had no reason to refuse after coming here. In a sense, it would save him effort to stay. Obeying the rep’s request, he sat on the sofa on the right, and the rep subsequently sat down on the left sofa. Soma had wondered what the receptionist would do, and she moved behind the receptionist and stayed standing. It gave the strange impression that she was at once acting as secretary and surveilling the rep. That may have been because her eyes were pointed not toward Soma but toward the top of the rep’s head.

“Hey, I’m getting this weird feeling like I’m being watched. Is it in my head?”

“It is, so get on with it,” the receptionist hissed. “He and I have things to do, unlike you.”

“Ohh? You’re disrespecting me too much, eh? Well, that makes things easier for me, so it’s fine.”

As Soma wondered if it really was fine, the rep stuck a hand into her pocket and pulled something out. It was a rectangular object the size of her palm that appeared to be made out of wood. He couldn’t tell what it was at a glance...but as he was making his guesses, the rep handed it to him.

“Here you go. It’s a pass to get out of town. The guards should let you right through if you show it to them. I don’t mind if you lose it, since it’s not made of anything expensive, but it’d be a pain to remake, so try not to.”

“Hmm... Are you sure?”

“Ooh, you don’t seem fazed at all. I’m impressed.”

“I surmised why I’d been called here while I was on my way, and when I saw you, I became almost certain of it. You would like me to use that to leave town, check on the surrounding area, and, if I encounter any monsters of the same kind as before, exterminate them, correct?”

“Wow, that saves me some time talking! Lucky. Well, I wasn’t going to ask you to go as far as *exterminating* them, to be honest.”

In other words, they'd reached a similar conclusion to Soma's group. There were dangerous monsters outside that couldn't be dealt with using the town's current military power, so they would block off the town and leave the outside to someone who could handle it. It would cause discontent, but since there was the risk of someone getting killed, it was better than standing on the sidelines biting their nails.

Soma had surmised as much for one simple reason: he'd planned to suggest that very thing after he was done surveying outside the town. He'd been prepared for the possibility they wouldn't give it the slightest consideration, but they'd come to that conclusion before he'd even shown up. He really must have underestimated them.

As Soma took the pass, he sighed quietly. "I suppose this tells me I have room to improve."

"Huh? Uh, does that mean you can't do it? It *was* a sudden request..."

"Maybe it's because you're too arrogant," the receptionist replied. "Come on, get on the ground and beg for it. That's about all you're good for, after all."

"Dammit, I'd better fire this receptionist sometime soon."

"Go for it, if you can keep this guild running."

"Dammit..."

"So may I assume this is a quest assigned to me?" Soma asked, ignoring the drama. Both of them turned to look at him.

He'd originally planned to suggest this himself, but that was one thing and this was another. It would be ideal if he could get a reward out of this, and that would be rational as well given that they had been the ones to ask him.

"Yeah, I guess it would be. Things are too unclear to give you a quest sheet, but I think we can make it worth your while. You'll just have to trust me on that, though."

"Hmm, I have no problem with that... What work period did you have in mind?"

"Well... A month at most, I guess. We put in a request for emergency help

from the main branch, so we should have things under control by then. We have food and supplies, so we can manage without leaving town until then.”

“Although the townspeople won’t be happy,” the receptionist mewed.

“They’ll just have to put up with it. We’ve been explaining to whoever comes, after all.”

“Oh, speaking of which, would it be possible to inform everyone at once?” Soma asked. “I imagine that would reduce their discontent as well as ease the situation here.”

“But all we know right now is that the usual monsters are gone and a really strong one showed up instead. We don’t even know if this situation is natural or if someone caused it. Informing everyone would only cause unnecessary worry.”

“Hence only informing those who are directly affected and come to ask...” It made sense to Soma, so he nodded. Whether the inhabitants of this town would accept that explanation was another story, but it wasn’t a bad one considering the current situation.

“You got it. Oh, and if you have any other questions, I’d be happy to answer. I’m giving you a quest, after all.”

“Other questions... I don’t believe... Ah, no, I do have one. Why did you assign this quest to me? I understand that it’s because of what happened yesterday, but in that case, I would have expected you to hire my group as a whole...and yet you gave this to me alone.”

He’d wondered about this conversation and how the two were treating him. He hadn’t told them who had defeated the monster, but the two of them had decided to give this quest to Soma and Soma alone as if that was the obvious choice.

“Hmm, not really sure how to answer that... Because we could tell, I guess. Your whole group seemed good, but you’re a head above.”

“Hmm...” Soma turned to look at the receptionist; she nodded. That meant what the rep said was accurate. They could tell that without even seeing him fight... Such was proof that the devils valued power above all else, he thought.

“So is that all you wanted to ask?”

“Well... I should have no problem for the time being. If something concerning happens, I’ll come to report it, and I can ask any further questions at that time.”

“Gotcha. Well, I don’t think it’ll be me you’re asking, then!” the rep said as she stood up. She extended her hand toward him, probably in place of a contract.

Well, at least this had resolved one of his concerns, Soma thought as he shook her hand.

After leaving the guild, Soma headed directly eastward. The direction he went didn't really matter, but he was curious what had happened since he'd left.

However, the scene he saw when he arrived was hardly any different. The adventurers were holding back people trying to force their way outside, and yells were ringing out. It looked like it would be a pain to go over there, but he had no choice.

Soma let out a sigh and headed over...but got through faster than he'd expected. As soon as he showed the pass, the men let him out. It was so sudden that even the people who had been arguing with them were stunned momentarily. Immediately after, however, Soma heard them shouting, demanding to know why he'd been let through...but that had nothing to do with him anymore.

"Hmm... That was very smooth, even for having discussed it beforehand."

The fact that it had gone so smoothly was curious, in fact, but that wasn't a problem for him. Soma muttered that it was fine...but then turned around.

That wasn't because he was concerned about the ease with which he'd left. He was focused further ahead than that.

"I wonder how the others are doing..."

Nothing had gone for Soma as he had expected. He couldn't rule out the possibility that similar things were happening to them.

But even with that in mind, Soma turned to face forward again. He trusted the three enough to have faith that they would be all right no matter what happened, so it wasn't his role to stop and worry about what was going on back there.

Soma continued forward to accomplish what he had to do.

To make a long story short, the investigation in town was going badly.

That wasn't because anything unexpected had happened, though. If anything, it was going badly because everything was as they'd thought it would be.

They didn't know anything about the person they were looking for; all they knew was that this person probably had a particular magical item. And they couldn't exactly search from inside their room, so they'd gone outside, but their target wouldn't be carrying the magical item around in plain sight. They would have to narrow down where the item was being used, but if they could have done that, they wouldn't have had to search in the first place.

So their actions were limited here. They could walk around and look everywhere they could, or they could wait to stumble upon a lead.

In other words...

"This is boring me to death."

Stina's murmur summed it up concisely.

To their right and left, all they saw were the same buildings as ever. They didn't *not* look suspicious, but they didn't particularly look suspicious either. It was just a completely normal area. They'd been looking at scenes just like this ever since their investigation began, so they couldn't help a muttered complaint or two.

"Well, we knew what we were getting ourselves into."

Stina glanced over at Felicia, who had said that, but even she looked sick of this.

So Stina shrugged in response. "Yeah, I guess we did."

She'd been the one to suggest this in the first place, actually. One could have said she was simply reaping what she'd sown...and if she hadn't complained, someone else would have. That was just how inescapably dull this was.

Well, that was only natural, since all they were doing was walking. That was why both Felicia and Sierra expressed agreement.

"Mm-hmm, it's boring...but predictable. And better than what Soma suggested."

“Oh... He said to barge into any place that looked suspicious, right? He’s not some musclehead, so how come he can be so *dumb* sometimes?”

“And when I asked how we should judge which places look suspicious, he said to use our guts... That is just like Soma in a way, I suppose.” Felicia sighed.

“Mm-hmm...and he’d fix the problem that way.”

The scary thing was that Sierra was right. Several times before, Soma had prevented, as if by destiny, events that would have turned into a train wreck if left to play out, even though he shouldn’t have known how. Stina was well aware of that, and that was just how Soma’s intuition worked. No idiot would have been capable of that.

But that didn’t mean they could really rely on intuition, which was why they had no choice but to do this the boring way.

“Well, I think we’re done with this area,” Stina remarked.

“Yes...”

“Huh?”

Stina responded with confusion because she sensed a certain gloom in Felicia’s reply. When she looked over, she detected something apart from the tiredness she’d picked up before.

But Stina shrugged. Even though Felicia’s face was hidden like normal, Stina had a good idea what she was thinking. “Hey, no use overthinking it. It’s ultimately none of our business, anyway.”

Felicia must have realized from those words that her thoughts had been obvious. She seemed to try to say something but then gave the impression of a wry smile and relaxed. “I know... I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Also...”

Stina had been about to say she knew how Felicia felt, but she stopped herself. There would have been no point in saying that.

Instead, she glanced around and sighed quietly. As mentioned before, the scenery around them was plain. The building in front of her was more run-down than the inn they were staying at. It was the kind of place that made her worry

about the risk of collapse even before getting to how suspicious it was.

However, the problem was that it was relatively good compared to the buildings they'd passed. These weren't abandoned buildings either; people were currently living in them. Stina would have called it a slum if she was being careful with her words or a dump if she wasn't.

They'd gone to the southernmost part of town, then continued into a back alley. However, such scenes as this weren't uncommon; they probably existed in every town.

Only limited settlements like villages wouldn't have places like this, since they didn't have the room. Only the lowest in society would live somewhere like this, and a small village wouldn't be able to support them. Thus, those people headed for larger towns such as this one, and most of them got eaten by monsters on their way, but the ones who were lucky enough to make it ended up in these places. Eventually they went away or crawled up the ladder, but sooner or later new people would replace them. That cycle was why places like this never went away.

And that was what made them the perfect places for hiding or plotting. It was the ideal place to start their investigation.

However, knowledge was one thing and experience was another. While she must have known intellectually that it would be like this, it wasn't hard to imagine Felicia's shock at seeing it for the first time.

But Stina only shrugged at that. Doing something about it was Sierra or Soma's job. Stina wasn't even really part of their group, so her job was to look for things the other two would overlook and get clues that way...

"Mm?"

A shadowy figure crossed her peripheral vision.

That in itself was no wonder; while there were a lot of people of uncertain status, people did live here, as previously described. Adventurers also lived nearby, albeit in better locations, so it was only natural that people would be out and about.

But if Stina's eyes hadn't deceived her, she recognized that person.

“One second, you two.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Found something...?”

Sierra’s voice rose in pitch at the end as though she was asking a question, but actually, she seemed quite certain. Stina smiled wryly; while Soma was scary, this girl was plenty scary herself. Well, maybe that made her reliable in a situation like this.

With that in mind, Stina nodded. “Yeah. I don’t know if it’s related to what’s going on...but definitely something.”

“I see... Well, we have no other leads at the moment.”

“Mm-hmm... Up to you, Stina.”

She smiled wryly again, glad that that had been resolved quickly, then nodded again and quickly began to move.

Naturally, she was heading in the same direction the shadowy figure had gone. They didn’t seem to have noticed her—they would have run away if they had—so Stina proceeded stealthily and peeked around the corner with just one eye. She saw the same person at the end of the road, their back turned to her.

“That person? Well, they certainly look suspicious...”

“Yeah, they definitely are.”

They were completely shrouded in a black hooded robe, after all. If that wasn’t suspicious, what was?

Stina knew what Felicia meant, though. Although Felicia and Sierra’s robes were white, they appeared much the same way. She was probably hesitant to judge it as suspicious.

But Stina had to make that judgment nevertheless. She couldn’t let this person go out of consideration for Felicia and Sierra... She recognized them, after all.

“If I had to say...they look suspicious,” Sierra said. “And kind of nervous.”

“We don’t have time, so I’ll leave out the details...but I caught them up to no

good recently.”

She’d only seen them for a few seconds but hadn’t forgotten what they looked like. While she hadn’t meant to kill them in the first place, she’d accidentally let them escape unscathed, so she couldn’t forget how they’d looked running away...and that was what she saw right now.

Of course, they were wearing a black robe, so she couldn’t say for sure they weren’t someone else of a similar height and build. But in this place and scenario...even if it was someone else, that was no reason to overlook that they were clearly up to something.

To be honest, Stina didn’t think they had anything to do with the monster situation. She’d only heard a little, but what she’d heard made her think that was separate.

But that didn’t mean she should ignore this. If this was the same person and she ignored them, then that little girl...

“Not that I care about that... None of my business.”

“Excuse me? I didn’t catch that.”

“Never mind. I was just talking to myself. Anyway, we have to follow them.”

The layout of this area wasn’t too complicated, but they had to wait until this person turned a corner so that they wouldn’t be spotted. If they were too slow, they would lose sight of them.

“Mm-hmm... Hurry.” Sierra had been looking intently at Stina but now turned to look ahead, at which Stina let out a sigh of relief.

Being careful not to make any noise, Stina chased after the figure.

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As Stina followed the robed man, she tilted her head in puzzlement. She thought the direction he was heading was odd.

“Where do you think he’s going?” she asked the other two.

“Out of town...?” Felicia responded. “But that would be an odd path to take there.”

“Mm-hmm... But it doesn’t look like he’s heading toward a building either.”

“That’s what I thought...”

This town had a wall. It wrapped around the town, separating the inside from the outside. Despite the anti-monster barrier, it would have been hard to feel safe if everyone could see what was going on outside it, and they couldn’t rule out the possibility of the barrier failing. That was why most towns in this world had walls around them.

And it was for that reason that one had to use the gates in order to enter or exit the town. The wall was less than twenty meters tall, so it would have been possible to climb over if someone tried, but just about nobody did. It would save them the toll, but they would be fined many times that if caught, and the risk of being caught was quite high. Since the toll was low in the first place, it was better to just pay it rather than take that risk.

As for those gates, there were four in this town, at the north, south, east, and west. But the man didn’t seem to be heading toward any of them. They were currently in the southwest, so if he was trying to leave, he should have headed to either the west or south gate...but he appeared to be moving toward the midpoint between them.

“Could he be planning to scale the wall...?” Felicia asked.

“That’s possible, but...”

The wall wasn’t so tall that it was impossible to climb over, but the chances of

being caught were high, so it was high risk and low reward.

However, there *was* a reward for climbing over the wall. Passing through the gates guaranteed that somebody would see your face. There were exceptions, of course, such as Sierra and Felicia; it was enough for someone in your travel group to show their face, so there were ways to get around it. But that wasn't possible if you were alone, and either way, it was easy for your identity to be detected.

That was highly inconvenient...if you were a criminal who didn't want to be reported to authorities in other towns. Someone like that would figure out some way to climb over the wall if they wanted to get into town, and there were in fact methods to do it without getting caught. They weren't known among ordinary people, of course, but criminals and other people in the underworld would have networks that shared information like that. Stina knew of a few herself.

The only thing was that this wall had been built in the time of the former Dark Lord. Between that and the nature of this town, there shouldn't have been any secret way out.

"I think the wall is right there... What now?" Sierra asked.

If they continued to trail him around corners like this, then as soon as he got to the other side of the wall, by climbing or otherwise, they would lose sight of him. And Stina's assessment matched Sierra's; the wall was right around that corner. They were likely to lose him.

"Right, well... Wait, you're leaving it up to me?"

"We already have," Felicia pointed out. "You were the one who decided to follow him."

"Mm-hmm... Already have."

They were right when they put it like that...but Stina smiled crookedly at the looks the two were giving her. Sierra seemed certain, and while Felicia's look carried a slight distrust, she wouldn't have allowed Stina to take charge if she really didn't trust her. That was probably because it was Felicia's role to trust the others, and she hadn't forgotten it even now...but that didn't change that

she was being exceptionally trusting.

Stina sighed, thinking that *everyone* was so trusting...and that she'd never thought she herself could be so trusting.

But it was too late to reconsider now. She squinted toward the back in front of her, then made her decision.

"Well... If he spots us, then we'll just have to change plans and capture him."

"Understood."

"Got it."



They'd been tailing him in order to ascertain what he was doing, which was why they'd left him to his own devices, but this would be better than losing him.

Actually...Stina hadn't told the other two why she thought the man was up to no good, but neither of them had hesitated to agree.

She smiled wryly again and emerged from behind the corner. She could only pray that he wouldn't notice her now.

She breathed in, then out, and watched his back intently. Finally, it disappeared around the corner.

"Now!"

The three leapt out at Stina's signal. Sierra ended up in front, with Stina slightly behind and Felicia even farther behind, but that was inevitable and irrelevant. All that mattered was that at least one of them could see that man.

However, moving at this speed meant they couldn't remain completely silent. It was likely he would notice them, and then they would have to change course and capture him.

Ultimately, Sierra reached the wall first and stopped. She hadn't moved to capture him, so he must not have noticed her...or maybe he had and she hadn't been able to catch him in time.

Stina caught up a few seconds later and stood next to Sierra, looking at her with puzzlement. She seemed bewildered.

"What's up? I don't get the feeling you just lost sight of him..."

"Mm-mm... I watched him go."

"So he actually got out? I don't see any buildings he could've gone into."

"He left, but..."

As Sierra struggled to articulate something, Felicia finally caught up with them. It hadn't been very far, but her breathing was labored... Well, that was inevitable, given that a witch had just run as fast as she could to catch up to them. Since only one of them had needed to keep an eye on the man, Felicia

could have taken her time, but she wasn't that kind of person. Stina smiled wryly as she watched her approach.

"So..." Felicia huffed. "What...happened?"

"Take your time; catch your breath. I'm asking about that too, actually. So, I know he left, but why're you so confused?"

Stina wasn't trying to position herself above Sierra or anything; she just meant to say that if he'd left, they had to go too. Giving up here would defeat the purpose of following him. They couldn't exactly climb the wall themselves, but they could go through the gate...or so Stina thought, but then she realized they couldn't take that risk. There were nothing but grassy fields outside this town, so they wouldn't lose sight of him right away, but if he'd managed to get out in a place like this and they didn't know what he was trying to do, there were no guarantees of what would happen.

Sierra must have understood that too, but she still wasn't opening her mouth. She looked like she was struggling to grasp what she'd just witnessed.

"He...walked outside." That was the next thing she said. "He didn't climb or anything. He just walked. As if there was no wall."

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"So what was even up with that?"

As they headed toward the west gate, they were discussing what had just happened. Stina had chosen that direction arbitrarily; she'd questioned whether to go west or south and decided she just felt like going west. It had nothing to do with the fact that she'd have walked past run-down buildings again if they went to the south gate.

Anyway, they were talking about the wall that she'd just heard about from Sierra and checked personally...

"I checked, and it was a normal wall... Could he have used magic?" Felicia suggested.

"Didn't look like it..."

"City walls aren't supposed to respond to magic anyway... Oh, but it's possible

that particular area is an exception. I shouldn't try it myself, though, so we can't know for sure right away."

"You *shouldn't*? Do you mean you can use magic, Stina?"

"Yeah, a bit. I didn't bring it up before because I don't have any detection spells or anything."

"Mmh..."

Stina knew why Sierra was giving her that upset, envious look. She'd found out when she'd looked into the elves before. But knowing that would only make her look suspicious, since Sierra hadn't told her. Stina thought the others might not even mind at this point, but she pretended not to know anyway just to be safe and feigned confusion.

"Hmmm... The only other thing I can think of is some kind of special trick. Did he make any unusual movements?"

"Not as far as I saw... But he was muttering something," Sierra added. "Maybe that was magic?"

"If that's all, then that still leaves the possibility it was a trick he set up. Well, I guess it doesn't really matter which."

It was baffling, but knowing that didn't change anything for them. If it had been some kind of hole that he'd made to look like a wall, they could have gone through it, but they couldn't, so they would just go through the gate and chase him.

Or so Stina thought...

"Excuse me? We can't get through?"

"As I said, you need permission to pass. The guild will explain the circumstances and issue permission if deemed necessary. That is all. On your way, now."

But they were curtly turned away; the guard even shooed them. It irritated Stina, frankly, but it was clear that discussion wouldn't get them anywhere. She had no choice but to obediently stand back. It would have been possible for her to force her way through...but it was questionable whether this situation

warranted that.

“What should we do now...?” Felicia asked.

“Give up...?”

“I guess we have to. We won’t catch him if we have to go to the guild first, and I doubt they’d give us permission anyway.”

Well, maybe the guild would give them permission if they told them about what was going on...but Stina hadn’t even told the others everything because she didn’t want them to make a big deal about it. But maybe she should, considering that girl...

“No, who cares what happens to them...”

“Stina...?”

“Sorry, it’s nothing. Well...this is too bad, but time to give up on that man. Let’s keep looking. We can search this side while we’re here.”

“Mm-hmm... Got it.”

“Understood. But...if things are already like this, could it be that Soma did something?” Felicia asked.

“Not even Soma could do something that fast... At least, I don’t think he could.”

Stina couldn’t rule it out, but it was implausible. There was a more natural conclusion to reach.

“The people at the guild...must be better than we thought,” Sierra concluded.

“Must be,” Stina agreed.

“But in that case...do you think Soma managed to make it out all right?”

“Probably...”

Stina agreed. She thought Soma would have been able to get outside somehow, even without force. And although Felicia was voicing uncertainty, she appeared to feel the same, nodding with a crooked smile.

“Well... I guess we should worry about ourselves before him. It doesn’t look

like we're likely to find any leads at this rate."

"It's a shame that we lost that one...but we can't change that now."

"Mm-hmm... Let's do what we can."

They glanced back toward the southwest, but Felicia was right that there was nothing more they could do about that man. Facing forward again, the three resumed their search.

Soma returned to the inn after making three round trips between the area outside town and the guild. He'd gone back to the guild after every time he investigated outside to trade information. Well, one factor was that on his first trip out, he'd come across a gift to give them, but the biggest factor was that neither he nor they knew nearly enough about the situation. Anything they could learn was valuable.

However, to make a long story short, he hadn't gained much from them...but he'd needed to go back at least once because of the gift he'd found, and considering that he thought he should stop by after his last round to thank them, it hadn't been much extra work for him. Nothing to pay any mind to.

That aside, when he came back to the inn, the other three were already there. That meant he and they had to report how their respective missions had gone...but the sun was already beginning to set. That was why they decided to share over a meal in the dining room.

"Well, that would be all that I have to share."

Soma didn't have much to report, though. He'd made three trips and ventured quite far from the town on the final one, but he hadn't found anything unusual. All he'd accomplished was to strengthen his confidence in the deduction he'd made the day before—he'd spotted another monster like the one he'd seen previously. That made him certain that this situation was man-made, but that wasn't especially important; he'd already been acting under that assumption. Since he hadn't found any clues to solve it...

"Ah, however... I may not be able to call it a clue, but it isn't the case that there was nothing at all."

"You discovered something?"

"I would say I happened upon it rather than discovered it."

He was talking about his first trip. He hadn't encountered a single monster

since leaving town, and just when he'd been thinking to himself that he wished he had more to do, he'd sensed both a person and a monster.

If his deduction was accurate, then that person would probably have been in danger, so he'd hurried over...but he'd been met with an unexpected scene. He'd seen a motionless monster and a person in a black robe standing at a distance from it.

At first, Soma had thought that person had defeated the monster, but his intuition had said otherwise, so he'd concluded that this monster must be the kind that was docile unless disturbed...which meant the issue was this robed person.

They had looked incredibly suspicious, but Soma wasn't one to talk, frankly. Thinking they must have some reason, Soma had wondered what to do, but before he could say anything, the person had noticed him. Soma had thought that was the perfect time to ask what they were up to...but for some reason, they'd scoffed and then abruptly attacked.

"So of course you won, right?"

"I don't understand why you take that as a foregone conclusion...but yes, to make a long story short, I did."

"Why did they attack...?" Sierra asked.

"I wonder about that myself."

"Wait, did you go overboard and kill them?!" Stina exclaimed.

"What kind of person do you think I am?"

He hadn't even meant to knock them unconscious, let alone kill them. He'd thought he would simply render them powerless and had pushed them to the ground.

"And...you went overboard and sent them flying?"

"That might actually have been better, in the sense that it would have been easier to understand."

"What do you mean...?" Sierra asked.

“They immediately lost consciousness, and I was unable to wake them however I tried.”

Soma had immediately brought them to the guild because they were clearly up to no good, but they hadn't regained consciousness even by his last visit to the guild. That had been his “present” to the guild, incidentally, but given the situation, it was questionable whether it really counted as a present.

“Because they hit their head?” Stina asked.

“No, I knocked them over onto their front in such a way that only their abdomen would make impact with the ground, so that shouldn't be a possibility.”

“That sounds like it'd really hurt... But why'd they get knocked out immediately, then?”

“It would save us some trouble if I knew why...but their mouth appeared to move immediately after I knocked them down. It was as if they were swallowing something.”

“Drugs...?”

“That is highly likely.”

All interrogation methods required the target to be conscious, so on occasion, someone would fake death or induce sleep in themselves to prevent that. Of course, the world in which such things happened was quite far from that of the average person.

“That makes them even more of a suspect.”

“Yes, that in itself was tantamount to a confession. However, it means that they wanted to prevent themselves from giving away any more information, even if it meant making their guilt obvious. And moreover, they will wake up eventually.”

“So they were trying to do something within the next few days?”

“Either that, or they had already done something and were attempting to escape within the next few days.”

That would mean that it wouldn't be a problem if they were caught after

everything was already over. And Soma was familiar with something that that would apply to.

“Is it related to what’s going on...?”

“The guild determined it is, at least.”

It had served as grounds to strengthen their conviction that this was the work of a human. It was because they’d made that assumption in the first place that they had blocked off the town, but this would make good evidence to persuade others of that.

“I must say, though, you three seem strangely invested in this.”

“Well... Before we go into that, may I ask where you found this robed person?” Felicia asked.

“Hmm, all right... I believe it was south of town. More specifically, approximately one kilometer to the southwest.”

The three girls looked at each other and nodded. They then turned back to the puzzled Soma and began to describe what they’d experienced today and the person they’d spotted.

“I see... So you also found a person in a black robe, and they escaped to the southwest,” Soma responded.

“I think it’s probably the same person.”

“Well, it would be difficult to argue that it was a coincidence. The timing matches, after all.”

“So the question is whether they’re really involved. Even if they are, we can’t get that information from them anymore... But I guess there’s no use saying that at this point.”

“Mm-hmm... None of us are responsible...and all of us are.”

“I appreciate you saying so.”

It was enough that they’d learned that something might happen within the next few days. That meant they couldn’t be sure they could take their time, but rushing wouldn’t accomplish anything either. It was also possible that nothing

would happen and the fuss would die down. That would cause a different kind of trouble, but it was nothing for Soma to be concerned about. What he had to think about right now was the solution to the current problem, nothing more and nothing less.

“Hmm... Is that all we have to report to each other?”

“Yes... I suppose there weren’t many developments,” Felicia replied.

“Yeah, nothing we can do about that. We don’t have any leads. And the guild seems to act fast, so I think we should just do what we can.”

“Mm-hmm... What Stina said.”

“This is true.”

Just as they came to a stopping point in their conversation, they were served dessert, as if the innkeeper had been waiting for them to pause. It was a pure white frozen dessert—sorbet. This was only served at night, and they’d eaten it the day before too.

Soma scooped a spoonful into his mouth, and a refreshing flavor rushed through it. While the other dishes had tasted more than good enough to be worth the price, this was on another level; it was exquisite. To be honest, although much of the reason they had chosen to stay here again was to save themselves the trouble of finding another inn, about thirty percent was because they wanted to eat this again. That was how good it was.

“Mm... This is truly delicious.”

“Thank you. My daughter will be happy to hear that.”

Yes, apparently it was that little girl who made this. The owner made the other meals, but the girl was in charge of dessert. Soma had the urge to ask how it was made, but he doubted they would tell him.

“This alone is reason enough for more guests to stay here.”

“Ha ha... As a father, I’m proud to hear that, but we can’t make it in large quantities. We were satisfied with living like this, so we didn’t plan on doing anything about that in particular...”

“You say that in past tense... Are you planning to relocate to the main street?”

“No, as I told you yesterday, I’m not considering that... The opposite, actually. I’m thinking about shutting down.”

“Not enough guests...?” Sierra asked.

“No, for other reasons. In fact...if you four hadn’t come along, I would have closed up shop and been out of town by now.”

“Are we preventing you from doing so?”

“Oh, no... If that were the case, I would have turned you away. I thought maybe it’s fate that we crossed paths, and I wanted to show you as much hospitality as I can in the end before I close the inn.”

Soma didn’t see any insincerity in the owner’s face when he said that. While Soma felt like the owner was hiding something, what he said seemed to be true.

“That’s a shame,” Felicia replied. “The atmosphere here is very nice. But if you’ve already decided, then I suppose we won’t change your mind.”

“I’m really glad you think so... But yes, I’ve already committed to the decision. Hearing you say that at the very end, though, makes me think it was right to accept your business. And it’s likely that I wouldn’t have been able to leave today anyway.”

“Oh... So you know.”

“I overheard when I went to the store. It doesn’t have very much impact on those of us who stay inside...but it sounds like it’s causing a lot of stress.”

“It certainly is...”

Soma had heard at the guild that they didn’t plan to grant anyone permission to leave except for in very exceptional circumstances. Since they didn’t know who the culprit was, they hadn’t even given passes to merchants they had good relationships with. That meant it was true that the owner probably wouldn’t have been able to leave today if he’d tried, and it was also true that the town was under a lot of stress. It would have been acceptable if they’d known it would only last a few days, but they couldn’t be sure this would be over even after a week. Soma hoped he could do something about it by then...but this wasn’t a problem that could be solved by brute force, so he would just have to

see how things played out.

But considering that, it was interesting that Soma had gotten permission so easily. Had he seemed that harmless?

“They probably just didn’t want to get on your bad side,” Stina pointed out.

“Mm-hmm... Sounds right.”

“Or maybe they thought that Soma wouldn’t need to take this as slowly as they need to,” Felicia suggested. “He could wipe out a town like this in an instant, after all.”

“Also sounds right.”

“You three are being oddly rude to me today.”

Had something happened during their activities together, or were they just enjoying this kind of exchange? Soma was glad that they were getting along, but he wished they wouldn’t have fun at his expense.

With that in mind, Soma brought his last bite of sorbet to his mouth and shrugged off the laughter from the other three.

After finishing dinner, the group decided to gather in Soma's room. Although they were done reporting to each other, they still needed to discuss their plans for the next day. The owner might not have minded if they'd stayed in the dining room to do that, but they probably would have been a nuisance, so they were once again meeting here.

Nevertheless...

"Our attempts once again proved to be in vain today," Soma concluded.

"I guess so, since we didn't gain any info," Stina agreed.

"So we're going to do the same thing again tomorrow?" Felicia asked.

"Mm-hmm... We have to."

There was the possibility that they would once again accomplish nothing, of course. In fact, it was likely that they would find literally nothing. The guild was blocking the gates, after all, so they would have to get through the guild to exit town.

The culprit wouldn't be so stupid as to think nobody would suspect them, and they wouldn't walk around town in this situation either, especially now that it was known to the public. Considering that, today may have been their only opportunity...but it was too late now. Maybe that showed how careful the culprit had been.

Perhaps the culprit would hide away at this point, but that plan wasn't foolproof, and apparently there was a secret path out of town that the guild didn't know about. It was probable enough that they would try to exit that way.

Even if the man in the black robe was really involved with this and the guild realized that, there wasn't necessarily only one secret way out. In fact, it made more sense to assume there was more than one.

In any case, it was likely that they would be able to get out despite this

situation, so even if tomorrow's search turned up nothing, it wouldn't be meaningless in the true sense. They could just wait for the target to take action.

The guild probably had the same idea, and they must have known about the secret path out as well. Felicia's group hadn't told them about it yet, but they should have been able to deduce its existence from today's events.

That meant they could leave things to the guild, but then they themselves would have nothing to do. If they had been willing to let the guild do everything just because the guild was motivated to, then they would have done that from the beginning.

Also, even setting aside their investigation of the town, the guild probably couldn't do anything about the area outside town. While Soma had discovered that there were no useful clues there, there were still dangerous monsters to eradicate. Although the residents of this town wouldn't go out, there would be a few people visiting from outside. It was important to patrol outside town to prevent those people from being attacked.

"But I don't feel like that should be Soma's job," Stina remarked.

"Well, if nobody else is capable, then I have no choice but to accept it. And it would also be the ideal opportunity to check how this works." Soma turned to look at the sword leaned against the side of the bed.

The other three followed his gaze. It seemed they hadn't noticed it before.

"Oh, I remember you saying that you were having it repaired. I didn't know you already went to pick it up."

"How is it...?" Sierra asked.

"I dropped by on my way to the guild. I only just picked it up, but... It meets my expectations as far as I can tell. It may even exceed them."

"So...the new sword should be good too?"

"Yes... I have high expectations, to be honest."

The blacksmith himself had said that repairing this had sparked his motivation. He'd also told Soma that he wouldn't be able to come and pick it up right away, but Soma had said that was perfect if it meant the blacksmith would

take his time with it. That raised his expectations even higher.

“I would expect it to cost more money the more time it takes... I’m sorry, I know it’s impolite to talk about money, but I couldn’t help wondering about it,” Felicia said apologetically. “I don’t think you would be very concerned about that if it means he can make a better sword, though.”

“That is true, and I’m not worried about it in the first place. He said he only wants to do so for his own satisfaction.”

“That tells me what kind of a guy he is,” Stina commented. “About how much is it gonna be, though?”

“Well, he didn’t give me a quote. He told me that because he doesn’t know if he can make it to his satisfaction, he will determine the price after it’s finished.”

“I wouldn’t be happy with that... That means it depends on how he feels about it, doesn’t it?” Felicia asked.

“And he might rip you off,” Stina pointed out.

“I’m not worried about that. I plan to bring a large enough sum of money, and if it isn’t enough, I can earn more by doing quests for the guild.”

Soma wasn’t actually particularly concerned with that possibility, however. The blacksmith would probably only charge market price plus the cost of materials. In fact, depending on the quality, Soma might even end up thinking he was undercharging.

“And if you have extra...?” Sierra asked.

“Compensation is a measure of the value of what you’ve been given. If I’m satisfied with the product, I may pay extra, considering the labor he put into it. I expect to use it for a long time, after all.”

“I feel like I already know how this is going to turn out...”

“You’re imagining it.” Soma shrugged at Stina and Felicia, who were giving him weary looks. All he was saying was that he wanted to pay a fair price. There was nothing wrong with that. “That aside, does doing the same thing tomorrow work for everyone?”

“I don’t have any counterarguments...but I’d like to add one thing,” Felicia

said.

“Hmm... And that would be?”

“Like doing it early...?” Sierra asked.

“Yeah, that might work,” Stina agreed. “The guild probably doesn’t have definitive proof yet, so maybe if we act now...”

“I see... You have a point. The gates won’t be open if we leave too early, but in that case, I could search with you.”

“In that case... Can we start very early in the morning? Like around dawn?”

“Mm-hmm... Sounds good.”

“That’d be the perfect timing if we go straight to bed now... And I don’t have anything else to do, so I’m all right with that.”

So it was decided.

Felicia’s request probably represented what all of them were thinking. If they were going to do the same thing, then they wanted to change it up somehow. It wasn’t that they really thought something was going to happen...

“Well, I wonder...”

“Soma? Is something on your mind?” Felicia asked.

“I was just thinking...if the guild has the same idea, then they may treat us as suspects.”

“Ah... That does seem possible if things go like they did today.”

“But if that happens...then it happens.”

“We would have nothing to feel guilty about, so it would be no problem in my mind.”

They did look pretty suspicious, though.

As Soma spoke, he shrugged and turned his gaze toward the window. Wondering how this would really play out, he narrowed his eyes as if looking closely at the view.

“So he hasn’t come back.”

It was a quiet mutter in the dark. The man glanced around but didn’t see the usual face there. He narrowed his eyes toward the other person standing there as if in his place.

“Yes... Could that mean something happened outside?”

“It must. The question is why.”

Their original purpose had been to check whether their plan was going well. The man had gone to see for himself and confirmed that it was succeeding, but he hadn’t checked whether the magical item was active. However, that had the potential to turn into an issue later, so the man had gone back to check.

It wasn’t an issue if he’d been attacked by a monster. It would sting to lose a trusted ally, but at least there would be no risk of their plans being leaked.

The worst-case scenario was that someone had suspected him and captured him. That would make it likely that their actions would be exposed.

“I don’t think he would talk about us just to save his own skin...”

“I know. But he could still be forced to confess against his will.”

He’d taken sleeping drugs with him to prevent that, but their effect only lasted for a day. If he really was being held prisoner, then it was all over as soon as he woke up.

“What should we do? Do you think we should...put things on hold? Surely not.”

“Of course not. Our plan goes ahead unchanged. All we have to do is capture one thing in the form of a little girl. We have enough power for that.”

“Understood. In that case...should we move faster just to be safe? If we act now, we can make it in time.”

“Hmm...”

The man turned to look out the window. The dark of night had fallen. It would be several hours before dawn.

Their original plan had been to attack when the sun came up. They’d thought

that time of day, before the town had fully awoken, would give them the best odds.

However...

"No... Let's delay it."

"What? Why would we..."

"There are some odd characters staying at that inn tonight, right?"

"Yes, I think so. At least three of them, if I'm not mistaken."

"At least? Do you mean you don't know exactly how many?"

"Y-Yes... Two of them were covered in robes and appeared to be children... I-I'm sorry I don't know!"

"Well, whatever... If they're the type to stay at that inn, they can't pose much of a threat."

But numbers were numbers. They couldn't be sure they wouldn't cause a fuss.

If they were in perfect shape, they could have disregarded that, but they'd just lost their second strongest. One man should have been enough, but they needed to take the utmost caution.

"I understand... I'll let the others know."

"All right. I'm counting on you."

"Yes, sir." The underling left with a dipped head.

The man let out a small sigh. He narrowed his eyes toward the receding back for just a moment, then turned to look out the window.

"It's a shame we won't be able to share this joy with him...but it can't be helped. It's just that we've repeated the same thing as always, that's all... Nothing more. But that ends now."

As he muttered, he clutched the thing he kept in his pocket.

"As long as I have this... And if we use *that* as an offering, it's even more certain! Just you wait, former hero. It's our turn this time...!"

He scowled into the distance as if facing up to a challenge.

29

Just after the sun rose the next morning, Soma's party left the inn, as they'd planned the day before.

They hadn't eaten breakfast, however, nor were they planning to order somewhere else and save it for after they got back. The plan was to make one round of town, come back to eat breakfast if they didn't find any issues, and go back out when they were done.

As for lunch, the inn would prepare foods that were convenient to eat on the go, as they had yesterday. Soma's group would find somewhere to eat along the way. Yesterday, they'd eaten in a corner of the bar connected to the guild, but they weren't sure what they would do today. Probably they would end up eating somewhere random.

Regardless, they split into two groups as they had the day before and began to act according to their plan.

†

Some suspicious-looking men were walking around the south side of town. While their faces weren't hidden, all five of them were wearing full-body black robes.

But nobody questioned them, partly just because of the time but especially because of the location. The people in the south were mostly adventurers and others of that ilk. These men weren't worth their concern because they themselves looked no less suspicious.

So nothing was stopping these men from walking around...and yet they suddenly stopped. In front of them was a crossroads, and they heard voices faintly from the road to their left.

The man who had been walking in the lead turned around where he stood, just before the main street.

"Just to check one last time... You all know what to do, right?"

The other four nodded in confirmation. Nerves showed on their faces, probably because they were thinking of what they were about to do, or maybe even about what was to come after that.

Unless they made a huge blunder or something completely unforeseen happened, they couldn't fail, so it was only natural that they would think about what would happen once this was over.

But it wasn't over yet. From another perspective, it might have seemed as if they weren't taking this seriously.

The man decided not to point that out, however. It would have been another story if they were being careless, but they were showing a suitable amount of nerves. That could only work in their favor rather than against them, he judged.

So he nodded back and turned to face forward again. Aware of a sizable amount of excitement and nervousness within himself, he lifted one corner of his mouth just a little and began to run toward his destination.

†

To make a long story short, the guild was extremely busy that day, so much so that it could have been described as engulfed in tumult. This was despite the fact that it was early in the morning and the sun had only just risen.

The door to the building was tightly shut, but the employees were rushing around inside. Needless to say, that was because of the lockdown that had started the day before. They planned to keep it going, so they were preparing what was necessary for that as well as for the trouble that would likely arise as a result. There were countless tasks to carry out, including ones left unaddressed from the day before. It had been inevitable that things would end up like this.

And amid that, someone let out something between a groan and a complaint.

"Whew, I'm beat... Let's call it a day!"

"What're you talking about? We haven't even gotten started." Emily sighed, having expected this sooner or later. But since she'd expected it, she shouldn't have expected she would be able to change it just by saying that.

As Emily was putting together what she expected to happen today and how she would handle it, she got a look of undisguised dissatisfaction.

“Boo. Maybe we haven’t started yet today, but I’ve been working hard since yesterday...even the day before, actually.”

“So have I. All of us have.”

“So let’s all take a break. Someone’ll take care of it.”

If only that were true. They would have left it to someone else in the first place if they could have. But they had to work late into the night and then start again early in the morning tomorrow whether they wanted to or not.

“Well, you can prrrotest all you want, but you’re the one who’ll be in trouble later. Nobody’s going to help you with your work.”

“Dammit, I put in some effort for once and this is the thanks I get? My mistake for trying to—”

She stopped abruptly in the middle of her complaint when she sensed that this wasn’t the time for that.

Everybody there must have noticed too. The guild rep couldn’t have avoided noticing, no matter how she tried to fake incompetence.

It was a noise...a noise that they shouldn’t have heard here. That of a very loud explosion.

The judgment was quick.

“Everyone, continue your current duties. Those of you who know how to fight, stay aware of your surroundings.”

“Just more work to do... Well, I guess I don’t have to think about the bar, at least. What are you going to do, rep?”

“I’ll keep an eye out, I guess. I can’t imagine there’s anyone dumb enough to pick a fight with the guild...so this is probably some kind of attempt to distract us.”

“So if you do anything, it’ll be after the adventurers come in?”

“Yeah. It’ll probably be over by then, though.”

“Myeah...”

If the culprits had chosen this time deliberately, they would probably try to wrap things up before they ran into unnecessary trouble. That noise had been quite loud, so once the news got out, adventurers would probably come to the guild even if it was early...but it would be some time until then. Emily didn't know what the people responsible for the explosions were up to, but it was entirely possible that it was already too late to stop them, especially if they were doing something else right now.

“Can we afford to wait and see, though?”

“We don't have enough hands or power. I think it'll be okay, though. I just get that feeling.”

Those casual words loosened the tension that had filled the area. Everyone knew how dependable the rep's intuition was. The same went for Emily to some extent, but she couldn't help letting out a sigh anyway.

“Maybe it will... But we're still leaving it up to other people.”

“What's wrong with that, if the problem gets fixed?”

She had a point, but Emily still didn't fully accept it. She knew she wasn't about to change the rep's mind, though, so she sighed again and pushed the thought away.

At the same time, she thought of the people who must have triggered the rep's intuition.

“The issue is whether they're involved with this...”

“If so, then I'll be glad to not have to do that extra work. It'd make everything we've done pointless, though.”

“You've barely done anything today, so that doesn't affect you.”

And there was one other problem. Since the rep said so herself, this situation would most likely be resolved without the guild's intervention...but only in the end.

The rep's intuition was almost like foresight. It was so reliable, it was said to be the reason she'd earned the position of guild representative. So Emily could

trust it...but at the same time, all it meant was that things would be resolved in the end. It was entirely possible that someone would get hurt or killed in the process.

But there was nothing Emily could do with that knowledge. The most she could do, considering that the sound could very well have nothing to do with the lockdown, was continue her assigned work.

So she exhaled, praying that this would turn out to be nothing by the time it was over.

†

Hans, the owner of Glass Stop North, heard the sound while he was preparing breakfast.

That was why he didn't stop what he was doing. If what he'd heard was correct, his four guests would be back within thirty minutes or less. While his meals were simple, they weren't low effort. He couldn't pause and end up not being ready in time.

He would have been lying if he'd said he wasn't bothered, of course. It had sounded like it was rather nearby.

But he had more work left to do...and whatever was going on, it had nothing to do with him.

Well...he did have one concern, but he was sure he was overthinking it.

She'd said it herself, after all—his daughter had just happened to get lost. She hadn't been abducted by anyone.

So...

“Oh?”

As he was lost in thought, he heard a quiet bell. It was the one in the reception area that notified him of guests arriving.

For a moment, he thought they'd returned, but it was too early for that, and they wouldn't have had to ring the bell anyway. But he couldn't imagine anyone else showing up right now. Puzzled, Hans stopped cooking breakfast and went to the reception area.

He wasn't surprised when he saw who was there. He'd had a gut feeling.

Despite what he'd told himself, all his excuses...he'd been half certain of this, and he just hadn't wanted to accept the truth. He'd known from the beginning that this would happen; that was why he'd wanted to leave town.

But it was too late. It had all been nothing but futile resistance.

"Haven't seen you in a while. You know what I'm here for, don't you? I'll be taking back that weapon we made."

He immediately turned around and ran, but it was meaningless. He floated up into the air and was slammed directly into the wall. Pain shot through his whole body, and he spat a thick red liquid from the back of his throat.

"Daddy...?"

He turned to look toward the voice. It was his daughter. She should have gone back to sleep after seeing the guests off...but she must have woken up and come out.

He wanted to tell her to run, but when he opened his mouth, all that came out was a feeble breath. Sensing footsteps approaching him from behind, he reached out...but all he could grasp was empty air.

Stina dashed through the town by herself. She heard explosions around her from time to time, each from a different direction, but she wasn't heading toward any of those.

If she'd been asked why that was, she would have said it was simply a gut feeling. That was what she'd actually told the others, and there was no other way to explain it.

But she was sure of it. As soon as she'd heard the sound of something exploding, she'd known she had to go.

The events of the day before last had flashed through her mind. When she'd been searching for an inn...when the only daughter of the innkeeper whose inn they were currently staying at, Glass Stop North, had nearly been abducted.

The girl hadn't just gotten lost. She'd been the victim of an attempted kidnapping. No, maybe she'd been kidnapped already at that point. Stina had come across that scene by coincidence and put a stop to it, but if she hadn't, the girl would have been taken away.

When Stina had encountered the scene, she'd immediately moved to save the girl, but as soon as she'd succeeded, the culprits had fled. She could have caught them if she'd gone after them, but it would have meant leaving behind the girl she'd saved. After a moment of indecision, she'd ultimately given up on them and decided to take the girl home...which was when Soma had shown up.

The suspicious man she'd spotted yesterday had been one of the people who had fled. That meant they were still in town, and it was more than a little likely that they had something to do with the monster incident.

And now this was happening. It was natural that Stina would connect all these events.

To sum it up, Stina had judged that all the explosions right now were distractions, and she was heading to the inn.

However, while she probably would have reached the same conclusion after careful consideration, this was more like a justification after the fact. She'd just immediately thought, for no particular reason, that she had to go to the inn. She hadn't been able to explain why...and yet Sierra hadn't hesitated to agree. Maybe she'd also had a gut feeling that it was their best choice. That didn't change that she'd wholeheartedly believed that with minimal evidence, however.

But while they'd only been together for a short time, that didn't strike Stina as out of character for Sierra. Felicia's reaction had been more unexpected. She'd given Stina an annoyed look but nodded her assent readily.

Stina knew that doubting her was Felicia's role, but in spite of that, she hardly seemed able to doubt her anymore. But it had been surprising nonetheless, because Stina had expected Felicia to at least ask for definitive proof.

But when she'd said as much, Felicia had just smiled wryly and shrugged. Apparently Soma would have accepted it without hesitation if he'd been there, so there was no point in finding the meaning of it, according to her. And Stina had found herself nodding in agreement with that.

"What a bad influence..."

Even when she deliberately spoke the thought aloud, she didn't feel negatively about it, which was proof of the severity of her condition. She'd really let him influence her too much.

But she already knew that. She'd known that as soon as she found herself thinking about how she'd saved the little girl, something she hadn't admitted even to herself until then.

Incidentally, Sierra and Felicia weren't with her because they were going toward the explosions. Stina thought the inn was the main objective, but they couldn't afford to ignore those. While she thought someone would likely resolve that issue without their help, they couldn't be sure nobody would get hurt in the meantime, and they couldn't allow that.

"What a bunch of softies."

And she found herself thinking that wasn't such a bad thing, but that was only

because of Soma's bad influence. She was sure of that. That had to be it.

"Well... I have more important things to worry about—"

Just then, Stina narrowed her eyes, because in her line of sight, a shadowy figure was emerging from a familiar building.

No—there may only have been one shadow, but there were two people. A man in a black robe and a small child on his shoulders.

And she met eyes with one of the two.

It was just like before. There hadn't been any tears in those little eyes then either. Only resignation to her fate.

Oh, Stina remembered. Right. I ran over because I didn't like that.

And that hadn't changed. So as a matter of course, Stina leapt out toward them and thrust out the spear in her hand.

Spearmanship (High-Grade) *Unarmed Combat (High-Grade)*
Sorcery (High-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship (Imitation)*
Pain Suppression: Lightning Flash.

"Wha—?!"

She instantly heard a shocked shout, but she didn't care. The tip of her spear seized the man and flung him away.

She clicked her tongue when she saw that he hadn't let go of the girl. Stina had been prepared to catch her in midair, thinking that he would drop her...but the girl had been thrown through the door of the inn along with him. That could have turned ugly if it had gone wrong.

But she couldn't possibly not pursue him. He might use the girl as a shield, but regardless, Stina had to continue to ensure her safety.

So she leapt inside the inn and swung reflexively.

Spearmanship (High-Grade) *Unarmed Combat (High-Grade)*

Sorcery (High-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship (Imitation)*
Pain Suppression: Lightning Flash.

When she slashed away something that had been drawing close to her, she heard the man scoff.

“Tch, I thought I had you for sure... Didn’t think you could block that. You must be one of the adventurers who’ve been staying here... So you’re back. I thought I’d gotten lucky and you weren’t here. Hmph... Either it’s good luck, or your intuition—”

Stina stepped forward, disregarding his obvious attempt to buy time by talking. The thing that had come flying at her had been a spell, which meant he was a mage. She would’ve had to be dumb to allow him time.

That spell had been at least Middle Grade too. Considering that it had been shot off so quickly, he was likely High Grade. She had to act decisively.

For just a moment, she glanced around and made sure that the girl was at a distance from him. While she was concerned for the girl’s safety, that was enough for right now.

She stepped forward and thrust her spear toward his torso.

“Tch, you’re not playing along? And your spearmanship... Are you the same Grade as me? Wait... You’re—”

He furrowed his brow as he scrutinized her, but she had no need to play along with him. With her spear thrust out, she slashed sideways, then connected that into a diagonal sweep, all of which the man dodged by a hair’s width. It didn’t seem as if he was managing that through sheer coordination...but regardless, she had to finish this now.

With her arm still swung out, she forcefully stepped forward again. For an instant, the man reacted with surprise, probably because he hadn’t expected her to close the gap between them. She’d been at the perfect distance before, but now she was too close; she didn’t have much room to swing her spear.

But she could still swing it even without the extra room, and this was enough of an opening for her. The man realized that immediately after her, but too late.

Spearmanship (High-Grade) *Unarmed Combat (High-Grade)*
Sorcery (High-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship (Imitation)*
Pain Suppression: Giant Swing.

She spun the spear around its center and slammed it into him.

"Gah...!"

He went flying, destroying the reception desk before crashing into the wall behind it. When Stina saw that, she briefly wondered whether she'd screwed up, but she couldn't have prevented it. As she thought in the back of her mind that the owner would probably understand, she kept her eyes on the man. Approaching him vigilantly, she thrust the tip of her spear out.

"Well, I'd like to know why you tried to pull this... But I don't care if you won't tell me. I won't need a reason after I crush you here."

"You have a point, but... Tch. Maybe I didn't leave a strong impression on you... But you could at least remember a bit."

"What are you talking about...?" Stina furrowed her brow. She didn't get the impression that he was just bluffing. He seemed to know something, and moreover, he seemed entirely certain of it.

"I'm saying this is no way to treat one of your own. Don't you agree, shrine maiden of the Evil Spirit?"

So he said to her with an unwavering stare.

31

Soma let out a sigh as he looked at the scene below him. On the ground lay a man in a black robe.

He thought this was one of the people setting off explosions around town. The reason he thought so was because this man had attacked him on sight. Somebody who had nothing to do with it wouldn't have gone around attacking people willy-nilly.

Moreover, he thought this was one of several people involved because this was the second person he'd encountered, but the sounds hadn't stopped yet. Even apart from that, though, they were happening too frequently for Soma to think that they were all the work of one person.

The locations were scattered all over too, but that fact didn't require much consideration. From the beginning, Soma had assumed the explosions weren't being caused directly.

Well, to be more specific, he'd thought that since he'd happened to come across the site of one of the explosions. There had been very little damage there considering how loud the sound had been. At most, the explosions were leaving fist-sized holes in the sides of buildings or in the ground; they wouldn't contribute much toward the goal of taking down a town. And anyway, as a method of attacking a town, it was too indirect.

So Soma thought they were diversions for two reasons. They were distracting from the culprits' main objective, and they were being set off remotely.

He had no idea what that main objective was, though, so he'd decided to stop these diversions first and looked for places to hide near the wall. He'd thought they might try to escape town in the confusion.

And he'd been right, which was how he'd found two of them, but...

"Hmm... Judging by the frequency of the noises, I would estimate there's one left."

Soma didn't know how they were setting off explosions remotely, but if they had set off some kind of mechanism, it couldn't produce unlimited explosions. And since it was a diversion, it couldn't be interrupted, so it had to happen at some fixed interval.

Based on those assumptions, Soma had estimated that there were four people responsible for this diversion. So if he had everything right, then someone else must have captured one of them...probably someone from Sierra's group. They were entirely capable of arriving at a conclusion similar to his own.

"The problem is that I don't know where they found this person...but it should be all right."

If they were going out of their way to hide, though, they wouldn't be hiding somewhere nearby. Soma had found the two in completely different locations, so if he knew where the third had been found, he could estimate where the last person would be. He could do that to some extent right now, but it was still a rough guess; he wasn't sure which direction the remaining one would be in.

They'd probably caught the culprits around the same time, so it would be easier if he could meet up with them...

"Well, I suppose I'll head over," Soma muttered. He picked up the man on the ground and carried him on his shoulders. It would be a pain to lug this man everywhere, but it would also be a waste to lose a valuable source of information, so he would take him to the guild.

But just as he began walking, Soma suddenly turned to look into the distance. He thought he sensed something vaguely. It could have been a gut feeling that something would happen...but he couldn't know what it was.

Although he wondered about it, there was nothing he could do right now, so Soma let out a sigh and resumed walking.

†

"That title..."

Stina reflexively narrowed her eyes at the man's words. Unconsciously, she tensed the arm holding her spear.

Only a select few people said that title, and it wasn't meant to be known in the first place.

She'd been expecting this on some level, so she wasn't especially shocked. But she certainly hadn't expected them to know that name.

"So you're one of the survivors, which I guess I expected... You were there, though?"

"Tch, so you really don't remember... But you only saw my face once and we didn't even talk, so that's understandable."

"Why'd you think I'd remember, then? I probably wasn't even paying attention. I'm surprised *you* remember."

"Yeah, it surprised me too... But I guess that goes to show how much respect I had for our lord. Even if it was only temporary, and even if we were only dealing with an impostor."

"I see..."

It made things faster if he knew that much, actually. She didn't have to show him any mercy.

"Well, I never planned to show you mercy or let you free. And I still don't."

"Hmph, how cruel. I'm one of the few of your own kind who're left—you could let me go free."

"Don't be dumb. We certainly are of the same kind, and I'm not about to deny that now."

But that was one thing and this was another. They had only assembled in the first place because they stood to gain by using each other and wouldn't get in each other's way. If their interests conflicted, then naturally they would wipe each other out.

"And you know that, or you wouldn't have been aiming for my neck all this time."

"Hmph, so it's no use hiding it, then. Fine. But...do you really understand what I was trying to do?"

“Excuse me...?”

Stina was puzzled. That didn’t sound like a simple attempt to buy time or beg for his life. It was as if he was genuinely trying to tell her something she didn’t know and should have.

That didn’t necessarily mean she had to concern herself with that. Once she thrust her spear forward, it wouldn’t matter what he’d been trying to do.

But...

“You make it sound important. It’d better be worth hearing, or you’ll pay.”

“I get the feeling I’ll pay either way...but all right. I don’t think you’ll be saying that once you see this, after all.”

The man took a black sphere from his pocket. Stina, who had been on guard wondering what he would do, exhaled quietly. She’d thought he might be bluffing to catch her off guard.

There was no need to consider that if it was the exact thing she’d expected, but on some level, she was disappointed.

“So you really brought it. But so what? What about it?”

“What, you knew about it and you figured it out? But in that case, shouldn’t you know what I was doing?”

“Well, you were testing its power, right?”

“Yes, you got that right. So do you know *why* I was doing that?”

“How should I know?”

She really had no way of knowing. She had no idea why this man thought she *should* know, actually.

As she looked at him with confusion, he seemed to realize she wasn’t feigning ignorance. He furrowed his brow.

“Are you telling me you really don’t know? It’s so we can use this when we storm the Dark Lord’s castle—what else would it be for?”

“Excuse me...? When you *what*?”

That was completely out of left field. She'd suspected he would use it to create unrest, sure, but it wouldn't make sense to use the word "storm" if he meant guerrilla-type activities.

That didn't mean she didn't understand what he meant by that, though.

"You mean you're going to revolt again?"

"So you really don't know... I heard all of us who are left and all of those working with us were contacted about it if they were reachable."

"Oh... Simple, then. I wasn't reachable."

All of her contacts had died. There would have been no way to get in touch with her.

"So is that why you went after that girl?"

"It is. That's a living weapon we made. We were going to use it in the last revolt, but it got stolen...but that doesn't matter. Combining it with a monster makes a pretty powerful weapon. There are a lot of ways we could use it...maybe even as a nucleus of sorts. If we can unsettle them even a little bit on top of that, then we'll have done well. Now you see why we were trying to collect it, right?"

"Okay, I see how it is... Makes sense. In that case... That's enough."

"So are you going to—"

"Basically, I have no reason to let you live."

"Huh...?"

There was a stupefied look on the man's face; he apparently hadn't expected to hear that at all. But Stina wasn't kidding in the slightest. She stared down at him coldly.

"Don't you get it? If you kill me, the revolt..."

"It won't make a difference whether you're around or not."

"You're not going to cooperate...?"

"I never got a request to, so I'm not obligated to."

“So...you’re betraying us?!”

“Quit jumping to conclusions. I never got a request to work with you, so I’m not betraying you.”

That was a specious argument, to be fair. From his perspective, it would certainly be a betrayal.

But...

“I’m not going to get in the way of your next revolt. But...I don’t like you. I don’t approve of how you do things. That’s all.”

“Are you serious...?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“Tch...”

He seemed to grasp her seriousness. Feeling a certain kind of relief at that, Stina narrowed her eyes slightly and tensed her arm. If she thrust it just a little forward, it would really be over. There was no room for anything else to intervene—

“I just have one last question... What don’t you like about me? Is it that I caused trouble for everyone indiscriminately? Or maybe because I tried to use a weapon that looks like a kid?”

“What does it matter? If I had to say, though... Everything about you.”

“Huh... Does that mean one of us has awakened a compassionate mentality? It’s a bit late for that, though... It has been for a long time.”

She knew what he said was meant to make her feel vulnerable. She knew that, but it got a reaction out of her anyway.

But that shouldn’t have been a problem. Whatever he tried to do, she was sure she could stop it entirely.

That was why she didn’t expect the next thing he did in the slightest.

“Ha, I wasn’t going to try this... But I have no choice now. You apparently know what this does, but it doesn’t look like you know how it’s really used. You use it...like this.”

He activated the black sphere in his hand. But it was obvious that there was no point in doing that here. Stina thought it must have been one last attempt to rile her up by talking about how it was “really used”—and then her mind went blank at what happened next.

A magic circle appeared directly below the man, and a split second later, something crawled out of it...and ate him.

“Huh...?”

She couldn’t grasp why, but she understood a few things immediately, not by reason but by instinct.

That *something* that had crawled out of the magic circle had been produced by the magical item the man had used... In other words, it was a monster.

And no amount of struggle would give Stina any chance of victory against it.

“—————!”

Stina looked on, subconsciously beginning to tremble, as wings spread from the jet-black creature’s back and it howled in a soundless voice.

If Soma had been there, he would have called it a demon. Of course, it wasn't one in the technical sense, only in the sense that Soma knew...and Stina wasn't familiar with that concept.

Seeing it was enough to tell her just how dangerous it was, however. She immediately considered running away—then clicked her tongue when she spotted a small figure out of the corner of her eye. The girl had been in the back of her mind, but Stina hadn't looked at her until right now because she hadn't had the capacity.

While it had looked as if she was overwhelming the man, in reality, there hadn't been much of a skill gap between them. She'd only been able to get the upper hand temporarily because they had fought at the ideal distance for her; the results would have been the exact opposite if they'd been farther apart. Stina could use magic, but power buffs were the only kind she was good at. She had no way of winning a ranged battle.

In any case, it seemed that the girl had lost consciousness. Stina had expected that, since she hadn't noticed the girl moving, but that was part of the reason she'd clicked her tongue.

The girl had been a bit farther from the magic circle—the man had probably thrown her—but that was a negligible distance to the monster. It could swallow her whole if it felt like it, just like it had that man.

And the same went for Stina. If she ran away right this second, she might have a chance of survival...but it was looking even more hopeless for the girl. Maybe if she had been conscious, she would have had a chance to run and hide, but that wasn't in the realm of possibility right now.

That left only one chance for her to survive. However...

Once it was done howling, the monster glanced around the room and fixed its eyes on the small figure lying near the wall, and Stina's breath caught. It must

have seen Stina too, but it didn't seem to even be cognizant of her. It was as if it was saying it could handle her, so she could wait.

And that perception was correct. It was clear to see what its attention was focused on right now, though; Stina could easily imagine the scene she would be faced with in a few seconds.

Therefore...

"At least give me a second to worry...!"

Her hesitation only lasted a split second. Before she knew it, she was half automatically sprinting toward the girl.

She scooped her up in her left arm and continued into the back corridor...

Dark Lord's Guardianship (Imitation) / Sense Presence (Middle-Grade): Detect Sneak Attack.

"...!"

Spearmanship (High-Grade) / Unarmed Combat (High-Grade) *Sorcery (High-Grade)* Dark Lord's Guardianship (Imitation) / Pain Suppression: Lightning Flash.

Instantly, she spun around and swung her spear, half out of intuition and half out of a base fight-or-flight response. In resistance against imminent death, she swung haphazardly, yet with a certain sense of where the thing was.

What she saw next was something of the same pitch-black hue as that monster...but that was all she was able to perceive. Before she could process any more, an impact hit her. In the same moment that she realized it had broken through her defenses like they were nothing, she was thrown across the room, slamming directly into the wall.

"Gah...!"

She tried to cover the girl still under her arm, but as a result, she wasn't able

to brace herself. The full force of the impact shot through her body, and she spat a dark red liquid from her mouth. Agony coursed through her, but not enough for her to lose consciousness. Maybe the attack hadn't been enough for that, or maybe her spear had lessened the force somewhat; either way, it was far from a fatal blow.

She'd been pushed away from the back hallway, but that was actually good for her in a sense. Escaping into the back wouldn't turn the tables in her favor. It would only worsen her situation if the monster followed her, in fact. She thought she would be able to make it outside from the back, but she didn't know the layout of the inn in detail. It was more likely that she would end up getting killed before she found a way out.

From here, though, it was possible to run directly outside. It was another story whether this thing would allow that, but regardless, it meant a higher chance of her surviving. It would end up outside if it chased her, but that would happen sooner or later either way.

It would wreak havoc on the town, of course. That was inevitable if a monster appeared inside a town with an anti-monster barrier.

But Stina had no way to win this fight, and there were only two people in this town who could. The fastest way to alert one of them would be to cause a commotion.

“And I'll just have to turn a blind eye if anyone gets hurt in the process...”

While she'd realized it from the beginning, this moment had made the monster's power advantage painfully clear. She would only be able to last about ten seconds if she tried to hold it back. Considering that, the better option was to run and warn the people nearby.

But who was she to talk about people getting hurt in the process, anyway? The man had been completely right... She was like him. It was too late for her to redeem herself.

But even still...

“Even I have one or two things I can't let slide.”

Biological weapon or not, it didn't matter to Stina. It may have been a

coincidence, but she'd saved this girl once. It followed that she would take responsibility for protecting her to the end.

She would have been lying if she'd claimed there were no personal feelings or sympathies involved, but...

"I swear I'll at least save you...!"

It was nothing but self-indulgence. Atonement. A way to tell herself she had an excuse; she'd done something.

But despite knowing that, Stina didn't hesitate for a second. Ignoring her aching body, she tensed her left arm, which held the girl, eyed the figure in her line of sight, and...

"Da...ddy..."

Just as she went to run outside, she heard a quiet murmur and froze.

The girl must have been talking in her sleep; when Stina glanced at her momentarily, she didn't seem to have regained consciousness. But Stina had heard that nevertheless.

And that made her realize. Or maybe it forced her to acknowledge something she'd been looking away from.

She hadn't seen the innkeeper.

What did it mean that he hadn't shown up in this scenario? It wasn't possible that he was running an errand, nor that he was taking a nap.

The man she'd just fought had been attempting to leave the inn in the normal way. It was natural to assume that he'd done the same when entering...and who had met with him then?

Maybe the innkeeper had been killed then, and that was even preferable. It meant that there was already nothing Stina could do. She could abandon the inn.

But if he was still alive and this monster ravaged the inn...or maybe even killed him in a more direct way...could she really say she'd saved this girl?

She had no way of ensuring the owner's safety, though. She had to make a

decision and act on it.

Normally, she wouldn't have had time to think. As soon as that thing attacked her, she would have had no choice.

But it was just looking at her, not making any move, as if it understood the situation she was in and was waiting for her to choose. It was also possible that the monster was simply wary of her...but now that she'd had the thought that it was waiting on her, she couldn't think of the situation any other way.

"What a bad-natured monster..."

And if that was the case, running away now would be letting that thing win.

That must have been the instant Stina decided. Maybe it was nothing more than an excuse, but...

"It doesn't matter anymore...!"

Sorcery (High-Grade) / Spearmanship (High-Grade) *Unarmed Combat (High-Grade)* Dark Lord's Guardianship (Imitation) *Pain Suppression: Lightning Flash Fury.*

As she shouted, she whipped her aching body into action and swung her right arm down. She wasn't close enough for the spear to make contact, but lightning formed along the arc. Ranged fights weren't her strong suit, but she could manage this much.

Without watching the attack hit the monster, Stina raised her left arm. In it, she held the little girl.

Sorcery (High-Grade) *Dark Lord's Guardianship (Imitation): Magic* Physical Strengthening.

She swung her arm out and threw her with all her might.

After a brief glance to make sure that she'd definitely landed outside the inn, Stina wasted no time in dashing out. While she'd thrown the girl at full force,

she'd used as much strengthening magic as she was capable of, so she could at least be sure the girl would survive. It was a brute force type of method, but unfortunately, Stina wasn't strong enough to accomplish everything while also being gentle. If she wanted to accomplish anything despite that, she had to resort to force.

However...it was another story whether that would work.

“—”

She didn't have time to react. Before she knew it, Stina was in midair, flying at incredible speed. She understood she'd taken an attack when the pain came at a delay, and at the same instant, she hit the wall.

“H...ah...!”

This time, it was the wall of the corridor...but that was no consolation to Stina.

No...actually, she saw something that did serve as consolation there.

A familiar person was lying right there. The innkeeper.

“So... I see...you're alive...”

That one thing was certain; his chest was moving up and down. But blood was flowing out of it nonstop...so maybe it was more accurate to say he wasn't dead yet.

But regardless, he was alive. That made it worth taking that risk and going through that pain.

If she could just escape now, then everything would be solved...

“But...of course it wouldn't...go that well...”

From behind her back, which was in more pain than the rest of her, she felt a definite presence. A cold feeling ran up her spine along with a gushing sensation.

She knew what it was. She'd never made anyone feel it directly, but she must have indirectly caused it countless times.

It was death.

“I guess...this is what they...call karma...”

She'd felt it several days before, but it hadn't ultimately visited her. This time, however, the monster had her, and it wasn't letting go—that wouldn't make sense.

If even just that girl...and this man if possible...

But that was a pipe dream. Even one would have been cause for celebration. But if neither made it...then that was just how the world worked. It would be misplaced to begrudge that fact.

Ah, and yet...

“I guess...I was beyond saving...the second I hoped...”

“Hmm... I wouldn't say that's the case.”

“Huh...?”

Her fate should have been sealed. She'd given up without even looking over.

But that voice made her look. She saw the pitch-black monster, of course...but in the next instant, a line shot down its middle. It was split into two pieces down the center...and on the other side, she saw a boy with hair and eyes of the same pitch-black color looking at her and letting out a sigh of relief.

“Well... That was certainly a close call.” Soma sighed as he looked around.

Several parts of the inn were demolished, and fresh blood clung to the objects scattered around the room. And in the corridor lay the innkeeper and Stina, both badly wounded. The innkeeper’s daughter had been lying near the entrance, but she hadn’t appeared to be hurt, so he’d prioritized coming here...and that seemed to have been the right decision.

After deducing the gist of what had happened, he let out another sigh.

“What’re...you...doing here?”

Soma turned to look; Stina was attempting to get up. How reckless of her, when she was clearly in no condition to push herself. Sighing again for a different reason, he approached her to heal her before anything else.

“Hmm... That’s a difficult question to answer. I suppose I simply had a bad feeling.”

“It’s...irritating...that that almost sounds true...when you say it.”

“The serious answer would be that I heard about what was going on from Sierra and the others when I came across them at the guild.”

And he’d been concerned, so he’d left the rest to them and come here. Well, he’d hurried because he’d gotten a bad feeling at that point, so his previous words hadn’t technically been in jest either.

Stina’s eyes widened slightly in surprise when he brandished his sword in the midst of their exchange. Immediately after, though, she nodded in understanding before he said anything.

“Yeah... It’d save you...some trouble...to take care of me while you’re at it... But I don’t think...you have to... I’ll just die...on my own...”

“You seem to have come to a wildly mistaken understanding. I don’t feel like explaining, however, so I’ll simply show you.”

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing* Steadfast Resolve
Mental Stillness Eye of the Void: Secret Technique: Blade
of Devotion / True



After swinging his sword, he left Stina looking at her body with a strange expression on her face and went over to the innkeeper to swing his sword in the same way again. They would be all right for now.

Putting his sword away, he returned to Stina. She seemed to understand what had happened, but there was still a look of disbelief on her face.

“Didn’t you say you can’t use magic...?”

“What do you mean? I did and I’m not. That was nothing more than a sword technique.”

“What do *you* mean...? Well, whatever... I already knew you make no sense.”

“Hmm?”

Stina still looked baffled but seemed to accept the explanation. With a sigh, she slowly stood up.

Soma was the one who wasn’t satisfied with the conclusion of that exchange...but he didn’t have time to go over it right now. He decided to move the conversation forward.

“So am I correct in assuming that the culprit was defeated—rather, killed—by that monster?”

“That’s right. How can you tell before I’ve even said anything, though?”

“Well, it was a guess based half on what I saw and half on prior experience.”

“What kind of experiences have you been through to reach that conclusion based on just that...?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

What he called experience was actually partially learned from others. And regardless, it was nothing to boast about.

“So the rest is up to Sierra and the others, I suppose. I have no concerns about that, however.”

“I wanna say we can’t be sure, but when you say it, it makes me want to believe you.”

“I think you overestimate me,” Soma said with a shrug.

Well, he’d reached a conclusion about what had happened here, but he couldn’t say anything more based on that alone. They needed to exchange information to learn what had really been going on.

“However, the guild will also want information, so it would be faster to discuss there. Considering that we also have to talk to Sierra and Felicia, it would take us twice or three times the effort to repeat the conversation.”

“Yeah, and we can hear how things went for them. But...what about them?” Stina looked toward the still-unconscious innkeeper.

By “them,” she probably meant both him and his daughter. While Soma did think they would be all right, it wouldn’t be ideal to leave them like this.

“Hmm... Well, it’s possible that they know something about this. Considering that, we should discuss with them, so let’s bring them with us. I imagine the guild would agree.”

“Yeah, that’d be the safe choice.”

The only question was whether to carry them like this or wake them up to walk together... Well, they weren’t likely to refuse, so it would probably be better to wake them. Maybe the four of them could even talk on the way.

With that decision reached, Soma walked over to the innkeeper to wake him as Stina headed toward the girl.

†

To make a long story short, the innkeeper didn’t tell Soma or the guild anything. He claimed he was attacked out of nowhere and his daughter nearly abducted...but anyone could see he wasn’t telling the whole truth. He seemed altogether too confident for that.

But nobody pressed the point with him because it was judged that he wouldn’t tell them anything even then. Maybe that would be different if Stina talked to him, but she had no obligation to do so. And that was why...

No, her motive was more selfish than that. She’d been deeply impressed with the innkeeper.

He definitely had resolve—resolve to protect his daughter, no matter what it meant for him. Maybe Soma and the others had picked up on that as well, and that was why they hadn't tried to ask him about the details.

Regardless, it was enough to make Stina think. About the present, the past, and the future...what she was doing, what she'd done, and what she was trying to do. And what she needed to do.

Half unconsciously, Stina reached for her pocket. In it was a certain monster part. She'd collected it before she'd met Soma here.

"Hmm... What to do?"

"Huh? Oh, you're back." She looked up at the voice. Soma and the others were just returning. She casually put her arm down and looked at him, then tilted her head in puzzlement. He seemed to be unsure of something.

"What's up? Did they tell you something troubling?"

"Not in particular..." Sierra replied.

"Yes... There were a few things that didn't add up, but it was a good conversation," Felicia agreed.

"So what's on your mind, Soma?"

They were currently in the adventurer's guild, and those three had gone into the drawing room, where adventurers weren't allowed except in special circumstances. They'd been discussing the recent events, so Stina thought maybe they'd been told something that meant trouble for them, but apparently not. What was it, then?

"I can tell you about it on the way to the inn. It wouldn't be right to stand around and talk here, and this isn't the right place to go into detail."

"Yeah, that's true."

Normally, nobody would have been around at this time, but the circumstances being what they were, there were a fair number of people at the guild, including adventurers, travelers who were curious about the incident, and people from town.

Soma's group couldn't avoid drawing attention by coming out of the back of

the guild; nobody was outright staring, but they were clearly paying attention. While the four of them hadn't been told to keep it secret, it certainly wasn't something to talk about in a place like this. Stina was also curious how the innkeeper was doing now that he'd returned to the inn, so she saw no reason not to head in the same direction. Sierra and Felicia had nothing in particular to say, probably because they'd already been told about it, so the group left the guild.

It should have been some time since the incident had been cleared up, but there was still a nervous atmosphere about the town. Well, since the lockdown was still in place and there hadn't been any official announcement from the guild, that was to be expected.

"So, what'd you talk about?" Stina prodded Soma as they walked. He still seemed to be deep in thought, but he must have come to some kind of conclusion.

He nodded before opening his mouth. "Well... Mainly, we confirmed what we already knew based on what happened. There was very little that we knew, however."

"We captured somebody who probably has information, but they haven't woken yet," said Felicia.

"Mm-hmm... But it's the guild's job to handle that."

"Sure is. They called us in in the first place because they thought we might know something else, after all. Not that I actually went."

That was the guild's reasoning for inviting Soma's group into the drawing room, but Stina hadn't accompanied them because she hadn't seen a need to. She honestly didn't have anything she wanted to confirm about the incident, and she had no obligation to tell the guild anything either. She'd already told Soma what she knew, and she hadn't felt like going over it again.

She'd only told Soma the inconsequential parts, though. She hadn't mentioned what the girl was or anything to do with her own connection to the man.

That was not only for the innkeeper's sake but her own as well. If she slipped

up and Soma found out who she really was, he might suspect her of being involved in this. She didn't necessarily expect that, but she had to be careful of things like that, especially when dealing with such an oddly insightful person.

That also meant that Stina couldn't find out what exactly that girl was...but there was no need for her to know that.

She already had an idea, anyway. She'd heard about it in the past. She couldn't remember who'd said so, but in the previous revolt, they'd planned to use a biological weapon. Most of their attempts had failed in the production stage, and their one success had been stolen by a traitor just before they'd gone ahead with it...so that was what was going on. It didn't matter to Stina.

Regardless...

"So what was the problem, then?"

"There was no problem with the conversation. We learned that the girl was targeted for some reason, that the individual who targeted her was the same one who caused the monster problem, and that that individual is dead. Oh, but we had difficulty agreeing on what to do with the magical item."

"What? Why?" Stina asked. "You left it there, so didn't you decide to give it to them?"

"They didn't want it," Sierra replied.

"They must not have wanted to deal with it," Felicia said. "It's clearly a troublesome item, after all."

"But we couldn't take the responsibility of managing it. We successfully made them take it, however, and moved on to what to do next..."

"What do you mean, next?" Stina thought they'd only confirmed what had been going on. Had there been something more, and had that been the problem?

"I mean just what it sounds like. We discussed what to do now that we've resolved this."

"Such as when to end the lockdown," Felicia said. "We think the problem is solved now, but we can't be entirely sure."

“I guess they’ll just have to ask the guy who survived... But that’s the guild’s problem, right? Why’d you talk about that?”

“Since we were already there...?” Sierra suggested. “Or maybe to escape some of the responsibility?”

“Is the guild here all right...?”

“Well, that is nothing for us to concern ourselves over,” Soma declared. “They’ve been all right so far, so they should continue to be all right.”

At any rate, it seemed they had been able to dodge that one without incident. The lockdown would be lifted tomorrow, or rather, at the end of the day today...

“And given that, we were thinking about what we should do.”

“Okay... I see.”

In other words, Soma was unsure whether to continue being involved in this situation. It was mostly over, but the witness still had to be interrogated, so there might be further developments. Should he stay here until that concern was cleared, or should he leave town early tomorrow, assuming his work here was done?

“What are you two thinking?”

“Up to Soma.”

“Well, there are good arguments for both options. I can’t choose between them, so I’m leaving it to Soma’s discretion.”

“Huh... Well, just my personal opinion, but I think it’d be fine for you to leave tomorrow.”

“Hmm... Why do you say so?”

“We’re just outsiders here when it comes down to it. We’ve done more than enough at this point, so I think we can leave the rest up to them. I’m not saying there’s nothing more to do, because there is, but I think it’s time to move on,” Stina said with a shrug.

She really thought so...but in two different ways. It was her genuine opinion,

but it was also what she hoped they would do. Now that she'd agreed to travel with them, their direction was her direction, and she hoped they would all move on so she could fulfill her own objective.

"Hmm... Then let's do so. We received more than enough money from the guild in thanks for cooperating, so we have no more need to earn money here."

"Yeah, let's do that... I already decided on that anyway." Stina muttered the last part under her breath and turned to look ahead. She saw a crowd that was still turbulent. Narrowing her eyes, she quietly let out a breath.

There was no such thing as everything going according to plan. His influence didn't change that one bit; nothing that seemed as if it had changed had actually been altered. She couldn't change the past, the present was out of her hands, and her future had been determined long ago. There was only one choice she could make. So Stina had resolved herself; that was all.

As she thought about what was to come, Stina headed toward the side path that led to the alleyway outside the inn.

She hadn't gone through enough hardship to warrant thinking, *Finally, I'm done*, but that was the thought on her mind when she stepped into the village.

It made her somewhat emotional to realize that this would be her last time here. But even more so, she thought about how she'd been able to accomplish something like this two years ago. She had magic now, but she hadn't back then. The reason she'd been able to do it despite that must have been at least half desperation, if not more.

"I guess I can be pretty stubborn..." she muttered with a wry smile. It was only because she'd gone through all of what she had that she could look back and laugh now.

She sincerely felt she was blessed. She must have been the whole time, and she just hadn't realized. Now that she'd had an abundance of time to look back on her past, that was how she'd come to see it.

She must not have been seeing anything outside of herself at the time. It was like she'd seen everyone as enemies, thinking nobody was on her side. That was what had driven her to run away.

But was that really true? Sure, their attitude had been a bit laissez-faire, but they weren't the type of people to ignore an injured child. They'd probably had a good reason; maybe she just hadn't noticed.

It was possible she was just overthinking it, of course; maybe she was looking at the past through rose-colored glasses.

But she didn't need to waste time considering that now.

"I can just ask him myself now that I'm here."

It would have been better if she'd done that back then. She *should* have done that, in fact. If she had...

"Oh... But then I wouldn't be who I am today."

If she hadn't run, she would never have met that boy or any of her other friends. In an ironic twist, she was only happy with where she was now because she hadn't made the best choice back then.

"Well, maybe that's how life is," she said to herself with a shrug.

She was almost to her destination, anyway. She knew exactly where to go from here.

"Let's see how this goes, then..."

She had trouble imagining it, to be honest, but it would work out one way or another.

With that optimistic mindset, Aina headed toward the heart of the village.

†

"Well, thank you for having us."

It was early in the morning, and now that the sun had risen, Soma's party was about to leave the town. When Soma turned to look behind him, he saw the innkeeper standing in front of the entrance to the inn. He'd insisted on seeing them off even though Soma had told him there was no need.

"No, thank *you* for staying. I really appreciate it." The innkeeper lowered his head.

Soma sighed quietly. He'd already been thanked over and over—right after saving him, on the way to the guild, several times while being told what had happened, and effusively upon returning to the inn after wrapping up the discussion at the guild. He couldn't help being tired of hearing it at this point.

And also...

"As I told you yesterday, Stina is the one you should be thanking."

He really meant that. Soma basically hadn't done anything for him except heal his wounds, and even that had only been possible because Stina had acted first. Based on what Soma had heard, the situation wouldn't have been resolved as smoothly if Stina hadn't taken action, and the innkeeper could even have lost his life. Considering that, Stina was the most deserving of thanks and the only one whom it was necessary to thank.

“Yes, I’m especially thankful to Stina. Truly...you’ve done so much for me.”

“Cut it out. You’ve told me enough already, and it’s not like I did anything much anyway.”

Stina was clearly just being modest. It was possible that she really believed what she said, but it was obvious that the innkeeper was deeply grateful to her. There must have been *reasons* for that...but in life, it was inevitable that there would be reasons, even ones that couldn’t be shared with others. That was completely ordinary, and trying to force things like that out of someone was tantamount to stomping on their heart.

That was why Soma hadn’t pushed the issue even when he’d realized at the guild that there was something else going on. Maybe that would change if it became an issue later...but he didn’t feel like it would.

So Soma simply shrugged. “Shall we be on our way, then?”

“Mm-hmm... Sounds good.”

“Yes, I believe I’ve packed everything...although I don’t have anything so valuable that I’d miss it if I forgot it.”

“Can it with the self-deprecating comments,” Stina retorted to Felicia. “Well... Bye, then. I doubt we’ll see each other again, so have a good life.”

She was saying that because the innkeeper planned to leave town after this. Although a lot had happened, he’d decided to stick to his original plan. Maybe what had happened had been even more reason for him to do that, actually.

“Yes... I’ll see you if our paths happen to cross again. Come on... Say goodbye.”

He was talking to the little girl, who was hiding behind him. As Soma looked at her, he thought about how she hadn’t stopped avoiding him even now.

“Uh-huh... Bye-bye... Thank you.”

That was probably mainly directed at Stina...but Soma could tell it was also intended for him a little. That didn’t change the fact that she hid as soon as he met her eyes, but he smiled slightly. That alone was more than enough compensation for everything.

As the innkeeper saw them off with his head bowed, the four began to walk toward the town gate.

†

Naturally, Soma didn't have a map of the area. The devils would never have distributed materials relating to military secrets near the border, especially not to outsiders. They had been able to travel without issue despite that because people were willing to tell them the general location of the next village or town. If they hadn't been, then this journey would have been far more difficult.

Even taking that into account, though, this trip had been unusually easy. They'd left town in the morning and reached the next village before night. It was the fastest trip they'd made so far.

It wasn't that the next village had been relatively close, however. It had been about the same distance as trips that had taken them three days in the past.

Things had been different this time because they now had something they hadn't before—Stina, that is. She'd known precisely how to get to the next village.

Even if they knew the general area of their destination, proper roads were rare, so they usually lost their way and slowed their pace out of uncertainty. Also, since they didn't know how much longer they had to go, they sometimes took breaks when they didn't need to, which added even more travel time. Between all of those factors, walking ended up taking them more than twice as long as it should have.

However, that was actually a deliberate choice. If they went the wrong way, they risked tiring themselves out and putting themselves in danger unless they took pains to preserve their energy, so it was better to buy safety with time.

But now that they knew the exact way to get there, they didn't have to worry about that.

"Hmm... This alone has made it worth inviting Stina."

"I think that's a bit of an exaggeration."

"No..."

“Yes, I’m not used to traveling, so I can’t help being anxious on the road even with Soma and Sierra here... Being able to reach the next village faster makes it more than worth it.”

Some might say that kind of anxiety is the real thrill of traveling...but it would certainly be better to not have to feel it. It would be troubling if a total lack of excitement became their new normal, but this kind of thing was all right once in a while.

“Well, since we’ve arrived before night, shall we secure a place to stay?” Soma suggested.

It was normal for towns to have inns, but villages typically didn’t. They were unnecessary if few people visited. And if there was no inn, they would have to pay a visit to the village leader’s house and negotiate lodging arrangements, so that was better done sooner than later. They would risk ending up with nowhere to stay if they were late. It would be silly to go to a village only to sleep outside, so they needed to act quickly.

But just then, Stina spoke up.

“Yeah, good idea. Time for me to say goodbye, then.”

“Hmm...? What do you mean by that?”

“You already have a reservation...?” Sierra asked.

“No, I meant exactly what I said. I’m not staying here at all. There’s still time before the sun sets, so I’m going farther ahead.”

“Ahead...? Where?”

“My final destination, of course. Which is in a completely different area from where you all are headed.”

Soma scrutinized Stina through narrowed eyes; she didn’t seem to be joking. He wondered for a moment what the meaning of this was but quickly came to an understanding.

“I suppose that while you did agree to travel with us, you never specified for how long.”

“Exactly. And a trip to the next village might be a short trip, but it’s still

traveling. I kept my promise.”

“Well, you could say that, but...”

“This is sudden,” Sierra finished for Felicia.

“Maybe it feels that way to you since I never mentioned it, but I was never planning on spending more than a few days with you. I’m traveling for my own reasons.”

“Hmm... That makes sense.”

It would be possible to travel together if they were going to the same place, but even then, one of them would have to make a detour if their objectives were different, and they might have to pick up the pace depending. They could coordinate that to an extent, but not perfectly, so it made sense to keep it to just a few days.

“I suppose we have already spent a few days together...but do you really need to be in such a rush?” Felicia asked.

“Yeah, and that’s all I’ll say about it.”

“Too bad... But up to you.”

“I suppose so...”

Soma hadn’t expected her to agree in the first place. It had exceeded his expectations that she’d stuck with them even for a short time. He did feel like he now owed her even more, whereas one of his original objectives had been to repay all of his debts to her...but that was no reason to keep her from going.

“So that’s it, then...?” Felicia asked.

“Well, it may be all for now, but I imagine we’ll meet again, and we can travel together then,” Soma said. “For longer next time.”

“Mm-hmm... Journeys have meetings and goodbyes... And reunions.”

“I can’t exactly guarantee I’ll see you again. Maybe if I have occasion to.” Stina turned her back on them. “Well, bye, then.”

With that, she left, so abruptly that it seemed as if she’d never been there in the first place. Her figure receded into the distance without so much as a glance

backward...and eventually, she faded from sight.

The three of them sighed.

“Hmm... This changes our plans somewhat, but we will still need to find an inn. Why don’t we start by asking at the first place we find?”

“Mm-hmm...”

“All right...”

Felicia seemed reluctant to move on after the sudden turn of events, but she would get over it soon enough; she had to. Maybe that was a cold and harsh way of looking at it, but Stina was gone, and she wasn’t coming back.

Soma would have been lying if he’d said he had no thoughts about this, though. What Stina had said had been rational...but it had also certainly been too sudden. Maybe she’d had some reason of her own for doing that.

But thinking about it would accomplish nothing. He glanced in the direction she’d gone and let out a sigh. Then, turning away, he began to move toward one of the houses to do as he’d suggested.

Soma's group headed for the largest house they could see because that was likely to be the village leader's house. It would have been different if they had seen something that was obviously an inn, but since they didn't, the safest choice was to go for what seemed like the village leader's home.

As they walked, Soma surveyed the area. It was truly a quintessential village; the atmosphere was surprisingly tranquil for being surrounded by nothing more than a wooden fence. It was neither busy nor noisy; it seemed like the perfect place to take a breather.

Soma thought he would get bored if he lived here, but it wasn't a bad place. The biggest reason for that was that nothing dangerous was likely to happen. He knew from their journey here that there were hardly any monsters nearby with the exception of weak ones like horned rabbits. They were probably a threat to the villagers, but all they would need to deal with the problem was an adventurer as low as rank two to serve as a guard. The earth also seemed quite fertile at a glance, so it didn't seem as if famine was a concern.

All of that together meant that he didn't think there would be much to worry about here. If he'd gone to a village where the people were struggling to scrape by, he might have even preferred to sleep in the wilderness. Luckily, he hadn't seen any villages like that in this world, but that was because of the kind of places he visited. He was sure he could find several places like that if he traveled a little more widely.

Regardless...

"This place is shockingly normal."

"Mm-hmm."

"You say that every time we visit somewhere new. Does it really warrant commenting on? I honestly think you're exaggerating."

"Well, I certainly am, but nonetheless, this is no typical place. I would expect a

place like this to be unusual.”

The people who lived here had been branded as outcasts. Even if they didn’t view themselves that way, that would normally warp people to one degree or another.

So far, however, there was no indication that that was the case for devils collectively. Maybe they didn’t have to concern themselves with such things because the elves’ forest was nearby, or perhaps...

“Somebody is making it that way intentionally?” Sierra ventured.

“But who would that be? There’s no ruler here, right?” Felicia asked.

“Not officially, but given that there’s somebody who is called a lord, it’s safe to assume that there effectively is one.”

“You mean the Dark Lord, right? But...”

Soma knew what she wanted to ask. Would somebody called the Dark Lord really be that supportive of his subjects?

He had only heard a little about him, but Soma’s image of the Dark Lord didn’t match that at all. He’d been told the Dark Lord was cruel and committed atrocities—exactly the kind of person you picture when you hear the words “Dark Lord.” It wouldn’t seem right for that person to actually be a benevolent ruler who was kind toward his allies and cared for his people.

It wasn’t difficult to work out, though.

“There’s the Dark Lord whom we’ve heard about outside, and there’s the Dark Lord who currently rules. This would make sense if those were two different people.”

“Different people...? Oh, now that you mention it...”

“The Dark Lord was defeated,” Sierra finished.

“Precisely.”

Stina had just told them as much, but it had slipped their minds because it had been their first time hearing about it. The same had been true of Soma, but he’d predicted it before Stina had told him.

That wasn't because anyone had mentioned it to him but because of Aina. She hadn't told him much about the Dark Lord, but he could tell she respected him. And if he was really like Soma had heard, Aina wouldn't have turned out so upright, even if he was kind to his family.

Also, the former Dark Lord had been defeated over ten years ago, but that hadn't gotten out yet, so it was likely that the Dark Lord people talked about was the previous one. People would know that there had been a change in ruler if they suddenly started hearing about a different person called the Dark Lord.

"That makes sense... They do seem to be deliberately hiding that there was a regime change, so that's a natural conclusion to come to."

"Well, it's possible that the new Dark Lord is a similar person, but..."

"Not likely considering Stina."

"Exactly."

Stina seemed to have her fair share of problems, but Soma could tell she wasn't a bad person at heart. Between her and Aina, he couldn't imagine that the current Dark Lord was evil.

"Well, frankly, it doesn't matter to us whether the current Dark Lord is good or evil."

"That's true...but aren't you being a bit too blunt?"

"Just chatting to kill time..."

"Indeed."

Considering that they were unlikely to be involved with the Dark Lord at any point, it was irrelevant what kind of person he was. To be honest, Soma was a bit curious about him...but that was personal. It wasn't anything worth going out of his way to check into, and he wouldn't have the chance to, anyway. This was nothing more than some gossip as they walked.

"I don't think this is the right place to gossip about this... But I suppose considering how we got on the topic, we wouldn't be talking about it if we weren't here. Won't people be mad if they overhear, though?"

"Well, some may take offense, but I've taken that into consideration and

made sure that nobody is near enough to hear us.”

“Yet another needlessly advanced trick...”

“Mm-hmm... But it’s just like Soma.”

“How rude. It’s basic decency to make sure that nobody who overhears your conversations will be offended.”

As they conversed, they approached the house they thought was the village chief’s. Soma looked it over once they were near. It wasn’t large enough to be called a mansion, but it was at least five times the size of the surrounding houses. In small villages, the size of one’s house directly demonstrated one’s status and influence; this couldn’t possibly be an ordinary villager’s house.

Soma sensed people inside, so he knew it was occupied. He approached the door to ask his questions...but he didn’t need to knock. Right as he was preparing to, the door opened.

He saw someone on the other side, as of course he would, since the door hadn’t opened automatically. They seemed to be on their way out.

He stepped back reflexively...but stopped in his tracks when he saw the person’s face.

She was about his height, and there was a vivid red hue reflected in her eyes. That was enough to remind him of a certain someone...and just then, she noticed him too.

Her eyes, the same color as her hair, were wide with surprise. His must have been the same.

The person standing in front of him was the exact person he’d been reminded of, and he hadn’t thought in his wildest dreams that he would see her here.

“So...ma?”

“Aina...is that you?”

Soma muttered her name in shock as he looked her over.



“Well, it’s been a relatively long time, Aina.”

“Why’d you add ‘relatively’? You could’ve just said it’s been a long time... But yeah, it has been a while. I honestly didn’t think you’d end up somewhere like this.”

“I could say the same of you.”

Aina gave Soma a fed-up look, but he just shrugged. He understood what she wanted to say, but he had a point too. He wasn’t here because he wanted to be. She already knew that, though; he’d explained what had happened to him, although only an overview.

Some time had passed since he’d encountered Aina in the door of the house he’d thought was the village chief’s. Darkness was already spreading outside the window, illustrating the approach of night.

They were currently inside, as was obvious given that they were looking out a window. But this wasn’t the village chief’s house, and it wasn’t an inn. They had moved to Aina’s house—her vacation home, to be precise. It was no larger than the other houses nearby, but it could comfortably house four people. While there wasn’t enough food stored here for all of them, they’d gotten enough to cover their needs.

With that on his mind, Soma glanced around the house.

Aina sighed with seeming resignation. “Whatever... You can tell me more about that later. I’m surprised to see you here too.” She looked at Sierra.

It was no wonder she felt that way; Soma felt the same. He would have felt the same even if he hadn’t been involved.

Since there was nobody else around, Sierra had her hood down. Her golden hair swayed as she nodded.

“Mm-hmm... Didn’t expect to see you.”

“Yeah, I can understand that. I can tell a lot has happened. That’s always how things are with Soma around, after all. Good to see you again.”

“Mm-hmm... Good to see you.”

While they’d exchanged brief greetings when they’d reunited, they’d immediately decided to relocate. That was also why Soma had greeted her again.

“Did I just hear something rude said about me? Are you implying that bad things happen when I’m around?”

“I just mean that’s how things are with you. Or do you mean to tell me nothing weird happened?”

“A lot happened,” Sierra replied.

“Well, it certainly did...but that isn’t necessarily because I was around.”

“You don’t think so...? Neither Sierra nor I would be here right now if not for you, and we wouldn’t have gotten wrapped up in everything that happened in the last town either, so I think we can say it’s at least related to you.”

When Felicia jumped into the conversation, Aina seemed vaguely uncomfortable. They’d briefly introduced themselves, but apparently she was still a bit shy. Not that Soma should have expected that to change in a month or two.

And Felicia’s appearance must have had something to do with it too. Unlike Sierra, she was still wearing her hood. It was only natural that Aina would feel more conscious of her.

“I suppose you could argue that...but I see it as quite the stretch.”

“You do? What do you think, Sierra?”

“This is Soma...so it’s inevitable.”

“Incomprehensible...”

“Blame it on the things you do,” retorted Aina. “Well, you haven’t changed a bit, I guess. Things must have been rough...uh, should I call you Miss Waldstein?”

“Just Felicia is fine. I may sound formal, but it’s just how I’m used to speaking...and I’m not used to being called ‘Miss,’ being what I am.” After a moment of hesitation, Felicia pulled down her hood.

Aina’s breath caught when she saw the white hair and red eyes underneath. But then she let out a small sigh, and the atmosphere of anxiety dispersed. It was as if she’d come to terms with it.

“Got it... Felicia, then. You can call me whatever you like.”

“Understood. I’ll call you Aina. While we’re speaking, though... May I ask you one question?”

“Sure, what is it? I have a feeling I know...”

“Yes... Um, does it bother you? That I’m, you know...”

“That you’re a witch? I mean, I’d be lying if I said it doesn’t right now...but I don’t think I *need* to be bothered by it.”

“Why is that?”

For some reason, Aina flicked her eyes over to Soma with a weary sigh. “Because this idiot’s with you. I’m sure he did something dumb and that led to you traveling together. So there’s no need to worry about it... I’ve been through the same thing, after all.”

“Ah... I understand.”

The two exchanged looks of understanding, which slightly bothered Soma...but he let out a quiet sigh of relief that they were getting along. He’d thought they would, and he’d told Felicia as much, but he couldn’t be completely certain about these things.

His concerns had been unfounded, however. That deepened his conviction that things would be fine when he returned to Ladius, which put a smile on his face.

“I’ve heard a lot about you from Soma,” Felicia said. “I’m relieved that you’re just like he said.”

“Huh? S-Soma talked about me...?”

“Yes, since we had more time than anything else on this journey.”

“Mm-hmm... I’m not good at talking...so Soma did the majority of it.”

That was true, but he hadn’t done much more than half of the talking, if that much. He’d certainly brought things up to pass the time, but Felicia had done the same, and even Sierra had participated occasionally. It came out to about forty percent Soma, forty percent Felicia, and the rest Sierra. But that misconception wasn’t worth correcting, so he kept his mouth shut about it.

“Uh... Can I ask what he said about me? I-I mean... I can’t help but want to know how he made me sound, you know?”

“Well...” Felicia looked over to Soma as if for permission.

Soma shrugged. It wasn’t as if he’d been spreading gossip about her; he hadn’t said anything that he wouldn’t want her to know. At least, he didn’t think he had.

“There was a lot, so it’s hard to summarize it... But if I had to say, I would say he made you sound funny.”

“Soma... What have you been telling her about me...?!”

“Calm down, Aina. I don’t recall saying anything...ah, wait, perhaps I do.”

“Mm-hmm... We said it’s fun to tease you. Mostly I said that.”

“Sierra...?!”

“I see... This really is exactly like they said.”

“Even you, Felicia?!”

“I was half joking, so let’s set that aside...”

“That means it was half true...” Aina shot Felicia a glare, but she seemed unfazed. Apparently even Felicia was capable of that.

“The serious answer is that you sounded like someone who’s kind but also has integrity. That’s only my impression based on what I’ve heard, though.”

“O-Oh... Should I say thank you?”

“I don’t think that would be quite right...but you’re welcome anyway.”

The two exchanged mildly awkward smiles; it seemed as if they were beginning to bond. It would still take some time, but Soma was glad to see that.

“Still, though...” Aina looked Felicia over with puzzlement.

“Um... Does my hair bother you? I could put my hood on if so...”

“Oh, sorry, not that... It’s just... You and Sierra are sisters, right? And you’re pretty far apart in age? I can see you being sisters, but you don’t look that much older.”

“I see... It’s difficult for us to see it that way, however.”

“Mm-hmm... You and I are further apart than you and our brother.”

“Hmm... I haven’t given that much thought.”

“You should,” Aina retorted to Soma. “You’re on my side of this.”

Soma knew that, but he hadn’t thought of it as anything to be conscious of. Maybe that was because he’d known an even longer-lived being.

This was a good opportunity to segue into the next thing he had to say, though. He’d been meaning to ask Aina ever since reuniting with her...

“Speaking of sisters... Do you have any, Aina?”

Soma’s intent in asking that was clear. Both Sierra and Felicia realized that and held their breath. However, Aina seemed oblivious to it. She gave him a confused look, her brow furrowed.

“What? No, I’m an only child. I’ve told you that, haven’t I?”

“I do remember you saying that. I was just making sure. So you simply happen to be the sole only child out of all of us? You haven’t forgotten any siblings?”

“No. What are you talking about? How could I forget?”

His question had definitely been a strained pretext, but now Soma knew for sure. Stina, who had identified herself as the Dark Lord’s daughter, wasn’t Aina’s sister. That left the question of why she’d said such a thing, though...

“Oh, but now that I think about it...”

“Hmm? Have you remembered a long-lost older sister?”

“I told you, I don’t have any. But there was a girl I grew up with who was like an older sister to me...”

“Oh...?”

“I haven’t seen her in ages, though. Not since she went off to live on her own... I wonder how she’s doing now.” Aina stared into the distance, reminiscing about that person.

Soma was able to accept that as an explanation. He did think she could have just said so in the first place...but maybe she hadn’t wanted to go into it. Something about it still felt amiss, but no amount of thinking would give him the answer... The person he’d need to check with wasn’t here.

He felt as if his doubts had simultaneously been cleared and deepened. Thinking of the girl with whom he’d parted ways shortly before, Soma narrowed his eyes and sighed quietly.

“So, now that you know the gist of what we’ve been through, what brings you here?”

Aina froze up at the question Soma directed at her in the midst of their chat. Of course he would ask that. She’d just let her guard down because he hadn’t yet.

There wasn’t any reason she couldn’t tell him, but...

“You couldn’t have come here for no reason, right?”

“Well, yeah... I mean, I’m here to visit home. Why else would I be here?”

That wasn’t a lie. She’d come to Dement to visit her home...the Dark Lord’s castle.

“Hmm... Are you going to be all right?”

“What do you mean, is she going to be all right...?” Felicia asked. “She’s just visiting home, right?”

“I haven’t heard much...but apparently it’s complicated.”

They hadn’t discussed that, of course, but Felicia seemed to have some idea of what it meant. Her face clouded over slightly, and she turned a concerned look to Aina.

Her eyes were the same color as Aina’s, but they gave off a completely different impression, maybe because of the differing colors of their hair. Most people’s hair and eyes were the same color, and while they were sometimes different, Aina had never seen anyone else in whom the contrast was so striking. Maybe that was another distinctive trait of witches.

But that didn’t mean anything, really. Felicia was a witch, yes, but Aina had secrets of her own. And like she’d said before, if Soma was there, then she didn’t have to concern herself with it.

Well, it did concern her in another way—apparently Soma and Felicia had

lived alone together for a month. But this wasn't the time to think about that. Aina shrugged, both in response to the question and to put the thought out of her mind.

"I'll be fine. It's not like anything will happen while I'm back... I don't think, at least. I'll make sure of that before I visit."

"So I understand your reason for visiting...but this comes as a surprise. You said you weren't going to go back for a while, didn't you?"

"Mm-hmm... You even said so when I left."

"Well, I wasn't planning to then. I only felt like it after Sierra left the academy."

She'd had a lot of time on her hands without Sierra around. She'd had plenty to do; there was always another spell to practice. But there was a limit to what she could do on her own, and she would get tired if she kept doing that by herself. She didn't have any friends at the academy to hang out with for a change of pace, though. There was Lina, but she'd been too busy for Aina to see her much, so she'd been alone...and she'd thought if she was going to be alone anyway, then she might as well do this.

She'd thought of Sierra. Sierra had gone home despite saying that she didn't plan to, so Aina thought she could do that as well.

"Hmm... So it was a rather sudden decision."

"I guess it was."

"I'm surprised you got permission."

"Oh, I was worried about that too, but it was easy. I had to barge in on Sophia to get it, but it was fast."

The Dark Lord's daughter planning to return to the castle, however briefly, should have been reason for concern, even suspicion. But there hadn't been any contract made with Skills or even on paper. She'd simply asked if she could visit home, and Sophia had said yes. It had been so simple, Aina had found herself asking Sophia if she was sure. Aina had understood once she'd visited the headmaster before leaving and heard about it from her, though.

“So it was easy for me to come to Dement.”

It hadn't been as easy since then, but nothing had been so out of the ordinary that it merited telling them. She'd just been through the typical struggles and wondered how she'd managed them in the past.

“And you came straight here...?” Sierra asked.

“Right... You're visiting home, aren't you?”

“I am... Oh, I guess it might seem odd if you don't know your way around Dement. You have to go through this village to get to the castle.”

While this area was near the border of Dement, so was the castle itself. The reason Aina had a vacation home here was also because this was the nearest village to the castle and she had to pass through to leave anyway. In the past, though, she'd rarely left, so the village chief was in charge of watching her house. That was why she'd come out of his home when Soma had gone there. The house may have been hers on paper, but that didn't mean she could use it as she pleased without speaking to the people who took care of it.

“How long does it take to reach the castle from here?” Soma asked.

“Not long. If you know the way, you can leave in the morning and get there by night.”

“Is that so...” Soma muttered, glancing at Sierra and Felicia. It seemed like a meaningful look...and it probably was, based on what he asked immediately after that. “Would it be all right for us to accompany you?”

“Well... I guess there's no reason you can't. Not many people visited, but there's no rule against it. Weren't you going back to the academy, though?”

“I still plan to, but I can afford to take a little longer.”

“I don't mind,” Sierra agreed.

“I don't either.”

“I mean, it's not your problem—it's Soma's. Lina and the headmaster and everyone know you're probably alive, but they don't know that for sure. Shouldn't you go back and tell them? I know I'd want that, at least...”

“Hmm? Hildegard should know I’m alive... Did she not tell you?”

“Huh? No, this is the first I’ve heard of it.”

She certainly hadn’t seemed to doubt in the slightest that Soma was alive, but she hadn’t told Aina that directly. All she’d heard from the headmaster was whining about how she couldn’t go look for Soma.

“I hadn’t heard either,” Sierra said.

“Oh? That’s strange... The ties between Hildegard and me mean that each of us can sense whether the other is alive, even if we don’t know where the other is. She told me that herself, and I can sense her as well.”

“I don’t know this person, but maybe she didn’t want to give you false hope because she didn’t know where Soma was,” Felicia suggested. “Although it’s questionable whether you would need to consider such a thing when dealing with Soma.”

“Yeah... That might be it. Also, I agree with that last part.”

“Mm-hmm... Me too.”

“Am I suddenly being insulted?”

“Of course not. It’s just an opinion.”

“Yes. If you feel a certain way about it, I think that comes down to your personal viewpoint.”

“Or a difference in values...?”

“How harsh of you,” Soma said with a shrug. He didn’t really seem to mind, though, and naturally, Aina wasn’t being serious either. Even if it was true.

“Well, in that case, returning to the academy is certainly important as well, but nobody will die from not knowing whether I’m alive or dead. I think the matter of Aina’s family is more important and urgent.”

“I’m just visiting home. I’m not going to die... Thanks, though.”

Although she thought it would be fine, she was still somewhat nervous, so she was glad she’d found Soma and he’d offered to accompany her. She wasn’t about to say that much...but she couldn’t help smiling.

Well, whatever happened, she knew it would be okay. It would be best if nothing happened, and she didn't think it would...but she also hadn't expected Albert to kidnap her, so she still maintained the bare minimum of wariness, ready for the worst that could happen.

Aina let her thoughts drift to the people she'd come to miss, wondering if they were doing okay.

It was the morning of the next day. Since Soma's group would have nothing to do if they stayed in the village, they decided to leave early.

Their original plan had been to head southwest, but now that they had a new destination—the Dark Lord's castle—they were going northwest. According to Aina, that was the only possible way to reach the castle. Soma had wondered whether that meant there was some kind of barrier that prevented one from going forward unless one followed specific steps...but once they went out, he understood. She had meant that simply in a geographical sense.

"I can see how this would be the only way to reach the castle."

"A spot surrounded by rugged mountains..." Felicia mused. "Quite cliché, but that shows how effective it is."

"Mm-hmm... But couldn't we get there another way?" Sierra asked.

"Well, maybe if it was only that the mountains were hard to traverse," Aina replied. "But it actually isn't misleading to say that there are specific steps you have to follow. They released powerful monsters in the area that attack anyone who tries to go through the mountains."

"I see..."

That certainly sounded like somewhere a Dark Lord would live. It also indicated another fact, however.

"So the Dark Lord can control monsters, I take it?"

Soma had heard people say that the devils controlled monsters and blame out-of-control monsters on the devils, but he'd thought they were just using the devils as a scapegoat. There were Skills to train monsters and make them do your bidding, yes, but they weren't exclusive to devils, nor would every devil necessarily have them.

"Technically not him, but his subordinate... Maybe I should say his retainer?"

Either way, that person can. But the number of monsters and the area they can influence is limited, so protecting these mountains is all they can do.”

“All? That sounds like more than enough to me,” Felicia said.

Soma felt the same. These mountains weren’t as daunting as the ones around Ladius, but they were significant nonetheless. Setting monsters loose to protect them sounded like more than enough. The Skill that granted the ability to control monsters, Tame, usually only worked on one or two at a time. The Dark Lord’s retainer must have been powerful to be able to disregard that rule.

“You’re one to talk. Well, anyway, that means the monsters around here aren’t just monsters; they protect our home, so don’t go killing them willy-nilly... You got that?”

“Did you hear that, Sierra?”

“Mm-hmm... She meant you, I think.”

“I meant ‘you’ plural! Both of you!”

“Tch, indeed.”

“Tch...”

“Quit it!”

The two responded to Aina’s shout by shrugging in unison, then turned to look at the monster Soma had just hunted down.

Yes, before hearing about this, Soma had spotted the rugged mountains and gone up to check them out. He had immediately been attacked by this monster, and naturally, he’d been able to fend it off...but seeing it had lit a spark in him and Sierra. They’d never seen or heard of any monster like it, and it had been quite strong as well—it had taken an attack from Soma, although not a full-force one, and survived.

Parts from strong monsters often had special uses. That was because their high mana content gave them unique effects. And this monster was not only strong but rare.

Which meant...

“I thought we could study it,” Sierra grumbled.

“Yes... Truly a shame. Would it be all right for us to take just this one, seeing as we’ve already killed it?”

“I told you, it’s ours. You killing it doesn’t change that. I would let that slide if it were anyone else, but not you two...especially not you, Soma.”

“Aren’t you being rather harsh? This wasn’t on purpose.”

“Well, it’s also my fault for not warning you beforehand, so it’s no big deal. But I have a feeling if I give you an inch on this, you’ll take a mile.”

“No, you’re overthinking this. However, it’s hard to imagine that there is only one type of monster here, so chances are that there are other rare monsters in the area. Perhaps if I were practicing with my sword as I do every day, I might accidentally cut a chunk out of one of the mountains, bringing a rare monster down with it...but that is far from my mind.”

“Thank you for your completely unconvincing argument. It’s a no from me.”

“Tch, indeed,” Soma said with another shrug. He was kidding, though, and Aina probably was too, except for the part about not letting him take the monster.

He did genuinely want to study it, but it must not have been okay to study. Since this creature protected the area right next to the castle, it wouldn’t have been surprising if there was some nasty trick built into it, even as a monster. Soma wasn’t about to step into a trap that he could see coming.

“Now that we know we can’t take it with us, what should we do with it?” Felicia asked.

“Well, it would eventually return to the earth if we simply left it here, but this would not be the ideal place for that.”

“Should we dump it in the mountains?” Sierra suggested. “Feed the monsters?”

“I don’t remember if any of them eat meat... Well, either way, I couldn’t bring myself to do that, so let’s bring it with us. I’m sure if we explain, someone will take it and do what’s proper with it. Would you mind, Soma?”

“Hmm? Why me?” Soma looked at Aina with puzzlement. If someone was going to carry it, it certainly made sense for that to be Soma, but...

“Well, you took it down, so it’s your responsibility, right? But to be honest, it’s also that you’re probably the only one who can carry it. It’s heavier than it looks. You must know that from fighting it.”

“Hmm, I don’t mind...but I would prefer to take responsibility by examining it closely if I can.”

“I’ll help...”

“I told you no.”

“Tch...”

“Look what you’ve taught Sierra now, Soma.”

“I think this criticism of me is overly harsh.”

“Then control yourself,” Felicia chided him. “You’ve been too rash today, going off and climbing mountains just because they’re there. That may be normal for you, but this is worse than usual.”

He’d been somewhat aware of that himself, so he accepted the criticism. He’d gotten worked up because the castle was near; he needed to think about his behavior.

“I suppose I’ll carry it, then.”

He kept the jokes to a minimum and went over to the motionless monster. To Soma, it looked like a cow at a glance, but it couldn’t possibly be one—cows didn’t have third eyes on their foreheads or create lightning sparks when they charged. That was why he’d wanted to study it...but now that he’d been told no, he had no choice but to obey.

He lifted the cowlike monster, which weighed heavily in his arms. It was about two meters long, and if it had been a cow, it would have weighed about a ton, but it felt like two or more to him. As Aina had said, he was the only one who could carry it. Sierra may have been good at momentary bursts of intense power, but she wasn’t suited for tasks like this, and Aina and Felicia didn’t bear considering. That meant Soma needed to carry it.

“Let’s be on our way, then.”

“Yeah... Are you all right? I can help if you want...”

“No, this has the potential to crush you if you make any wrong moves. I appreciate the thought, however.”

“Really...?”

It was just like Aina to worry about him when she herself had told him to do this. Soma smiled wryly and shrugged.

The four began to walk toward a spot at the foot of the mountain. This was a regular road, so it went through a mountain pass...or did it?

“Could this possibly be...”

“Something they added? And not natural?” Sierra finished Soma’s question.

“I’m impressed you can tell... Yeah, apparently it is. They dug out part of a mountain and built the castle there. But that was in the former Dark Lord’s time...actually, the one before that.”

“So there has always been a Dark Lord, even though the circumstances that led to them being called a Dark Lord differed.”

As they spoke, they proceeded down the path. It wasn’t even a tunnel; it was completely open. There must have been a mountain there the same size as the ones around them... It was hard to comprehend the sheer enormity of a power that could clear a mountain like that so cleanly.

“Something doesn’t feel right about Soma talking about great powers,” Felicia commented.

“Hmm? Why is that?”

“Oh, I see what you mean. I bet he could do that too.”

“I believe you’re overestimating me somewhat.”

It would be difficult for even Soma to make something like this. All Soma could use was a sword—an object meant for cutting. And mountains were too big to cut. The most he would be capable of was blasting them away.

“I don’t know what to say—there are too many places I could start...”

“I get it, but I mean, this is just how he is.”

“Ah, I feel the same.”

“You two seem to just say whatever you like about me...”

“Mm-hmm... Of course. And by the way...”

“What is it, Sierra?”

“If that power went against you...what would you do?”

“Hmm...”

Soma glanced around and muttered to himself once more.

The power that had created this path...it would be a truly great one. One that Soma wouldn't be capable of wielding.

And if that was directed at him...

“Well, I suppose I would cut it as usual.”

“Um... I thought you just said even you wouldn't be capable, but you think you can cut it anyway?” Felicia asked.

“I would have to attempt it in order to know. I think I would be capable of cutting it, though.”

In essence, the difference was simply a matter of where the power was directed. The power that had created this was specialized in widespread destruction, whereas Soma's power was specialized in cutting. The former was used on planes, in other words, and the latter on lines. Destroying a line didn't require as much power as destroying a plane...but that didn't necessarily mean one had to *use* less power.

“How do I put this... That's...really Soma of you.”

“Mm-hmm. Very Soma-like.”

“I'll take that as a compliment.”

It was just a hypothetical, however. That would only apply if clearing a mountain was the limit of that power; Soma would have to find out where its upper limit was.

And Soma didn't know how the takeover had happened, but he found it hard to imagine that the current Dark Lord was weaker than the previous one. In other words, the current Dark Lord could potentially be far stronger than whoever had done this.

A building was coming into view as they continued down the path. That must have been the Dark Lord's castle.

Soma narrowed his eyes toward it as if scrutinizing the person inside.

The closer they got to the castle, the more fitting it looked. It had an oddly eerie appearance; some lightning flashing in the background would have completed the picture perfectly. It couldn't have been more deserving of being called a Dark Lord's castle.

But it seemed overdone, as if it was deliberately trying to look that way, and apparently that impression was accurate.

"I used to think it was too dark and creepy, and I didn't know what they were thinking," Aina said. "But I get it now that I'm seeing it knowing everything I've learned outside. A normal house or castle would be out of place, if anything."

"Yes... Not even regular devils would come here, so only a certain type of person would ever see this place, and seeing an average building might turn them off at the outset," Felicia agreed. "Although if that were their objective, it might be a good thing."

"Being a Dark Lord is hard work?" Sierra asked.

"That seems to be the case."

The Dark Lord himself probably didn't care, though.

"It seems like it would be hard to live in, however. Are things all right on that front?"

"Yeah, it's fine. There are places for that, you know, like housing quarters. I guess I was only able to live there because I didn't do it for very long to begin with, though."

"You didn't? But it's so big..."

It was no wonder that Felicia was surprised; it really was a huge castle. It was probably even larger than the one in Ladius's capital.

But while it did look like it would be a difficult place to live, as Soma had commented, it also seemed like a waste for only a couple people to live in this

castle.

“Is the rest full of monsters? Not people?” Sierra asked.

“It was in the past, yeah, but I’ve never seen a monster in it myself. There’s an anti-monster barrier now, actually.”

“Ah, I recall hearing that.”

Soma had heard that from Stina, however, not Aina. That must have been why she turned a confused look to him when he said that.

“You do...? Did I talk about this before?”

“No, I don’t believe I heard it from you. It was somebody else who told me.”

Aina seemed to accept that explanation. “Huh... Well, I guess it isn’t like it’s a secret, so it’s no wonder other people know.”

Soma had deliberately avoided telling her that Stina had said that because he hadn’t mentioned Stina to her yet. The day before, he’d given her an overall description of what had happened and talked about someone from the previous town helping them out, but he hadn’t said who that person was. He had made that decision on his own, but when he’d found a moment to tell Felicia and Sierra his reasoning, they’d agreed.

That reasoning was that Aina and Stina hadn’t seen each other in years, and the two of them had some kind of past together that the others didn’t know about. Soma couldn’t be sure if it was all right to bring Stina up. They’d decided to watch and wait and only bring her up if it seemed like it would be okay. Well, they didn’t know exactly how to judge that...but they figured if they brought it up, it would be while they were on the way back to school. There was no reason they had to hurry.

More importantly...

“All right, why don’t we start moving?” Felicia said. “Looking at the castle isn’t going to get us any farther.”

“Yes, very true. Let us be on our way...to slay the Dark Lord.”

“Hey, what’re you trying to slay my dad for?!”

“Well, being a Dark Lord, he must have one-of-a-kind magical items or materials, correct? Perhaps even something that confers the ability to use magic. And if I defeat the Dark Lord, that will be mine. What reason is there not to?”

“True... I’ll help.”

“You can’t just agree and offer to *help*, Sierra...!”

Aina must have known they were kidding, and yet she was playing her role and snapping back at them. Soma nodded to himself.

“This is precisely how Aina should be.”

“Mm-hmm... Feels like she’s back.”

“I can’t believe you two...! And what was the last day or so to you, then?!”

But to this typical exchange, a different element was added. They heard a sigh.

It had come from Felicia, of course. The look she was giving Soma and Sierra showed clear disdain.

She then turned to Aina and dipped her head. “I apologize for my sister, Aina...”

“Huh? Oh, no, this is normal. I’m used to it... It’s no big deal. It’s not like I’m really mad, you know?”



“Hmm... While I was aware of this, something seems off about her saying so herself.”

“Mm-hmm... Kind of masochistic?”

“That doesn’t mean you two can say whatever you want...!”

Soma shrugged and stopped, both because he saw that he couldn’t get away with going any further and in response to Felicia’s annoyance at him.

Felicia would get used to it sooner or later. It was another question entirely who that was a good thing or a bad thing for, though.

Nonetheless...

“Well, let’s actually be on our way, shall we?”

Soma smiled wryly as Aina glared at him, and the group began to walk down the path before them, which led directly to the castle.

†

They were met with an unexpected development when they reached the castle. Well, maybe not exactly that—more like the absence of an expected development. That is to say, the person they’d thought would be there wasn’t.

“Hmm... A Dark Lord’s castle minus the Dark Lord. How novel.”

“They did say he ‘ran away,’ if I’m not misremembering...”

“Mm-hmm... I heard that too.”

Apparently that was what was going on, but it had all happened so suddenly, it was hard to grasp. Soma thought back on what had happened.

When they’d reached the castle, a man had immediately appeared and identified himself as the head butler. There apparently weren’t any other butlers here, and yet he called himself the head...but that didn’t really matter. The important thing was what he’d said after that.

He knew Aina, of course, and he’d been glad to see her back, but after he’d thanked her for coming, he’d told them that he was the only person in the castle apart from one other person; everyone else was out. And that one other person was the Dark Lord...but nobody knew where he was. He hadn’t been

kidnapped or anything; he'd simply gotten tired of working and run away.

Soma had thought it was a joke at first, but...

"I forgot he was like that... I guess he hasn't changed. That could be a good thing or a bad thing..." Aina had muttered with a sigh, so it must have been true. Then she'd gone with the head butler to search for the Dark Lord, leaving Soma, Sierra, and Felicia alone.

"Well, what shall we do now?"

"What choice do we have but to wait here?"

"Mm-hmm... Nothing else to do."

"I suppose so..." Soma shrugged and looked around. The first thing he saw was stone; in fact, that was most of what was around them. The only exceptions were the chairs they were sitting in and the table next to them, which were made of wood. Everything else, from the walls to the ceiling, was made of stone.

It was a tiny room, to be honest. It contained only three chairs and a table—enough for them to take a break, but it was far too small to do anything else. It must have originally been a break room for soldiers.

And it couldn't have been out of ill will that they'd been brought and left here. Aina and the butler must have been panicked and in a rush, or they wouldn't have made them wait in a place like this.

"Well, it's understandable, since she just heard the Dark Lord ran away," Felicia said.

"But she seemed to know he does that..."

"I imagine that neither she nor the butler have experienced it personally, even if they were aware."

The people who were out of the house right now would usually have been the ones to look for him, but now there were only the two of them, so they had to do it. But they didn't have any experience with it, so they'd freaked out, leading to this, Soma presumed.

Well, as Felicia had said, the owner of this place, their king, had run away. It

would actually have been a problem if they hadn't been anxious about that.

"But this leaves us with much time on our hands... Hmm."

"You just had a bad idea, didn't you?"

"How rude. That isn't the case. I did think of something, however."

"Like what...?"

"Well, sitting here will accomplish nothing, so I thought we could search this castle. We may find something, after all."

"This is Aina's home, isn't it? Wouldn't we just be snooping around her house?"

"But...it sounds fun."

"Yes, doesn't it?"

Felicia seemed exasperated with them, but this was a Dark Lord's castle; it was only natural to be interested in what was inside it.

"Well, I can't argue with that, but I won't go with you."

"Oh? Why not?"

"My conscience is stronger than my curiosity."

"I see. I won't push the matter, then."

"Then... I'll stay too."

"Sierra? I won't stop you if you want to go...although I might have a word or two for you."

"Mm-mm... I'm okay."

Sierra must have been acting out of consideration for Felicia. But if that was her decision, then Soma wouldn't argue it.

Well, even Soma had his reservations about going off on his own, but the other two would surely feel bad if he held back on their account.

"Hmm... I suppose I'll go alone, then. Ah, and if I search for the Dark Lord while I'm at it, that can serve as my excuse."

“I don’t think it serves as an excuse if that’s the only reason you’re doing it... And you don’t even know what the Dark Lord looks like, do you?”

“No, I don’t, but the Dark Lord is the only other person here. So if I find someone whom I haven’t seen before, that must be him.”

“That’s not very precise...”

“But it makes sense.”

Soma doubted he would actually find the Dark Lord, but that didn’t bother him. It was just a pretext, after all, so all that mattered was that it made logical sense.

And he was just killing time, anyway. He wasn’t really thinking of doing anything in particular.

So...

“I’ll be back shortly, then.”

“Mm-hmm... See you.”

“Don’t go too far, and come back before it gets too late.”

“What are you, my mother?”

Soma smiled wryly at that exchange before casually leaving the room behind.

As Soma had surmised from the exterior, it looked like it would take longer than a day or two to walk to every corner of the castle. While it was large, the corridors were narrow; they could fit two or three people abreast, and the ceiling was high enough that you wouldn't hit your head if you jumped, but that was small for a castle.

So while the size and number of rooms were also factors, that meant there was more distance to cover. If you took an area and filled it completely with either wide or narrow corridors, the narrow corridors would have to be more numerous, so it would take longer to walk through all of them.

He couldn't say that for certain given the possibility that the rooms were larger than average, but the rooms he'd seen so far hadn't seemed especially big. And this was a Dark Lord's castle, after all; they wouldn't have built it to be easy to get around in. It made more sense for it to go on forever like this. Soma had spent about thirty minutes walking, and it had been the same kind of corridor the whole time, so he thought it likely that they would continue like this.

It would be another story if this were a normal path, of course, but...

"It certainly isn't a normal path at this point," Soma said with a sigh, looking around.

It was a stone hallway, made of the same material as the room he'd been in with Felicia and Sierra, but there was a clear difference—the pattern on the walls. It wasn't that there had been a different pattern on the walls in that room—there hadn't been a pattern on them at all.

It wasn't that that room had been barren either, though. Well, it *had* been barren, but the point was that this pattern wasn't there to give you something to look at. The pattern in itself didn't have any effect. It wasn't pointless, but it didn't do anything on its own.

The point of it all was to confuse one's sense of distance and direction; the simple scenery that seemed to go on endlessly was just one part of that. It wore down your focus and made proper judgments harder.

And while it appeared monotonous, it actually wasn't. There were slight, nearly imperceptible angles in the corridors as well as variations in their length. Everything together served to distort the senses. It was a subtle trick, but that made it all the more difficult to notice and hence effective. It would even be possible to go round and round in circles while thinking you were moving forward.

"Well, I'm not sure whether I could call this Dark Lord-like, but..."

It was certainly reliable, and now that Soma knew about it, he couldn't disregard it, which made it quite a nasty trick. He got the sense that there was some sort of subliminal effect in the pattern, and it wouldn't be surprising if there were other things built in too. He could imagine the type of person who would build this. Apparently this castle had been passed down from previous generations, though, so it must have been them who were twisted.

"It was a good thing that Felicia and Sierra decided to stay put."

Even if he did find something interesting, this would have completely exhausted Felicia by then. In that sense, though, maybe it really was Dark Lord-like—it weeded out the ones without enough strength.

The issue was that Soma was beginning to tire of walking here. In the past, there would have been monsters roaming, which would have made the tricky construction even more difficult to notice, but right now the castle was nothing but halls. And noticing the trick didn't cause anything to happen, so there was nothing to do. Even Soma couldn't help but get bored.

"Hmm... Maybe I should create a shortcut myself... No, that would be a bad idea."

If this had been any old Dark Lord's castle, he would have cut his way through the wall and made a path for himself, but this was Aina's home. Snooping through it was bad enough; he couldn't get away with breaking things.

"But wait... Perhaps if I told her I did it to make it easier to live here...?" He

found himself starting to think.

And that was only natural. His spatial awareness told him he hadn't even made it a third of the way; that meant in the worst case, he would have to keep walking for many times longer than he already had. Of course he couldn't stay strictly rational about it.

And considering the height of the ceiling, there must have been several floors to this castle. That was the reason for his estimate that it would take several days to check everywhere...and if those other floors were the same way as this one, he wasn't sure he could withstand the urge to create a shortcut.

Well, he was the one who'd decided to look around without permission in the first place, so...

"Oh?"

Just then, as he was about to continue down the unchanging path with a sigh, he stopped. He'd sensed something amiss.

It didn't have to do with the pattern on the walls or the angle of the hall. He'd already taken notice of those. They were amiss, yes, which was how he'd noticed the trick...but he was picking up on something else now.

"Hmm... A wall?"

He spun around and zeroed in on the spot. The pattern also seemed off, so it was difficult to tell, but...

"Of course... This must be..."

He put pressure on the part of the wall that stuck out to him. It budged slightly backward. Then it seemed to get stuck, but he could guess what to do next based on that.

He tried moving it laterally and found he could move it to the right. When he did so, the wall before him slid in the same direction. Soon, there was a hole large enough for someone to pass through.

"A hidden corridor...no, a hidden room, should I say?"

This most likely wasn't the main path. Soma thought so because it was too early for there to be a staircase to the next floor.

While this had been difficult to perceive, the fact that Soma had found it meant that it was possible to find, at least. And now that he had, it rendered more than half of the tricks pointless. It wasn't impossible that they'd deliberately put a path to the upper floors in a place like this, but it was unlikely. In other words, this most likely led to a separate, unrelated area.

“And if it does, it would be worth going inside.”

There was no reason not to go, in fact. He was bored, and more importantly, it was possible that something was hidden in this room.

So he triumphantly proceeded forward...

“Oh... This is...”

He could tell right away that this area wasn't like the one he'd been in until now. That was clear from how it looked.

The first color that hit his field of view was green, and then brown. It was a tree—and a rather large one at that. In order to see the top, he had to tilt his head so far back it hurt his neck. Apparently the ceiling was higher here, which in itself told him that this was no ordinary tree.

But he looked downward right away. Just below, leaning against the trunk, he'd spotted a human figure. They seemed to be sleeping...but they instantly opened their eyes and hastily sat up.

“Shit, they caught—or I guess not. A kid, though...? Who are you?”

It was a young man; he appeared to be in his teens. His hair and eyes were the same jet-black as Soma's, but there was a certain maturity in his eyes. He looked like he could be a boy, a grown man, or even older; it was difficult to determine his age by looking at him.

And the familiar figure left Soma speechless. While he'd guessed he might, it was still surprising to actually see him...

“You don't seem hostile enough to be an invader... Did you get lost? Then maybe someone came to visit... Well, whatever. The others'll take care of it. So, sorry, kid. I don't feel like helping you find your way back. I'll be chilling out here, so good luck.”

After saying that, the man leaned back against the trunk and closed his eyes, but Soma let out a sigh. Sure, he'd kept in mind that something like this might happen, but...

"I must say, I'm not even surprised anymore. You could have stood to change at least slightly, but you don't seem to have changed at all...Kanzaki Iori."

"What...?" The man reopened his eyes and cast a doubtful look toward him. Soma sighed again; he really had remained the same in all the worst ways.

"How do you know my... Wait, and the way you said that... And if you know me, then..."

"I see your attitude hasn't changed either. Quite rude of you to criticize another's way of speaking."

"I only know one person who would say that... You're Yagiri Soma?!"

"Correct in a sense, but also incorrect. Technically, Yagiri Soma died many years ago."

So Soma said with a shrug, smiling wryly at the shocked look he was getting from his old friend, who had called him by a name he hadn't heard in a long time.

Afterword

Hello, this is Shin Kouduki. Thank you so much for picking up this work. I'm still publishing at one-year intervals, but I hope you enjoyed it regardless.

Well, this volume ends on another cliff-hanger. I plan to write a lot of original content for the next volume, though, so I hope you'll look forward to it.

Oh, and I'd better not forget to evangelize the manga adaptation. It's as well-done as ever, so I hope you'll pick it up while it's being published.

Finally, my thanks.

Thank you to my editors K and W, who I've put through a lot of work.

Thank you to necömi for taking time out of your busy schedule to create even more wonderful illustrations.

And I couldn't have done this without the proofreaders, marketers, designers, and everyone else involved in the publication of this volume. Thank you so much. And most of all, thank you to all of my supporters and everyone who's picked up and purchased this book.

With that, I hope we can meet again in volume 7.









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I Surrendered My Sword for a New Life as a Mage: Volume 6

by Shin Kouduki

Translated by Kim Louise Davis Edited by Shakuzan

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