

1

Author
Sin Guilty
Illustration
NAKAMURA 8



The
Boy _{who} **Ruled**
the
Monsters

1

Author
Sin Guilty
Illustration
NAKAMURA 8

The
Boy Who Ruled
the Monsters





Sol Rock

A young man with the godlike power of “Player,” which enables him to assign his companions incredible skills and stat buffs. After being banished from his party of childhood friends, he decides to start using his power to the fullest to realize his dream of conquering every dungeon in the world.

“All
right.
Ready...
attack!”

Julia Miller

A young girl who received the power to be the party’s healer from Sol. She’s known by the nickname “Saint of Healing” for her mastery of all healing spells.

Reen Faulkner

A young girl who received the power to be the party’s tank from Sol. She’s known by the nickname “Iron Wall” for the way she stops charging monsters head-on.



“My name is Sol Rock.
My dream is to
conquer every single
dungeon in this world.
O black dragon bound
in this eternal hell,
do you swear
to obey all my
commands and to
become my loyal
servant?”

“I swear upon
my name to become
your loyal servant.
I am Lunvemt
Nachtfelia the
All Dragon!
My true name is Luna.
I beseech you to call
my true name to bind
my soul to yours and to
become my
master!”



"Can I...
stay like
this...
for just a
little
longer?"

Luna

The Bound Evil Dragon of myths and legends, Lunvemt Nachtfelia. After being freed by Sol and dedicating herself to him, she assumed human form: a fragment of her real body, which possesses around 0.1% of her true strength.

Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Chapter 1: Player](#)
4. [Chapter 2: Break Up](#)
5. [Chapter 3: The Adventurer's Guild](#)
6. [Chapter 4: Newfound Power](#)
7. [Chapter 5: The New Order](#)
8. [Chapter 6: The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters](#)
9. [Chapter 7: The All Dragon](#)
10. [Chapter 8: Royal Succession](#)
11. [Side Story: Aina'noa la Avalil the Elven Queen](#)
12. [Afterword](#)
13. [Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)
14. [About J-Novel Club](#)
15. [Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: Player

Up north in a remote region of the Kingdom of Emelia was Garlaige, a fortified city surrounded by monster-infested territories. One such territory had an infamous reputation even in this age when monsters controlled far more land than humans did. Not only was this massive forest one of the five largest in the world, it was so dangerous that it had yet to be unsealed.

A party of adventurers was currently in the very heart of this forest, forming a perimeter around the towering form of the territory's boss. Not only did the Great Demonic Basilisk possess teeth and fangs that could tear through shields and armor, plus a formidable bulk that could easily send someone flying, but it also had Evil Eye, an attack that could petrify an entire army with a glare. This boss's power was the biggest reason this expansive area remained free of human influence.

Once, in the past, the kingdom had dispatched a force of elite soldiers blessed with talents useful for fighting monsters. Despite suffering heavy casualties, the force had failed to kill the Great Demonic Basilisk. The moss-covered statues littering the depths of the forest were all that remained to bear witness to the tyrant's century-long reign.

In spite of everything, the party currently facing this menace only had five members. These five were not fools who had unwittingly wandered into the forest and, with shock and despair, found themselves under assault. Instead, they had sought the boss out on their own initiative, filled with confidence that they could slaughter the beast that had bested even an army. That was why they had taken on the Rank A promotion mission that called for the unsealing of the territory.

This was Black Tiger, a Rank B adventurer party registered with the Garlaige branch of the Adventurer's Guild. Its five members were childhood friends from the same village.

Everyone in this world received a talent upon turning twelve, but only one in

a thousand received a battle-related one that was useful for fighting monsters. Such talents were so rare that those people were referred to as “those that God has smiled on.” And yet *five* of them had appeared in the same cohort five years earlier in Ros Village, a small settlement with fewer than a hundred inhabitants. As a result, the location was now also known by a different name: Miracle Village.

Unbeknownst to the world, however, this miracle was a lie. God had smiled on—no, *beamed at*—only one child that year. He had bestowed Player—a remarkable talent that had not been seen for over a thousand years—on that boy, granting him the nearly godlike power to designate others as his companions and grant them stats and skills. It wasn’t a stretch to say that this boy was loved by God. He had then proceeded to use Player on the other four, who had in truth only received run-of-the-mill talents. That was how they had come to possess the incredible gifts that allowed them to go toe to toe with monsters.

The name of this young man from Ros Village was Sol Rock. He sported glossy black hair swept back in a natural look and had black eyes that shone with the force of his will. There was still a hint of childishness in his otherwise shapely features, and his well-toned muscles gave him the air of a veteran adventurer.

But contrary to appearances, Sol was the weakest member of Black Tiger. Player allowed him to grant other people stats and skills, but he couldn’t use it on himself. He had kept the specific details of Player secret during his three years at the Royal Academy, graduating at fifteen without incident. He and his friends had then made their start as adventurers. Two years had passed, and they were now on the threshold of reaching the top rung of the ladder.

This was the true backstory of Sol Rock, the adventurer loved by God. A story that he had yet to fully divulge to anyone else.

“All right, Mark and Alan are in position,” Sol confirmed. He then asked the two girls next to him, “Reen and Julia, you good to go?”

One of the skills that Player gave Sol was Mapping, which created a window that only he could see at the edge of his vision, showing him the positions of both friends and foes. According to the display, two members of his party, Mark

and Alan, had successfully circled around the basilisk.

“Waiting on your signal,” Julia replied.

Reen nodded. “Sure thing.”

This area of the forest was so dense that Sol’s line of sight was greatly obstructed, but he somehow had a firm grasp on the positions of not only their party members but their enemy as well. Many of the things that Sol said would draw questioning looks from a normal person, but Reen and Julia had been with him so long that they had learned to take these facts in stride. The pair had also learned through experience that Sol never got lost in dungeons, no matter how complicated the layout was. That was simply what his talent did—it enabled him to support the rest of his party in a multitude of effective and substantial ways. Or at least, that was the explanation he had given everyone.

“All right. Ready...go!”

The moment Sol gave the order, the young girl known as Reen stepped out from behind a large tree right in front of the basilisk, catching its attention. Fulfilling her role as the party’s tank, she activated Intimidate, an exceptional skill that forcibly drew aggro from enemies and dulled all their movements for a time. The flashy visual effect from the skill enveloped her, creating a breathtakingly beautiful composition from the sight of her dainty form carrying a massive shield and giant greatsword far beyond her own weight class.

This was Reen “Iron Wall” Faulkner, a warrior to whom Sol had imparted the abilities of a tank. She was a beautiful girl with eyes that shone gold, a well-proportioned body that radiated health, and shoulder-length blonde hair that streamed in the wind as she charged in.

Upon noticing its challenger’s approach, the basilisk turned in her direction as if drawn by her beauty, bringing its massive bulk to bear. When the two clashed, despite their overwhelming difference in size, Reen easily held her ground by bracing with her shield. Immediately afterward, she effortlessly pulled off a shoulder throw and flipped the huge lizard onto its back.

Reen had made it look easy, but she had not gotten off entirely unscathed from the exchange. Even with the shield, clashing with the basilisk head-on had shaved off points from an invisible wall around her that normally only monsters

possessed. To ensure that this wall called “HP” did not reach zero, Julia promptly cast Restoration on Reen per Sol’s instructions.

Julia “Saint of Healing” Miller was a healer who had mastery over all existing healing spells. She had hair and eyes the color of cherry blossoms and a voluptuous figure that was almost excessive in its allure. Thanks to the skills that Sol had granted her, she could heal even injuries severe enough to make an adventurer hang up his boots. This had made her so famous that not only did she receive work from both the Adventurer’s Guild and the Church, but even nobles sought her out to make personal requests. More than once, however, the disparity between the image invoked by her nickname and her natural sensuousness had made someone do a double take.

Sol and Julia had revealed themselves to the basilisk knowing full well that they could not take hits from it without the protection of Reen’s shield. They pushed down the fear welling up within and paid close attention to their positioning, making sure that they were always keeping Reen between the monster and themselves. Stepping out from behind the figure staving off the majority of their enemy’s attacks was nothing short of foolish; in fights, the zone behind Reen’s back was much safer than behind any boulder or large tree. There was no advantage in the party’s commander and healer abandoning the protection of the tank.

In contrast, Mark and Alan, the two guys in charge of dealing damage, had no business staying in the tank’s shadow, save for the instances when enemies unleashed large-scale area-of-effect attacks.

Thanks to Reen, the basilisk was now on its back. As the monster fought to get to its feet, struggling due to its large form, countless projectiles rained down with flashy effects. Magic Orbs formed with pure mana of no particular element and Elemental Orbs of earth, water, fire, and wind slammed into it, staggered in intervals that gave away how long it took to cast each spell.

The caster named Alan “Grand Magus” Lewis was the party’s magic DPS, as Sol had given him the ability to cast a large array of spells. This young man had ice-blue hair and eyes that were always calm and collected. He was often called “cold” by those of the fairer sex who were around his age, but even he was now excited in the heat of battle. Still, he was making a constant, conscious effort to

keep his head cool.

“Alan!” Sol shouted. “Wind is the most effective! Focus on dealing wind-based attacks!”

“I disagree!” Alan shouted back. “This monster isn’t nullifying any specific element! It should go down faster if I throw all the elements at it, recasting spells immediately when they’re available!”

Sol paused, then said, “Okay, go for it.” He had display windows constantly showing him accurate battle data that the others could not see. That was how he knew for sure that wind was the basilisk’s weakness.

Unfortunately, he had no objective way to prove it, and he understood that Alan was simply making a judgment call based on what he knew from personal experience. The stronger someone was, the more likely they were to do that. In fact, the two guys in the party had been ignoring Sol’s commands in battle practically all the time as of late. It was only the two girls who still did as he asked. Black Tiger was somehow making it work as a party, but they were walking a very tight rope.

Even so, Sol could not dismiss Alan’s judgment call out of hand. After all, Alan wasn’t disagreeing with him because he didn’t trust him—Alan trusted Sol but was making different calls because he believed he knew better. This disparity could be ultimately chalked up to the fact that Sol had never told his party members about Player, so Sol understood that it was really his own fault.

In a general sense, it was true that a party’s ability to effectively convert its total MP pool into damage could be the difference between life and death, especially in fights that ended up being very close. When the party had things in hand, placing a little more focus than usual on dealing damage could indeed help the tank—and the rest of the group by extension—to come out the other side a little less spent.

At the moment, Sol had determined that they had a little leeway in how they were handling the fight as long as he used Player’s abilities without slipping up. All adventurers knew to leave themselves a safety margin in all situations, as someone who bet all or nothing would lose their life before making it big. It was after considering everything that he decided to give Alan room to do what he

thought best.

“Rending Burst!”

Joining in a beat slower than Alan on account of being a close-quarters melee fighter, Mark unleashed a massive attack that he had been building up at the basilisk’s flank. The same number of attacks that Mark had landed while charging the move were delivered once more in a split second, doubling the amount of damage that he had dealt in the time frame. Thanks to the Penetrating Strike buff that Sol had cast on Mark earlier, Mark’s blows had the added benefit of bypassing the monster’s physical defenses.

Mark “Supreme Fist” Ros, who had mastered every martial art school, was the party’s top attacker. The son of Ros Village’s chief had handsome features and, like most people in this world, brown hair and eyes. On account of his role as a melee fighter, his body displayed the result of much more training than the others’ did, boasting a degree of perfection superior to not only his peers but most other active adventurers. Mark was the leader of Black Tiger, and he had significantly more monster kills under his belt than anyone in his age group. These two facts had earned him so much esteem in Garlaige that he was considered among the five strongest adventurers in the city.

When Black Tiger had first started, there was a rule that Mark was supposed to wait for Sol’s signal before unleashing the finisher that he would later call Rending Burst. Lately, however, it was becoming common for him to launch it as soon as it was charged up. The way Mark saw it, the more Rending Bursts he could pull off, the sooner the fights would end.

Unfortunately, monster battles were not always such straightforward affairs. There were any number of ways to maintain control of a fight, such as managing the opponent’s aggro and either interrupting big moves or making the monster use those big moves once the party was totally ready to deal with them. As long as one had complete understanding of a monster’s moves and could afford for a fight to last slightly longer, one could seize victory without ever losing the initiative. This was the essence of fighting monsters through the intelligent use of the talents and skills at one’s command as opposed to relying on brute force.

Unfortunately, the only person who truly understood this was Sol, thanks to the Player talent. He had shared only bits and pieces of what he was capable of with his party, but never the full extent, which was why he couldn't demand that they follow his orders to a T, and he understood that.

The worst part was that he was undoubtedly the weakest member of Black Tiger in terms of individual fighting power. In fact, there was practically nothing that he could directly do to monsters, which was why he had relegated himself to the role of holding the party together even when the front line was ignoring his commands and doing whatever they wanted.

"Reen, use Intimidate again, please."

"Okay!"

Thanks to the burst of damage that Mark had just dealt, he now had the basilisk's aggro. If the monster cast Evil Eye, Mark would be the target. To prevent that, Sol, who could tell exactly how much time they had until the next casting of Evil Eye, wanted Reen to redirect the monster's aggro before then.

Normally, Intimidate would still be on cooldown. Without it, Reen wouldn't be able to cancel Evil Eye with Cleave. And when the opponent's aggro wasn't directed her way, Cleave was just a normal attack. Hence, Sol used Cancel Cooldown, one of the limited number of spells in his repertoire, to enable Reen to use Intimidate again right away.

Although Reen knew she'd normally have to wait more than five minutes before Intimidate was available again, she activated it immediately without hesitation. Not once had Sol ever given her an instruction that she couldn't carry out, so there was no reason to doubt him now.

After confirming that the monster's aggro was now directed back at Reen, Sol ordered, "Julia, Greater Restoration on Mark."

"Sure thing." Just like Reen, Julia did what he asked right away, fully restoring Mark's HP.

"I didn't need that healing!"

Right after seizing the Great Demonic Basilisk's aggro, Mark had taken a slap from the monster's long tail. He had protected himself with a cross-handed

guard, but that hadn't been enough to stop him from being thrown a great distance. Even so, his protest hadn't been mere bravado. He simply didn't know that his toughness was being sustained by HP. Therefore, he was under the misconception that he hadn't taken any damage.

No, actually, you did.

Sol knew better. What he had asked Julia to cast wasn't Heal, which would have indeed been needed if Mark had gotten hurt. Instead, he had asked for Greater Restoration, because it was Mark's HP that had needed attention. But for a few small exceptions, as long as someone had HP remaining, they wouldn't get hurt. They would feel shocks and impacts but wouldn't be wounded. In fact, they wouldn't even feel pain. Because of this, Mark thought he had managed to defend against the basilisk's attack unscathed. As long as an attack did not surpass his HP, he could actually just take it standing still; he wouldn't even need to cross his arms. The only thing that would happen was that he would be tossed around, seemingly without repercussions.

Conversely, if one of the basilisk's attacks exceeded his HP by even one point, he would be squished exactly as one would imagine of a mere human standing up to a giant monster. It wouldn't matter if he had a shield or if he was even wearing full-body armor. This was especially true of Mark, who was specced for DPS and not defense.

The ability to grant others the protection of HP, which was normally an advantage possessed only by monsters, was one of Player's overpowered strengths. At the same time, this was also a crutch that led to companions overestimating their toughness.

Mark had actually lost two-thirds of his HP after being hit by the basilisk's tail, but only Sol knew that. If Julia hadn't topped him up right away, the next attack would have shattered Mark's body. In other words, he would have died. Unfortunately, Julia did not yet have access to resurrection magic, and Sol did not want to continue the battle with Mark's life hanging in the balance, so he had told Julia to expend a significant portion of her MP to cast Greater Restoration on him even though he'd wanted to save it for Reen.

Okay, I can still use MP Recovery and Cancel Cooldown a few more times. If

we can keep this up, we can win, no problem.

Comparing the Great Demonic Basilisk's current state against the cards that he still had left, Sol determined that his party had the fight well in hand. Even so, he reminded himself to be even more careful than before. When territory bosses were brought to the brink of death, they commonly became much more powerful in a phenomenon called "rampage."

"Reen, hit it with Cleave within the next thirty seconds!"

"Got it!"

The party could not afford to get hit by Evil Eye this early in the fight. There was no guarantee that Julia had a spell that could dispel Evil Eye, so the safest strategy was to ensure that the basilisk never got to use that skill. Hence, Sol waited for the monster to charge up its attack halfway, then ordered Reen to interrupt it with Cleave.

A normal adventurer who was spectating would have seen a first-rate party one-sidedly whaling on the giant territory boss and foiling its every move. In a way, that would have been right. As long as Player used the party's HP, MP, skills, and other battle-related resources intelligently, the basilisk would die without being able to do a single thing. If Player made a mistake, however, the party could be wiped out in a matter of seconds, no matter how well they had been doing so far.



"Hell yeah! The Territory boss is dead! Our party's promotion to Rank A is now guaranteed!" Mark crowed after dealing the killing blow.

After a long fight that had been a walk in the park for him and Alan but a surprisingly harrowing affair for Sol, who had been skating on thin ice by the end, the Great Demonic Basilisk's massive form finally crashed to the ground. Sol's windows confirmed that the monster was indeed dead and that it would not be getting up again.

Alan, Reen, and Julia also cheered in turn.

"We did it!"

“Amazing!”

“Wow, we really killed it.”

Everyone’s eyes were glowing with accomplishment. They were all sweating heavily and breathing hard, but no one had a single scratch on them. This result was a natural outcome for someone with Player and his party, but a person who didn’t know better might have called it a miracle.

“Well done...indeed.”

The MVP of the fight, the person who had been key to their victory, slumped to the ground, looking more exhausted than everyone else. It took him all his remaining strength to give his party members a brief line of commendation.

“Well done to you too!” Reen smiled.

“Jeez, you gotta shape up!” Julia teased.

In contrast to the girls, who seemed worried about Sol, Mark and Alan looked down on him with scornful eyes that seemed to shout “Why are you more tired than us even though you didn’t even fight?” louder than words could. And this wasn’t the first time. The guys had been looking at Sol this way all the time lately.

With the completion of this mission, the up-and-coming party Black Tiger’s promotion to Rank A and subsequent breakup were now set in stone, because two things had just happened at the same time: Sol had made up his mind to finally share the truth about his talent with his companions, and Mark and Alan had just made a decision of their own.

Chapter 2: Break Up

The fortified city of Garlaige was the largest hub in the upper frontier of Emelia Kingdom. Near the center of the city was the local branch of the Adventurer's Guild, and on the second floor of that building was a large conference room that parties of Rank B or higher could freely use.

Currently gathered in this room were the members of Black Tiger, the party now guaranteed a promotion to Rank A on the merit of unsealing a territory. They weren't all that tired, as the guild had taken on the handling of the territory boss's corpse and even arranged for a luxurious carriage to bring them back to town. Today was the biggest day for them since the founding of their party, and they had more than enough energy left to go all out in celebrating it.

Everyone was all smiles. What they had achieved would be generating a massive sum of money, as all territories were chock-full of exploitable resources. The guild had acknowledged this by preparing food and drink of the highest quality in spades for their in-party blowout.

In terms of living standards, the members of Black Tiger had already made it big. When Sol took an objective look at their situation, he couldn't help but be impressed. Thanks to Player, the five childhood friends now led lives where they wanted for nothing. The food and drink on their table was essentially what nobles of this country enjoyed. Individually, they each had far more money than even run-of-the-mill merchants did. Every one of them owned a mansion on prime real estate in Garlaige, with Mark, Alan, and Julia even having butlers and maids on payroll.

On top of everything, the monster they had killed today was a treasure trove of raw materials. The Adventurer's Guild had already promised that it would buy the corpse at a generous price, and that was in addition to the reward it would be paying them for completing such a difficult mission. Black Tiger's members were going to get another big fat bag of cash soon.

If this had been a picture book, the celebration of defeating the territory boss

would be the very last page, concluding with “and they lived happily ever after.”

However, Sol’s goal wasn’t to live in decadent luxury. For as long as he could remember, way before he had gotten Player, he’d had a dream: to be an adventurer and conquer all of the world’s dungeons. Though he now understood how impossible that dream was, it was still burning red-hot in his chest.

Unfortunately, the same wasn’t true of the childhood friends who had once shared that dream. Now that they had obtained more success than any normal person could dare hope for, they valued safety and reassurance. They wanted distinction, but only that which they could acquire without risk. Sol didn’t blame them—that was just human nature. And it was all the more understandable since they were convinced that their success had been their own doing.

This was why Sol’s dream was going to be dashed to pieces tonight. He was never going to conquer dungeons with the friends who had dreamed with him since as far back as he could remember.



“Wait, what?” Sol looked at his friends in a daze as his brain struggled to comprehend what they had just said.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Mark sighed, then repeated himself. “You’re fired from Black Tiger as of today, Sol.”

“This is a foregone decision jointly made by Mark, the party leader, and me, the vice leader,” said Alan, confirming that Sol had not heard wrong.

The spacious room was plunged into silence. The members of Black Tiger were in the middle of celebrating their promised promotion. They had the place to themselves, the food and drinks were exquisite, and they were having a great time reminiscing about the past, which was something that seemed to never grow old. They had laughed about how they had played at being adventurers when they were kids. The five of them had gathered in the tucked-away nook in their village that served as their secret base and sworn on their handmade toy weapons that they would become a “super-duper uber-famous party” and conquer all the dungeons.

Then came that fateful day when they turned twelve and received the talents that allowed them to become adventurers. They were over the moon and ready to take on the world. Then, beyond their wildest dreams, they got to attend the Royal Academy in the capital. During those three years, they were treated as honor students and lauded by all as “the Miracle Children.” Naturally, they graduated as the top party of their year. They were extremely nervous when they turned down the offer from the royal army in order to found Black Tiger, but also full of both bravado and genuine confidence. Everything after that was history—they shot up through the ranks at record speed and reached Rank B in two years. Now, their promotion to Rank A, an honor held by less than ten parties on the continent, was confirmed. They felt invincible, having turned empty lives in a backward village into lives where they had everything they could ever want and every day was filled with excitement. All at the age of seventeen, to boot.

Normally, this was when they all allowed themselves to indulge in the food, drinks, and feelings of achievement, and the friction in the party and materializing deep-rooted discontent would fade away under the dazzling light of success. Today, however, things took a strange turn when the topic came to Black Tiger’s future. Mark wanted them to continue adventuring for a time but eventually join the army to seek fame and distinction. On the other hand, Alan wanted them to join a prominent clan that would appreciate them properly. The discussion started getting heated, but the girls ignored them because it was a common occurrence.

One thing was different this time, though. Sol, who would normally stay silent, spoke up, fervently arguing that now that they were Rank A and had the freedom to do whatever they wanted, joining the army would essentially be subjecting themselves to stifling regulations and therefore was out of the question. Similarly, joining a clan would mean being tied down by obligations, and the cons would eventually outweigh the pros.

Sol was making his speech partly because, even though he felt that Black Tiger was still lacking in strength, he was very excited that being Rank A meant they finally had the freedom to visit Adventurer’s Guild branches in other countries. Another big factor was that he had made up his mind to divulge what Player

really did, as he had come to the conclusion that hiding it any further would be an exercise in futility.

Unfortunately, he was not the only person who had decided to get something off his chest now that they had reached Rank A.

“You should have spoken up earlier,” Mark spat, then clicked his tongue in irritation. “That way, we wouldn’t have to listen to bull like ‘Oh, it would be weird for us to join the army’ or ‘But joining a prominent clan isn’t what we promised’ from a guy who can’t perform at the Rank A level.”

In a quiet voice and with an uncomfortable smile, Alan added, “I admit that your talent is useful, but that’s only for parties up to Rank C. Ever since we reached Rank B, you’ve honestly been nothing but deadweight. Today’s fight was a prime example. Now that we’re climbing to Rank A, we don’t need you anymore.”

This was a harsh evaluation, but one that sounded reasonable to someone who didn’t know what Player actually did—in other words, everyone besides Sol. Unfortunately, it was based on a completely warped misconception of Player, one which Mark seemed to share. It had never once crossed their minds that the one who always looked on so enviously as they flaunted their flashy fighting skills was actually the one who had given them those skills. They thought that Player was nothing more than a support talent useful only to starting and mid-level adventurers with skills such as Mapping and Enemy Detection to help them keep track of enemies. They were thoroughly convinced that now that they had enough experience under their belts to be recognized as Rank A, they no longer needed what he could bring to the table.

“Which is why it’s no longer your business whether we go with the army or a clan!”

“Mark could be expressing himself better, but he’s not wrong. The army brass and clan reps who approached us both had doubts about you. Also...”

The two of them were indeed a little drunk. Their self-control was looser than usual, and someone they thought of as little more than a leech at this point was bringing up fanciful dreams from their childhood, which rubbed them the wrong way.

They were now so strong that they had left most other adventurers in the dust, but being that strong only made them all the more aware how impossible it was to “conquer all the dungeons.” Despite the fancy Rank A title they had just earned, dealing with a territory boss was the limit of what they could achieve. The feat was a once-in-a-century achievement, and it definitely proved that they deserved to be promoted, but they couldn’t make it farther than the tenth floor in a no-name dungeon in the sticks, much less conquer it. Now that they were pros and knew the harshness of reality, it was no longer possible for them to seriously consider the dreams they had dreamed when they knew nothing of the world.

Mark and Alan fully believed that they had killed the Great Demonic Basilisk easily enough, but even they were thoroughly terrified by the thought of facing a monster from the lower floors of a dungeon, no matter how small it was. Once, Black Tiger had gotten a little overconfident and pushed through to the ninth floor, and the difference in strength between their opponents and themselves had been overwhelming. They had realized they could train for years and still never match up. Luck had given them talents to fight with, but there was a limit. No man could ever stand up to the monsters dwelling in the depths of the dungeons. There were myths about a hero who had had the strength to defeat dragons, but that was all they were: myths.

Over the past two years, Mark and Alan had learned what their limits were. Only death lay in store for someone who insisted on reaching for heights that were the exclusive realm of legends.

“You don’t want to die, right?” Alan asked in the tone that adults used when reasoning with children.

“No... No, I don’t,” Sol conceded.

This was no lie. He didn’t have the conviction to put his life on the line to realize his childhood dream. He wasn’t the kind of person who could say, “If I die running toward my dream, then I’ve lived a short but full life!” and mean it one hundred percent. He most certainly did not want to die. That was why he had hidden his abilities from even his closest friends.

“In that case, isn’t it about time for you to hang up your boots?”

It was a condescending question. Alan was definitely looking down on Sol for having a talent that was practically useless in direct battle. Now that he and Mark had clearly stated their intentions to fire him, Alan had given up all the effort he had previously been making to mask his feelings. And yet, at the same time, there was a hint of compassion in his words and in Mark's gaze, something that conveyed that they still cared enough about Sol enough to not want him dead. It wasn't very pronounced, but he got the message. Then again, maybe it was just him wanting it to be there.

"I understand... That's how you see things," Sol murmured.

Their overconfidence in their own strength and feelings of superiority over Sol were, in large part, his own fault for not being forthright about Player. Sol was fully aware of that. And now that he knew a part of them still cared about him as a childhood friend, he couldn't be angry. Instead, all he felt was resignation. There was even a little bit of laughter bubbling up. Not derisive laughter at the fact that they didn't understand how Player worked, but relieved laughter, because Sol had realized that he, too, had reached the limit of what he could achieve with this party.

The others now considered Sol an unreliable member. What was more, Mark and Alan knew what reality was after accumulating experience over the past two years and were therefore beginning to seek success in ways they considered more realistic. Under the circumstances, if their weak friend started going on and on about his unrealistic childish dreams, it was natural for them to get irritated.

Mark and Alan were thinking that once Black Tiger became Rank A, they would get called to fights where Sol could hold the rest of the party back so much that it put all their lives at stake. This was why they were kicking him out. And as it happened, Sol was thinking the same thing about them, which was why he didn't get mad. He knew that Black Tiger did not have what it took to help him realize his dream.

Fully divulging the effects of Player could perhaps clear up their current misunderstanding, but no matter how much experience they built up fighting together as a Rank A party, they could never become strong enough to challenge what they would find in the dungeons. They were all going to reach

their limits sooner or later, and doing so inside a dungeon or a monster's territory would mean the death of any or all of them.

Sol had really wanted to realize his dream with his friends, but he now understood that to continue involving them would be cruel, far more so than the way they were getting drunk on their power and looking down on him. The moment that Sol realized they still cared for him underneath their scorn, he had decided to come to terms with the fact that his dream of conquering all of the world's dungeons with Black Tiger was simply impossible.

"Are you serious?"

Mark, who didn't know what had just gone through Sol's head, found his seemingly apathetic offhand comment extremely aggravating. He was actually a little worried about Sol, but that emotion was only a tiny undertone to all the contempt he felt toward someone he thought lacked the strength to keep up with them. The blend of love and hate was a prime trigger for extreme actions, especially when inflamed by alcohol.

Just as Mark was about to explode, however, Reen spoke up in an ice-cold voice. "Excuse me, leader and vice leader, I was not consulted at all about Sol's firing. Was that just me?"

The fact that she addressed them with their titles rather than their names was a dead giveaway to Julia that she was absolutely furious. And angry Reen was a terrifying sight.

Julia quickly added, "Same here. They never asked me."

"We didn't see the need." Alan, who wasn't getting the memo, shrugged like this was no big deal. "You two are always picking up the slack for him, so we thought you understood even better how much of a burden he is."

"What, you don't agree?" Mark asked.

Normally, Reen came across as a quiet and well-mannered girl and always went with the leader and vice leader's decisions. That was why they didn't have the faintest clue how angry she was just then, unaware that they were practically pouring oil onto the fire. It was a herculean effort on Julia's part to not look up in exasperation.

The girls had never discussed Sol's abilities in depth because they had caught on to the fact that he was trying to hide them, but they had known quite early on. It was a complete surprise to Julia that the two guys had been oblivious this whole time.

Why are boys always so...

"Of course we don't agree. In fact, we think you're out of your mind. We..." Trying her hardest to stay calm, Reen instinctively tried to clear up the misunderstanding but then hesitated. No matter how much she had figured out, it wasn't her place to share Sol's secret.

However, Alan misinterpreted that hesitation and assumed that the rest of Reen's protest would be along the lines of "but we've been friends forever" or "but friends stick up for each other."

"Being an adventurer isn't all roses and rainbows," he said. "Sweet childhood promises aren't enough to keep us going. You're a tank. I thought you'd be the last person I needed to explain that to."

"Sol can't keep up with us anymore," Mark added. "He can't handle our fights. We have no choice but to leave him behind. Or do you want him to die, Reen?"

There was no way Reen hadn't noticed something that even Julia had. She had probably known from the very start that the "talents" that had brought them so far were Sol's handiwork. Of course, the two girls had been able to confirm what had started out as mere conjecture because their roles in the party allowed them to spend a lot of time in close proximity to Sol during fights. They had often personally seen him pulling off what they knew to be categorically impossible based on their understanding of the skills in their repertoire. In contrast, Mark and Alan had always been up front, absorbed in dealing damage in their own way, so maybe it made sense that they had never figured it out.

Even so, this is just...

Upon hearing Mark and Alan throwing not oil but gunpowder onto the fire, Julia finally could not help looking up in exasperation. This was the moment that she knew for sure it was Black Tiger's last day.

“You—”

Just as Reen was about to explode like no one in the party had ever seen before, Sol raised a resigned hand and said, “Okay. I’m out of Black Tiger as of today.”

Now that things had gone so far, Sol realized he had no choice but to accept the decision. Party members had to entrust each other with their lives when fighting while in combat. The moment a crack appeared in that trust, they would never be able to fight to their fullest again. That tiny difference leading to death was part and parcel of being an adventurer, which was all the more true at Rank A.

“Then I’m out too,” Reen said promptly.

“If that’s the case, I’m sorry, but so am I,” Julia added.



Sol's intention had been to leave with as little fuss as possible to make it easy for Black Tiger to continue without him. He wasn't completely dense and was somewhat aware that Reen had feelings for him, but Julia being so decisive about leaving too caught him by surprise.

What he felt, however, the other boys felt severalfold. Mark was straight up speechless. "Wha... You... Huh?"

"We finally made Rank A, but you're going to throw all that honor and privilege away?" Alan asked in disbelief.

They found it hard to comprehend how the girls could discard their status as members of a Rank A party so easily. They had not expected it of Reen, despite her feelings for Sol, much less Julia. Two attackers alone, with no tank or healer, did not make a party. In fact, if three out of five members left, it raised the question of who was actually being fired. Mark and Alan might have had different intentions for Black Tiger, but they were both trying to promote the name as a Rank A party. They were completely blindsided.

"I have nothing to say to you two anymore," Reen said in the icy tone she used for strangers.

Julia shot her a look, then sighed and shook her head. "And I don't have what it takes to be a healer in a party without a tank I can trust."

"If we put out a recruitment notice as a Rank A party, we'll get all the applicants we want," Alan argued. "That applies regardless of whether we're with a prominent clan or the army. Aren't you being a bit rash here?" He understood that Reen was most likely a lost cause but figured Julia could still be reasoned with.

Unfortunately, he was wrong. She wasn't just being emotional about it. "The 'who I can trust' part is important. I'm not clever, so I care about that sort of thing. I can't trust a party that abandons its members, even if they feel it's the smart thing to do. It's been fun, but this is it for me."

From the perspective of someone who had figured out a little of what Sol's power did, Mark and Alan were fools beyond saving. Julia saw no point in staying with people willing to throw out the very person who had given her the

powers that made her the Saint of Healing. She was using trust as an excuse, but she actually meant it a little. Adventuring meant living on a knife's edge between life and death, so the gritty parts had to be taken seriously.

It certainly did not help Alan's case that, even though his logic wasn't wrong, he didn't fully understand what he was saying. In Black Tiger, everyone had clearly defined roles because that was how Sol had handed out skills and stats. That was not the case in other parties. If they put out a notice saying "We're looking to hire a tank!" they would indeed get a flood of applicants. They could put those applicants through a demanding test and choose the person who performed best. However, Julia could say with certainty that the winner would be unable to do exactly what Reen did. Fighting monsters without support from Sol, whom she had watched break the limits of talents countless times without batting an eye, was simply out of the question.

"FINE! Have it your way! Black Tiger is disbanded as of today! *Now* are you happy?!"

"Wait, Mark!"

"Forget it!"

It was Mark who broke down first due to the unexpected turn that everything had taken. The sad thing was, his pride as party leader made it impossible for him to take back what he had said. He shot to his feet and ran out of the room, brushing aside Alan's outstretched hand.

Losing the prestige of being part of a Rank A party did hurt, but Mark and Alan had great confidence in their individual fighting abilities. Since they wanted to go different directions anyway, breaking up the group was actually a valid option. Thanks to their decision to cast Sol out, their childhood dream was now dead to them anyway.

Alan gave the remaining three a dirty look, then left the room too.

How did the entire party break up when I was the only one who was supposed to get kicked out?

The unexpected outcome made Sol cast his eyes skyward just as Julia had done shortly before. As he sat there in a daze, she spoke up in a wry tone.

“I mean, since we have three people, can’t we say that *we’re* Black Tiger? Honestly, I’m totally fine continuing with just you two.”

“With our leader and vice leader gone, that’s a bit... I’m flattered that the name Black Tiger is a reference to my black hair and eyes, but, um...”

What Sol was trying to get at, in a very roundabout way, was that this was a good time to change their party name.

Reen grimaced. “It sounds more like a shrimp’s name anyway.”

The comment sent Sol into chuckles, because he had actually been thinking the same thing since day one. That made Reen and Julia laugh too, and the tension left the air.

“Are you two sure about this? It would be helpful having you stay with me, but...”

That was a lie. Of course, if they really did want to continue partying up with him, he would never turn them down. They had chosen to stay with him when he was about to be kicked out of the party alone. He would have been the world’s most ungrateful bastard to turn around and say no to them. Although they would have to start over from the bottom as a new party, if he used Player to bolster their numbers with talented attackers, they could shoot back up to Rank A in no time. It would take a lot less than two years this time.

However, as Sol had just realized, doing so would mean giving up on his dream. Not only the part about doing it with all his childhood friends, but the core part of conquering all the dungeons in the world. Just as he was about to resign himself, Reen called his name in a serious tone.

“Sol.”

“Um, yes?”

“This is a good opportunity, so I’m going to come right out and ask: we’ve been hitting our limit, haven’t we?”

Julia blinked. “Wait, we have?”

Reen’s question implied that she knew a lot more about Player than Sol had thought. He was just as surprised as Julia, who apparently also had some idea

but hadn't figured out quite as much.

"How long since you two caught on?"

Unlike Reen, Julia wasn't romantically interested in Sol, and yet she had abandoned the other two without a beat and had no aversion to staying in a party with him. There was only one possible reason for that. As someone who had been trying his best to hide what his talent did for the past five years, Sol wanted to know when he had been found out.

The girls exchanged bemused looks, then laughed.

"From the start, duh," Reen answered.

"They call it a miracle because it's impossible," Julia scoffed.

Sol had thought they had figured it out somewhere along the way because he had used Player's skills on them often. The truth, however, left him speechless. He was still having trouble thinking of what to say as the girls laughingly wondered aloud why the boys had never caught on.

Reen noticed his expression and explained, "I don't know if you remember, but you looked *really* panicked that day."

"Oh..."

"That day" obviously meant the day five years ago when Sol had obtained Player. The moment he'd understood that he had been given a very special talent, that same talent had told him that his friends hadn't been equally blessed. One of the first abilities Player had given him was to visualize what talents other people had. Mark, Alan, Reen, and Julia had been given Villager, a very common talent that came with no skills and only a tiny stat buff.

Someone who received a talent that could fight monsters would immediately be aware of the skills they possessed. Of the kids who had heard the adults explain this countless times, many would realize that they had not been given a ticket to the life of adventuring they had looked forward to and would despair, going on to become adults living under the harsh yoke of cruel reality.

Like all children in this world, the five sworn friends had come of age on the first day of the first month of their twelfth year. When eleven-year-old Sol had

realized that his four friends were about to be condemned to lives of banality, he immediately panicked. A part of him had indeed been scared of being ostracized as the only one whom fortune had smiled on. But more than that, he didn't want to give up on his dream. So he used his newfound power to forcibly prolong that dream for a time.

In their secret base, they had discussed at length the kind of adventurer they each wanted to become. Just as Sol's friends were about to succumb to despair, he had given them exactly what they needed to be what they had envisioned. Mark got the skills he required to be a close-combat fighter, Alan got attack spells, Julia got healing spells, and Reen got what she needed to protect all of them.

Julia had been watching everyone and coming to terms with the fact that she had gotten unlucky when she suddenly became aware of the skills she owned. She shot Reen a surprised look and found her friend, who had been worrying more about Sol than herself, also suddenly sharing her expression after a brief delay. This was apparently the moment that she had received her tank skills. As Mark and Alan practically wept tears of joy at the miracle that had befallen them, Reen and Julia couldn't help exchanging looks that conveyed surprise at something else entirely. That was when Sol, who had been staring really hard at nothing with a really panicked expression, heaved a sigh of relief and announced in a self-effacing tone that he had received a talent useful for providing support.

Upon confirming that the five of them weren't lying, the rest of the village had joined them in exuberant celebration. However, Reen and Julia had understood the true nature of the miracle. It wasn't that five of them had received talents for fighting monsters, it was that one of them had received a talent that was behind all the others.

Having his own mannerisms at the time being analyzed in such an objective way made Sol feel a bit embarrassed, but now it made sense to him how Reen and Julia had had their suspicions from the start. This was a perfect illustration of how knowing the details changed one's perspective even if it didn't change the facts. The four friends had gone through the same experiences with Sol over the past five years. However, the guys saw a weakling who needed to be fired

for his own good, whereas the girls saw someone they had to stay with even if it meant leaving a Rank A party.

The fact that Reen and Julia were somewhat in the know explained why they had always been so ready to follow Sol's orders. Knowing was also why Reen's puppy love had, over their three years at the Royal Academy and two years on the road, developed into serious feelings.

"So, bringing the conversation back," Reen said, "this is it for us, isn't it?"

Just like Mark and Alan, Reen also thought that Black Tiger couldn't carry on as it had anymore—for entirely different reasons than them, of course, but she had watched Sol so much that she was as sure as they were.

"I mean, I wouldn't say that so emphatically, but..."

Even now, Sol had trouble being straightforward, but Reen was having none of it. "To be honest, I'm scared. I've been scared ever since we reached Rank B. I really don't think I have what it takes to be Rank A. And that's *with* you in my party, Sol."

As the tank, she had taken the attacks of all the monsters they had faced. It had been her role to block, dodge, and interrupt everything from straight-on attacks to ultimate moves that had nearly killed them all. Because of this, she knew better than anyone the difference in strength between herself and their opponents. Without the miraculous support from Sol that often broke the principles of reality, they could only perform at Rank C at the best.

Since Reen was opening up, Julia decided to follow suit. "Forget what I said earlier. I agree with Reen. I'll stick around if you're planning on making a name for yourself as a Rank C adventurer, but your dream is so much bigger than that, isn't it?"

Julia was willing to accept that this was the end of the line for her because she understood the passion Sol had for his childhood dream. The terror and despair that Reen and Julia had felt on the ninth floor of a dungeon was still branded onto their hearts and minds.

Despite having a different way of seeing things, the facts were what they were. Reen and Julia knew without a doubt that even if they had Sol and all the

miraculous powers Player came with on their side, it would be impossible for them to get any higher. And Sol's dream of conquering all dungeons and unsealing all territories lay far, far beyond merely "reaching higher."

To Sol, the idea of climbing back up to Rank A with Reen and Julia and carving their name into the annals of history as the strongest party of the age didn't sound all that bad. If that was enough to satisfy him, he could make it happen as a three-person party—he wouldn't even need to find replacements for Mark and Alan. Some people would make snide remarks about it being a harem, but others would thank their group if they challenged dungeons at their own pace and made a living by providing a regular supply of dungeon drops. They could live lives with just the right amount of excitement and luxury until they grew too old to fight. That in itself would make for a pretty good champion's tale. Case in point, Mark and Alan had decided that this would be their future after objectively evaluating their own abilities. That was what had led to Black Tiger breaking up.

Sol's problem with that life path was that settling for it would mean no longer being an adventurer—an incorrigible person who derived ultimate joy and intellectual satisfaction from going on adventures. He wanted to be one such adventurer until the moment he died. Having been blessed with the incredible gift that Player was, every cell of his being chafed at the thought of a life of common luxury.

"That's why I think you should party up with people who can actually make your dream come true," Reen stated simply. "Because if you don't..."

If Sol truly could not let go of his dream, it didn't matter if he was the one doing the firing or the one being fired; what mattered was finding new companions. He could bestow as many skills and stats as he wanted onto others, but there was a limit to what he could do with Reen and Julia, whose original talents were merely Villager. What Reen was referring to was people who already possessed fighting talents. It was by building *them* up with Player that Sol could create companions with the superhuman strength that was absolutely necessary for handling dungeons.

Reen didn't really fear dying. In fact, she considered her own death a secondary concern. The thing that truly terrified her was Sol dying—both

literally and figuratively—because she had failed to live up to her role as a tank. As in, him dying as a result of being hung up on fulfilling his dream with her and Julia, or him giving up on his dream because of the two of them. This fear was so keen that it trumped her intense desire to be with him every waking hour. That was why she was now suppressing her own heart and trying to remove herself from the picture.

“I... I’m sorry. I’ll do that, then.” Having gleaned a bit of the conflict roiling in Reen’s heart, Sol resolved to give his dream another go even if it meant leaving his childhood friends behind. He didn’t want to blame those friends when he reached the end of the road to his dream, wherever that may be.

The serious look and earnest apology from him sent Reen into a fluster. She flapped her hands and smiled awkwardly. “I’m totally fine! I have enough savings to comfortably splurge, and Ros Village and my family have become very well-off, so I’m going back to the countryside to live a life of luxury.”

Although Reen was giving up on being someone who would travel with Sol on his adventures, she was most definitely not giving up on having a stake in his life. The two of them were still adolescents, for one thing, and she was totally fine with staying with him as a tank until he built a new party that was actually capable of realizing his dream. Getting all possessive of him now would be dragging him down, just in a different way, and she understood that doing so would be getting her priorities wrong. The most important thing at the moment was Sol having the freedom to follow his heart. For now, it was enough for her that he knew in the back of his mind that, regardless of how everything turned out, there was a girl waiting for him in his hometown. She didn’t mind being called a doormat or a woman with no self-respect, because she was choosing the best course of action available to her. In her own way, Reen was also doing everything in her power to realize her dream.

However, even if Sol managed to form a party stronger than Black Tiger, there was no guarantee that he would be able to fulfill his dream and return home safe and sound. Reen fully understood this, but since she had no hope of making him forget his dream with her womanly wiles, the risk was just something that she would have to learn to live with. It would be so much easier if she could make herself hate him to save herself the angst of worrying about

losing him, but she couldn't, so she had no choice but to walk this path of thorns with the full knowledge that it would hurt.

The one consolation was that the likelihood of Sol falling for other random women was very low. Reen knew from all the time she had spent with him that he was rather dense in that department.

Julia sighed with appreciation for her devoted friend with a lifelong, one-sided love, then shared her own plans for the future. "As for me...I guess I'll get married."

Sol and Reen whirled toward her with more emotion than they had shown when the party had broken up.

"Seriously?!"

"Wait, really?"

"There's a nobleman who's been earnestly courting me," she explained with a laugh.

The name of the man Julia was genuinely considering marrying was Sephiras Howard Walden. He was the next head of a viscount family, which meant he wasn't all that high up as a noble, but he was still an amazing catch for a mere adventurer.

The fact was, Julia was constantly being inundated with wedding proposals from highborn men because she was the famous Saint of Healing and was a drop-dead beauty who emanated sexiness. Unfortunately, these offers didn't come from a place of romantic interest but a desire to introduce her blood into the suitor's family. There was no proof that talents could be passed down by blood, but people had a tendency to believe in pedigree. There were even a few well-known examples for which lineage seemed the only possible explanation. Since Julia's abilities enabled her to heal not only diseases but even lost limbs without breaking a sweat, even royals showed an interest.

After thinking about it, Reen shrugged. "Well, if it's someone you're taking seriously, then I know he's not a bad guy."

"Oh man, Julia's going to become a noble..." Sol chuckled.

The two of them knew that despite her appearance, she was very careful when it came to romantic relationships. Of course, she was nowhere near Reen, who had been carrying a torch for only one person her entire life, or Sol, who had nearly zero experience because he cared much more about dungeons than girls, but they were not the best targets for comparison. Julia knew that her powers as the Saint of Healing had come from Sol, which meant there was no chance of them being passed down to any children she bore. As such, she had always summarily turned down offers from any sources who were obviously after her blood.

Despite radiating enough sexiness as to induce heartburn, Julia was still a seventeen-year-old girl. She fantasized about romance and marriage a little, and it was only natural that she wanted someone who sought her not for her powers but for who she was as a person. That said, she had already come to terms with the fact that her powers would never be entirely out of the picture as a consideration. In this aspect, she was a bit more mature than Sol and Reen were.

Reen clapped happily. "You'll be living it up as a concubine, then!"

"Come on, she's the esteemed Saint of Healing," Sol countered. "They've gotta accept her as the legal wife. Out of hope for the talents that her children would have. Uh, not that I'm saying that's the main reason they're accepting you, just that it'd be something they cared about."

Since Julia was actually considering tying the knot with Sephiras, he had to be a very respectable person. In Sol's mind, this fact, coupled with Julia's standing, meant it only made sense for her to be given the position of main wife.

However, Julia did not share this view. "The problem is, I'm going to lose my powers, aren't I? Since our party is breaking up."

Without her abilities as the Saint of Healing, there was no way she would get the position of main wife. And she had no intention of marrying by hiding the fact that she had lost those powers. Part of that was because she didn't like being a coward, but more importantly, she didn't think she could keep up the farce for the rest of her life. She knew Sephiras well enough to understand that he wouldn't do a one-eighty and abandon her the moment he learned the

truth, but his family was too important to allow someone who had reverted to being a mere Villager to become the next family head's main wife. Sephiras might fight for it, but Julia didn't want to put him or his family in that position.

Another concern was regarding her children. She didn't want them to come of age disappointed about not having inherited her talent. When Julia herself had come of age, no one besides her childhood friends had had any expectations for her, but she had still felt indescribable despair the moment she'd realized God had passed her over. The position of main wife wasn't something she wanted badly enough to subject her children to the sky-high expectations of their parents and extended family on top of that despair. In a way, she was similar to Reen in being so ready to accept a position as concubine so she could stay with the man she loved. The two of them weren't the kind of people who would lose sight of what was truly important to them due to other people's opinions.

Sol shook his head. "Nah, you'll keep your powers. In fact, when you have kids, I'll give them whatever you want too."

"You'd do that?" Julia asked.

"I can actually do my thing on quite a lot of people because I'm limited in how much I can give each person."

"I'd be super thankful, but...just don't push yourself, okay?"

Contrary to Julia's assumption, Sol had no intention of taking back all the stats and skills he had handed out to his friends just because Black Tiger was breaking up. He could give the same skills to as many people as he wanted, and the stats that he could offer someone were capped by the individual's base stats and levels. Maxing out all the stats, HP, and MP of the members of Black Tiger had only taken less than a tenth of the pool of points he had at his disposal. There was no need to be petty or stingy. It would barely cost him anything to give Julia's children the same loadout as hers when they came of age.

In the same way, it would be very helpful to Reen if she got to keep her powers as Iron Wall. It didn't matter if she actually returned to Ros Village like she said she would or stayed in Garlaige to continue being an adventurer. Either way, having her powers would go a long way in alleviating any problems she encountered. If Reen and Julia were to work together, Rank C quests and

missions would be nothing for them.

“Uh...are you letting Mark and Alan keep theirs too?” Julia asked, even though she thought she knew the answer.

“Well, they got them by working hard with us, so...”

Julia sighed. “You’re too soft for your own good, seriously.” She honestly couldn’t understand his decision, since she was someone who believed in tit for tat. If she had been in his position, she would have met with Mark and Alan to take back every last drop of their strength in person so that she could see the looks on their faces while doing so.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Sol said, frowning thoughtfully. “They’ll probably have a tougher time than if I took everything away.”

“Oof, you might have a point there,” Reen agreed.

Apparently, the two of them were worried about Mark and Alan growing overconfident in their skills and dying in battle against a monster. This was logic that Julia could follow. She even thought, *The fact that I immediately jumped to imagine such easy humiliation means I still have a lot of growing to do.*

Regardless of Sol and Reen’s true intentions, forcing the boys to pay for their overconfidence and their making light of monsters was a much harsher punishment than the simple torment that Julia had come up with. Sol didn’t want to ruin the lives of friends who had shared his big dreams when he was a kid just because they were taking a different path in life from his own. That was why he hadn’t shoved the truth down their throats by telling them that all the success they’d built up—which was the very basis for their conflict—was thanks to him. He seriously thought that them dying in battle while believing they were at the top of the world was better than them suffering the shame and despair of knowing that they were intrinsically mere Villagers.

Sol’s intention was to do his friends a good turn, but chances were they would have trouble understanding him. His perspective was a very unique one informed by the godlike abilities Player gave him. People of this world took it for granted that they would be given talents, but by standing on the side that *gave* powers, Sol understood that God could take those talents away on a whim any time he wanted. After all, Player put him in the same position.

As long as Sol had Player, he was effectively playing God.

Chapter 3: The Adventurer's Guild

"Now, what am I to do?" Sol murmured to himself as he exited the room booked under Black Tiger's name and descended to the first floor.

He had asked Reen and Julia to go home first, even though the other adventurers had a tendency to mess with him when he was alone. There was something important that he had to do.

"Hey, Sol. I saw Mark and Alan making a fuss when they were leaving, then Reen and Julia passed by me with serious looks on their faces. Did something happen?"

"Ah, Steve." The important thing that Sol had to do involved him. Just as Sol had hoped, the man had been waiting to approach him.

This was Steve Naiman, general manager of the Garlaige branch of the Adventurer's Guild. He was a dapper gentleman with a perceptive aura, a slim build, and a silver monocle. Despite being in his forties, he had slicked-back graying hair that was nearing white, which spoke volumes about the hard life he had led. Just as his appearance indicated, he was a very capable man, one of the top brass of the Adventurer's Guild, and he often had to make business trips to their headquarters in the capital. He had been Black Tiger's main handler since their formation.

For a particular reason, he was much closer to Sol than the others. However, he was careful about doing things in the open that other adventurers might construe as favoritism. Approaching Sol in the lobby, which was visible from the bar area, was a rare occurrence. Knowing that, Sol had actually waited quite a while in the room, expecting Steve to come in after seeing Reen and Julia leave.

"Didn't Mark and Alan say anything?"

"So, something *did* happen. Speaking on behalf of the Adventurer's Guild, I ardently want the members of an accomplished party that will be promoted to Rank A tomorrow to get along."

“Ha ha ha, sorry. Black Tiger was disbanded as of today.”

It was only natural for the Adventurer’s Guild to want a powerful party on its roster that it could readily call on. That was why the guild had dug into its own coffers to pay for the sumptuous party. And yet, Black Tiger had disbanded during that very event. The timing couldn’t have been more awkward.

“That...is no laughing matter. C’mere.”

Sol had figured there was no point in lying to the general manager of the branch that he was registered with, but what he got for his honesty was a headlock and a trip straight to the room in the very back of the office on the first floor.

Steve had actually waited for Sol with full knowledge that there were adventurers and guild staff close enough to overhear their conversation. It was for that same reason that he had reacted in an exaggerated manner. In other words, he had foreseen Black Tiger’s breakup.

After listening to Sol’s account of what had happened, Steve murmured, “I see...”

Indeed, there was no other way to explain how he was so calm. As he himself had said in the lobby, the breakup of a party slated for Rank A was a complete catastrophe from the perspective of the Adventurer’s Guild. He, being the general manager of the affected branch, should have been practically tearing his hair out in a panic.

In actuality, though, Steve had been expecting Black Tiger to break up for a while now. He had even thought there was a high possibility it would happen today when the party secured its promotion to Rank A.

He sighed. “Still, doesn’t change the fact that this is a headache for me. You...will probably do fine, but have you heard what the others plan on doing?”

As implied in his remark, Steve was one of the few people who actually understood what Player did. Although he had not been blessed with a talent for fighting monsters, he had received Administrator, a rare talent suited to administrative work. One of the first skills that came with that talent was Talent Evaluation, which enabled him to see the names of everyone else’s talents.

Although it only told him the names, it was extremely useful for someone in a managerial position in a world where talents meant so much. In light of the fact that people could only infer their own talent through the skills at their disposal, being able to accurately identify everyone else's guaranteed that Steve would be a major asset no matter which organization he worked for.

As an example, the guild had to treat someone starting off with the Powerful Strike skill differently based on whether they were a mere Swordsman or had one of the more superior talents like Knight, Paladin, or Dual Swordsman. Being able to provide him with tailored advice about how to develop his abilities and what role to assume in a party could make a massive difference. In this world, it was not at all uncommon for someone blessed with a superb talent to mess up and die when starting out. From this perspective, it could be said that Administrator was much more valuable than most run-of-the-mill fighting talents.

Though rare, Administrator was not a unique talent, so at least a few people had it in every generation, and there was no concern about them dying out. Thanks to the cumulative effort of everyone who'd ever had Administrator gathering information about talent names and what people with those talents were capable of, Steve could get a general idea of what someone could do just by knowing what talent they had.

It was through shrewd application of his talent that Steve had managed to climb to the upper ranks in the massive organization known as the Adventurer's Guild. It was also because of his talent that he had recognized Sol as someone to pay special attention to and figured out the true nature of Black Tiger when it was registered two years ago. He had then used his authority as general manager to assign himself as the party's handler.

At the time, there had been quite a fuss when the so-called Miracle Children who had graduated from the Royal Academy with record-breaking scores went on to start a party. When Steve saw them for the first time, however, he could immediately tell that four of them were mere Villagers and that the last one had Player, a talent that even he had never heard of. He could hardly believe his eyes. And yet, the four weren't just pulling the wool over everyone's eyes. They did indeed use skills that were exclusive to pugilists, mages, healers, and

knights.

It didn't take a genius to realize that Player was the most likely explanation for the bizarre state of affairs. That, in turn, meant that Sol was someone loved by God. Considering Steve's position, it only made sense for him to approach the boy.

At first, Sol had kept his guard up, but when Steve divulged his own talent and revealed what he had figured out about Player, Sol determined that it was in his own interest to get along with Steve. As a result, Steve was now the most knowledgeable person when it came to Player other than Sol himself, which was why, public appearances aside, Steve managed the boy with the utmost care.

Part of that management policy included helping him hide the details of Player from headquarters. Since the way he handled Sol was in line with Sol's own wishes, the two of them had learned to get along quite well.

"There's no need to worry about Reen and Julia. They both said that they'll be retiring."

"Hold on, not only is Black Tiger breaking up, but Iron Wall and the Saint of Healing are retiring too? How do you think I'm supposed to feel as general manager of this branch?"

"Sorry."

"I know there's no point in me taking it out on you, but still..."

"Mark's probably entering military service, from what he said. And Alan's joining a prominent clan, I think?"

"Ah, so that explains why there's a squad of royal guards and a few members of Hecatoncheires in town." Steve smiled a little at finding out the reason behind some information that had reached his ears.

The fact that Black Tiger was breaking up didn't change the fact that Mark and Alan were highly capable attackers who had been part of a party that had made it to Rank A in just two years. Even though they were now suddenly on their own, they should still be well received by the places they had gotten offers from. Of course, those places would have strongly preferred incorporating Black

Tiger as a full party, but the way things had worked out was fine too, because they each managed to secure a competent attacker to bolster their ranks. If Black Tiger had made a decision as a singular entity, one side would have ended up empty-handed.

“Will Mark and Alan be all right?” Steve asked.

“I don’t see why not, since one will be in the army and the other will be a member of a prominent clan.”

“Don’t you think you’re a bit too soft?” Steve asked for confirmation’s sake.

Sol smiled a little. “Julia called me the same thing.”

If Sol took back what he had given Mark and Alan, the two would revert to being mere Villagers. Although their levels were now higher than what a Villager could achieve in an entire lifetime, their stats would still be so pathetic that they would explode when taking a single attack from a monster. If this happened in the middle of a fight, it could lead to a lot of casualties among the soldiers or clanmates counting on them.

The best course of action for Mark and Alan after parting ways with Sol would be to stay far away from careers that involved fighting monsters, like Reen and Julia did. Although they would be no match for monsters and people with fighting talents, their levels ensured that no normal person would ever get the better of them. And during their time in Black Tiger, they had saved up enough to live out the rest of their lives however they wanted.

Sol’s answer to Steve’s question, however, indicated that he had no intention of reverting the powers he had given out. Without Sol’s support, Mark and Alan could no longer perform feats that seemed to defy common sense, but they could still pull their weight in the army or a big clan. They would have to suffer the disappointment of people who had expected them to perform at the level of Rank A fighters, but that was their just deserts.

Since Steve was familiar with Player, his reaction was as harsh as Julia’s. If he had been in Sol’s shoes, he would have mercilessly revoked his handouts just to see the look of despair on the ungrateful bastards’ faces.

That said, Steve had learned over the past two years that Sol was not just a

softie. At heart, he was someone who believed in an eye for an eye. Instead of fretting over morality, he wouldn't hesitate to use his power out of self-interest. He was also well aware of how weak he was as a fighter and was good at planning around that weakness.

Another important thing to know about Sol was that he was entirely ruthless toward those he deemed enemies. Based on that, it was clear that he did not consider Mark and Alan a threat, even though they had tried to oust him from Black Tiger and still looked down on him. Part of this was due to sentiment from all their years together, but mostly it was because Sol didn't think the pair had the power to harm him. Even if they got to keep their strength, they were nothing more than small fry. As the saying went, dogs could bark all they liked, but it wouldn't move a lion.

Steve, who was under the impression that Sol was actually strong but was determined to hide it, thought that Sol saw Mark and Alan as little more than bugs he could squish anytime he wanted. That was why there was no need for him to get angry about every little thing they did. Honestly, Steve thought Sol was more coldhearted than his buddies, who at least still felt bad about the idea of their childhood friend dying in battle despite their contempt.

In actuality, Sol *was* nearly useless in a direct fight. He only felt like he was in control because he thought that he could revoke Mark's and Alan's powers if they ever attacked him. Doing so would practically cripple them, and he, thanks to all the stats from his higher level, could easily run away.

"So, what do you plan on doing? Personally, it would make me really happy to hear about you forming a new party with Reen, Julia, and maybe a few other people, but..."

Unfortunately, that ship had already sailed. Such a party would fall woefully short of the strength needed to realize Sol's dream of conquering all the world's dungeons, which he had passionately spoken about on multiple occasions. Steve was merely speaking on behalf of the Adventurer's Guild, which would much rather have Sol contributing as part of a Rank A party instead of traipsing about chasing a dream that everyone knew to be impossible.

That said, chances of Reen and Julia going back on their decision to retire

were close to zero. Sol needed them as little as he needed Mark and Alan, so they wouldn't be coming back for his sake. And although they were such huge assets that many parties would do whatever it took to add the two of them to their roster, all the information that Steve had gathered told him they had no intention of continuing as adventurers without Sol. It was highly likely they had stayed with him all this time because they also knew about Player to some degree.

Thanks to their time as adventurers, Reen and Julia already had enough money to live out their lives in luxury. The two of them were also very attractive, albeit in different ways, and still young. There were any number of ways for them to enjoy life without risking their lives as adventurers.

With all that in mind, the most important question for the Adventurer's Guild was what Sol, who was now entirely unfettered, would do next. If he had a clear vision, then Steve very much wanted to hear it.

"Honestly, I'm at a bit of a loss."

"Seriously?"

The answer that Steve got was not what he had expected. Sol really did look troubled, so he probably wasn't lying. Because Sol had been hiding his abilities this whole time, very few top adventurers understood his true value. On the contrary, many thought him an ass in a lion's skin. Mid-tier parties and below would kill to have the support that he was known for, but there was no reason for him to join parties of that caliber after leaving Black Tiger.

The only solution that Steve could see was to release enough information about Sol to make top adventurers take an interest in him. The fact that he had been keeping this information under wraps for so long could be glossed over in any number of ways. For example, he could pretend that he had only just found out. Based on what he knew, he could get a very good response if he utilized all of the guild's resources to make a big hubbub about creating "the world's most powerful party."

Sol would have to balance the risk of people knowing about his talent with the merits of gaining powerful new companions. Depending on what he was comfortable with sharing and who he was talking to, there were quite a few

people who just might say yes. Steve wasted no time in going over his mental list of all the top adventurers in the world and coming up with what he thought would be the most powerful lineup.

“Speaking of, can I register a party with only two people?” Sol asked.

“You can do it as just one person, actually. The same goes for a clan. Doesn’t make sense when spelled out like that, but results are everything for us adventurers. What, do you have somebody in mind?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but, uh...there’s something I want to try out.”

“Great. As long as you aren’t quitting being an adventurer, I’m fine with anything. If you need any help from the guild, just say the word. I’ll help you to the best of my abilities.”

“Thank you very much.”

If there was an adventurer Sol had his eye on, Steve wouldn’t hesitate to pull whatever strings he had to so they could work well together. He wouldn’t pressure the person or threaten them with the guild’s authority, because that would run counter to forming a party where members placed their lives in each other’s hands. No, Steve’s plan was to make the conditions so sweet that anyone would jump at the opportunity to party up with Sol.

This included adequately reimbursing the party or clan they were currently in. Intimidation was out of the question, and persuasion by tears or reasoning wouldn’t take. The best way was to make everyone involved determine that the arrangement was in their best interest. Steve had the influence and resources to make it happen. The reason he had worked so hard that his hair was turning white was because he loved the feeling of having the power to affect things the way he wanted in important situations like this. And now, he wouldn’t hesitate for even a fraction of a second to wield the full extent of all the power available to him.

“Well, go home for today and get some sleep. I’d tell you to watch out, but you’ll probably still get some people pestering you.”

“Nah, I’m not worried about those on that level.”

“Because you know your guardian will be looking over you?”

“Ha ha ha.”

Steve was under the impression that Sol was hiding his strength, so he wanted to assign a guard or two to protect this valuable asset. And if Sol truly couldn't fight, the guards would still come in useful. However, as Sol said, there had been no need for that for a bit, so Steve was instead concerned with ensuring that no one would mess with him going forward.

It wasn't all that hard for him, actually.



“Sol! Is what you said just now true?”

When Sol came out of Steve's office, he was immediately approached by Fiona Bannister, the most popular receptionist at the Garlaige branch and the one assigned to Black Tiger. She had beautiful blonde hair, gentle blue eyes, and all the right curves, and radiated an aura that drew the eyes of all men. It was now long after working hours, so she had changed out of her uniform and into personal attire. Her outfit accentuated the contours of her body and the skin that it bared in the perfect balance between sexy and classy, indicating that she was someone who fully understood her own charm and how to use it.

Julia was well-known for both her beauty and the excessive sexiness of her body, but her allure paled in comparison to Fiona's, which was based on an overwhelming advantage in experience. It would be a close fight on paper, but in person, especially in the context of a question like “Who would you want to drink with tonight?” Fiona would win hands down. After all, when it came to the night, the most enticing aroma wasn't perfect beauty but beauty tinged with a hint of corruption.

Unfortunately, Fiona's charm did not work all that well on youth. Younger boys had such a low tolerance for lewdness that everyone who surpassed that line received the same label of “sexy older lady.” This applied to Sol too, even though Fiona would make a face while admitting it.

“Yep. I can't say for sure about Mark and Alan, but Reen, Julia, and I are definitely out.”

Sol and Steve had agreed just now that they wouldn't be hiding the fact that

Black Tiger had broken up, so he did not beat around the bush when answering Fiona. Someone was going to stop him and ask anyway, so it might as well be her.

“You aside, Iron Wall and the Saint of Healing leaving does mean the party is effectively disbanded.”

Sol’s expression didn’t change much at the offhand insult delivered with a smile, save a little twitch at the corner of his mouth. However, the mocking laughter from the adventurers listening in did annoy him a little.

“Apparently, Mark and Alan both plan on going to the capital. Too bad for you, Fiona.”

Although Sol acknowledged that Fiona was beautiful and capable, he couldn’t understand why people were so into her. He also knew that the adventurers who had laughed just now had been trying to win her affections by plying her with gifts to no avail. That was why he had specifically named Mark and Alan, whom she did “entertain,” intending it as a modest riposte. It was hard to believe, but Fiona was involved with both of them. Sol didn’t even want to think about how she managed to juggle them without it crashing down around her, but he knew for a fact that she stayed overnight at their houses on a regular basis. Sometimes, he learned things through Player that he didn’t want to know.

Although Sol thought he had dropped a bomb, Fiona merely blinked her big eyes once in surprise, then said nonchalantly, “Oh, don’t worry, I don’t expect esteemed Rank A adventurers to keep lowering themselves to the level of a mere receptionist forever.”

Sol was trying to shake Fiona up by insinuating that he knew about her twisting both Mark and Alan around her finger, with the “too bad for you” being a mere aside. However, not only did she admit outright that she had relations with them, she even confessed that *she* was the one who was merely a fling.

“Wait, that’s not what I...” Sol’s voice trailed off as he struggled to come up with a response. The fight wasn’t even close.

Fiona winked suggestively. “Would you like to take their place from now on? I’m pretty good at making breakfast.”

Against an enchantress seasoned enough to cajole someone she had insulted mere seconds ago, all Sol could do was to implore her, “Please don’t say things like that around Reen.”

Seeing how down he looked, Fiona gave him a disarming smile. “To be honest, I had thought that you were just a lucky kid leeching off those who made it big on the pretext of being a childhood friend. Clearly, I’m a terrible judge of men.”

The self-deprecating comment indicated that, based solely on the information about how the party was breaking up, she had figured out that it was Sol who had been the core of Black Tiger. This admission of fault went over better than any insincere apology could have.

Mark and Alan probably told her stories about our fights, so I can’t really blame her.

In all likelihood, the two had exaggerated but not lied. Unlike Reen and Julia, Mark and Alan probably thought of him as a guy who couldn’t do a thing himself but kept on giving out orders like he knew everything. From that perspective, Sol was indeed nothing but deadweight.

“Well...do better next time, I guess?” he suggested.

The important thing about mistakes was to learn from them. Mistakes made in a dungeon or a territory likely meant there would never be a next time, but there were any number of next times when it came to matters of the heart. Fiona was still young, and there was no reason for her to get hung up on Mark or Alan.

Dropping the teasing tone, she looked into Sol’s eyes and said earnestly, “I’m saying I want you to be my next one.”

“I humbly decline,” Sol replied without hesitation. He did find the real Fiona without all the pretense much more appealing, but that was hardly enough reason for him to take her up on her offer. It was enough having Mark and Alan as childhood friends; never in a million years did he want to become “brothers” with them too.

Fiona shrugged. “Pity.”

Several guys who had heard the exchange started getting up, all of them with

a bone to pick with Sol. Spurred on by the alcohol in their systems, they were clearly hoping to show off in front of Fiona. Sol was pretty sure that whatever they were planning would only have the opposite effect, but based on the fact that this had already happened a few times before, the guys were thoroughly convinced that it would work.

If there really is a girl who'd be swayed by it, I'd want to stay far away from her...

Just then, Steve stepped out of his office and shouted, "LISTEN UP! I have an announcement for everyone present!"

The guys who were getting up and those who were egging them on all froze.

"I'm sure the rumor's already making its rounds, but yes, Black Tiger has broken up on the same day their promotion to Rank A was decided. How you react to that is entirely your own prerogative, but there is one thing that I have to make clear."

Not many adventurers could ignore the words of their branch's general manager. In this case, he was giving out information that everyone was hungry for, so people were even shushing those in their party who had been making a ruckus. As a result, the entire lobby area fell silent in a split second, making it easy to hear Steve's voice even though he wasn't shouting. At the same time, the gears in the heads of the top adventurers kicked into action as they considered how they could take advantage of the opportunity.

"Going forward, anyone found doing anything to harm Sol for any reason will immediately be branded as an enemy of the Adventurer's Guild. This applies not only to this branch but to all branches, including headquarters. The official announcement will be posted soon. If you don't want this to happen to you, make sure that all your party members get the message. There will be no exceptions."

Not a single person had expected that. Being branded as an enemy of the guild was a very serious punishment. It meant that they would be treated as mere monsters, and that the entire organization would see them as targets to be eliminated. The kill order would be a mission, not a quest.

Steve was effectively declaring that the Adventurer's Guild was officially

prioritizing the individual adventurer Sol Rock over all the other adventurers in the organization. Since Steve was both the general manager of this branch and a member of the organization's top brass, his word was as good as carved in stone.

The veteran adventurers understood this, as did Fiona, who murmured, "I *really* don't have a good eye for men."

Going forward, anyone who made an enemy of Sol would be ousted as an adventurer, without exception. What was more, this call had been made not by Sol himself but by the Adventurer's Guild as a whole. For such a decision to have been made in such a short time, Sol must have been *really* important to the guild.

The Adventurer's Guild had been founded to contribute to society, and it held its duty above all else. To maintain its ability to carry out that duty, the guild was also clear about its pursuit of profit. By conferring this special status on Sol, it was recognizing him as someone with the power to contribute the most to society and create the most profit.

This declaration from Steve was exactly what Sol had hoped for, even if it had come with a bit of hassle. As someone without much fighting strength, it had been a pressing issue for him to deter reckless action taken by latent enemies inside settlements where it was supposed to be safe.

There was no denying that this commotion was a lot bigger than Sol had expected, though.

Chapter 4: Newfound Power

Upon returning to his own mansion near the city center, Sol said at normal volume, “Thank you, Reen. Good night. And just saying, thanks to the bombshell announcement that Steve made, you don’t have to do this anymore starting tomorrow.”

There was no one within the range of normal human senses. However, Sol could see in one of his display windows that Reen had been tailing him from a distance. If he felt like it, he could easily tell the location of everyone he had registered with Player as a companion; in fact, he could do it with everyone he had met in person before. This ability had saved Black Tiger quite a few times, because it also applied to monsters.

As such, Reen was aware of it. After all the fights with monsters that she had survived, her base level and skills—Sol being the only one who could see this information quantified thanks to Player—had risen so high that, when compounded with all the stats that Sol had given her, she could pick up even a whisper from him when standing quite far away.

“Kay. Good night.”

Not even Sol could see her at this distance, but Reen nodded once, then turned and headed toward her own home, which was fairly close. She had pretended to leave first with Julia but actually stayed behind to escort Sol home in secret, where she could immediately rush over at any sign of trouble.

The news of Black Tiger’s breakup was going to spread like wildfire tomorrow, but there were always people who had their ears to the ground. Reen was worried about those looking to hurt Sol now that he no longer had the protection that came with being a member of a Rank B party. She was the guardian Steve had pointed out, eliciting a chuckle from Sol.

In terms of individual fighting strength, a normal person was no match for Sol. Against veteran adventurers and gangs of renegade adventurers from the slums, however, it was doubtful whether he could win a one-on-one fight.

Leveling up had given him physical prowess that seemed superhuman to normal people, but he would get steamrolled by those blessed with talents useful for fighting monsters.

It was true that Player was an incredible talent, but the owner of it was far from invincible. Its real value lay in making those whom Player accepted as companions ridiculously powerful, which meant it was quite useless when the wielder was alone. At least, that was the case at the moment. Sol sincerely hoped to see improvement in this area someday.

As for Reen, her footsteps home were heavy and forlorn. A part of her had held out hope that Sol would invite her in for a cup of tea or ask her to stay over, so it had been crushing to hear him tell her “good night” so casually. Of course, there was a possibility that someone might attack or burgle his residence in the middle of the night. Because of this, Reen had even fantasized about the possibility of living with him for a while. And yet, despite having the perfect excuse, he had figuratively closed the door on her. Little wonder she was disappointed.

Well, it's Sol. It's not like I didn't know it would be like this.

To make matters worse, he had even declared that he wouldn't need protection from tomorrow onward. Indeed, it was hard to imagine anyone being foolish enough to target the property of someone who was now a mere Rank B adventurer at the cost of antagonizing the entire Adventurer's Guild. If there really was someone so reckless or someone who had such a strong personal vendetta against Sol, they wouldn't have held back all this time just because he was a member of Black Tiger. In light of all this, there were no grounds on which to challenge Sol's call.

Showing no indication that he understood what Reen really wanted was a reason to see him, Sol waited until the dot of light indicating her location moved away before opening the magic lock of his front door and stepping inside. Unlike his friends, he did not hire servants, so his spacious house was dead silent.

“Now, then.”

Sol swiftly passed through the uselessly large rooms, heading straight for the

secret door leading to an underground space that he had spent a lot of money building. He had already eaten at the guild today, so there was no need for him to stop by his kitchen. The bedrooms and study aboveground were only for show, and he never entered except to clean them.

Where he actually lived was a hidden room fully outfitted even with an escape route in case of an attack. The existence of this room was something that he had kept secret even from the other members of Black Tiger. He was weak, so it was logical to take precautionary measures.

The space wasn't very big, but all the furniture inside was very high quality. The total cost of everything was very much out of reach for even reasonably wealthy merchants.

"I mean, if I don't use it now, when am I ever going to use it?" Sol murmured while settling into the fanciest chair in the room.

Now that Black Tiger's breakup was set in stone and that Sol had decided against creating a new party with Reen and Julia, his top priority was to try out what he had mentioned to Steve. He was now staring at a window generated by Player that, like all the others, could only be seen by him and was perfectly legible despite the room being pitch-black. This particular one only read "Summoning: One Time Only." The moment he willed it, the panel would be activated right away.

Sol had known about this function the moment he'd become aware of the abilities that Player granted him. However, he had yet to use it because up until this day, he had been foolishly clinging to his dream of conquering all of the world's dungeons with his childhood friends.

As Player, Sol himself was weak. This was a reality that had been pounded into him over the past five years. There was no denying that the talent was incredible, but he needed other people to bring out its full potential. The relationship between Player and his companions was supposed to be symbiotic: Player gave the others power, and the others had to use that power to protect him so that they wouldn't lose it. However, in doing so, Player was practically putting his life in other people's hands. Through past experience, Sol had confirmed that his companions could hurt him. He would be an absolute idiot to

get killed by the very power he had doled out, but the possibility was always there, no matter how slight. Sol had no leverage over someone who didn't care about losing their power.

That was why he was truly at a loss, as he had admitted to Steve. He was aware that not only was he stubborn and inflexible, he was also disastrously bad at communication. Mark was somewhat similar to him in this aspect, but until now, he had been able to rely on Alan, who was a very capable vice leader, and Reen and Julia, whom no guy could refuse. Now that he was suddenly on his own, he hadn't the faintest idea where to even begin. Never in a million years could he imagine himself going around talking to highly competent adventurers and convincing them to leave their current parties for his own.

In the first place, it was a miracle that he had started off with a group he could trust fully. It was because they were his childhood friends that Sol hadn't hesitated to give them powers that they could turn against him at any time, and it didn't matter that they were Villagers. There were measures that he could take to protect himself against complete strangers, but partying up with them and entrusting them with his life inside dungeons and territories was absolutely out of the question. Sol couldn't bring himself to trust other people that far.

Another thing to consider was that, despite Steve's misconception, there wasn't that much of a difference between someone who was merely a Villager and someone blessed with a rare talent in his eyes. Of course, this wasn't necessarily the case with unique talents like Sword Saint and Sage, but the statement was generally true of all the Rank B adventurers whom Sol had met in person. There were those who could get strong enough to easily blow past the ninth floor of the nameless dungeon Black Tiger had escaped by the skin of its teeth, but reaching the deepest floors of the four Great Dungeons was another matter entirely.

What *did* hold the potential for a solution to all those problems was this "Summoning: One Time Only" function. In the first place, it wasn't something that Sol was supposed to have waited this long to use. Everything indicated that he was meant to have used it the very moment he'd received Player. It was likely a crucial part of the talent that made up for his own weakness and ensured that his survival wouldn't be left to the whims of those he designated

as companions. The current situation, which had been born out of his panicked reaction to his friends not receiving useful talents, was unnatural. Chances were high that this function would summon an extremely powerful being who would be absolutely obedient to Player. At least, Sol desperately hoped it would. He would be extra thankful if it was something like a familiar or a pet.

Sol had yet to meet such a person, but he had heard that there were those who had talents that gave them the ability to control beasts and monsters. He was willing to dial his standards down and ask only that whatever he summoned didn't immediately turn on him. He couldn't help feeling apprehensive, but then he imagined himself going around trying to poach high-ranking adventurers, and then his earlier comment of "if I don't use it now, when am I ever going to use it?" popped back into his mind.

Oh, to hell with it.

The instant Sol resolved himself, light filled the pitch-black room. When his eyes adjusted, he blurted out, "Whoa..."

In this age where magic users were a rarity, the opportunity to see the activation of a magic circle large enough to be categorized as a large-scale spell was almost unheard-of. The window shattered into pieces and faded away as the light started moving like it had a life of its own. With Sol at the center, glowing mana traced out a multilayer three-dimensional magic formation. The next thing he knew, he was somewhere that was most certainly not his underground room.

Teleportation magic was ranked so highly that, despite multiple mentions in myths and legends, most people of this age doubted its existence. Sol remembered teachers at the Royal Academy bringing it up as the go-to example of fantasy and laughing scornfully about it during a class on magic. However, what he was seeing left no room for him to doubt that he had just been teleported. At roughly ten meters on all four sides, his underground room was spacious for what it was, but it did not have enough space for all the glowing orbs—a closer look revealed them to be three-dimensional spherical magic formations—rotating around him in varying directions and at different speeds. The most telling detail was something impossible not only for his room but for the entire city of Garlaige: he was floating inside a starry sky packed with

pinpricks of light spread out 360 degrees all around him. And his expensive chair was nowhere to be seen.

This was outer space, where the immutable ground was gone, and Sol's position made it seem like he was the center of the world. Although he knew about planets and stars on an intellectual level, he had obviously never seen them before in such detail with his bare eyes. And yet, he was now surrounded by giant examples connected by lines of light that formed a dizzying array of geometrical patterns. One of them was the very planet that he was living on, but he had no way of knowing.

Sol continued staring in a daze at the chaotic dance of the celestial bodies until five large cards decorated with sublime illustrations that wouldn't look out of place on display in a temple appeared and started circling him slowly. The lifelike art appeared to be depictions of the monsters described in the titles written on the magnificent frames.

One read "The Bound Evil Dragon." The illustration was of a massive black dragon missing one eye and one horn with both its wings—eyes, horns, and wings were purported to be the sources of a dragon's power—shredded to tatters. Its great form was hanging in the depths of an abyss, suspended by countless chains that looked like darkness given form.

One read "The Captive Elven Queen." The illustration was of a beautiful young girl clad in a chaste outfit made out of light but also blindfolded and wearing hand restraints. Countless threads of what looked like putrefied blood dug into her snow-white skin, yet the loveliness she radiated did not seem diminished in the slightest. Her distinctive long ears left no doubt that she was an elf, but her hair, which was longer than she was tall, was black like dried blood instead of turquoise blue as described in legends.

One read "The Lifeless Divine Beast." The illustration was of a giant beast with unblemished white fur pierced by several large, dark-gray spikes protruding from the ground and stained with its blood. The glazed look in its eyes and the way its several tails drooped limply made this composition look like a depiction of death itself.

One read "The Vacant Demon Lord." The illustration was of a being who had

once reigned supreme over the demons, a race that could pass for fallen angels due to looking like humans but for the horns on their foreheads and wings on their backs. This lord was all alone in a white space, standing listlessly with eyes devoid of the light of will, like an empty husk left to simply exist for the rest of eternity.

One read “The Cursed Hero.” The illustration was of a human champion clad in heavenly armaments capable of killing dragons and withstanding attacks from the Demon Lord. However, she was covered with the blood of many races, and although she had probably once had beautiful features, she now looked like a zombie, her body rotting alongside her supposedly divine equipment. She was locked in a state of perpetual wailing and lamentation, as if she were a terrible criminal.

Even though the paintings were beautiful enough to have been drawn by a god, all of them seemed ominous and sinister, invoking gloom and despair in the eye of the beholder.

These look like tarot cards. Are they going to continue spinning around me until I pick one? Does the one I pick decide what I summon?

Truthfully, Sol found all five options both attractive and repulsive in their own ways. A lot of time passed as he struggled to make a choice. However, he knew he couldn’t stay there indefinitely. For all he knew, the choice might be made for him if he ran out of time, though there was no indication that was a thing. Worse, he might get kicked out empty-handed if he failed to decide within his allotted time.

If there’s no way to tell which is the right choice anyway, then...

Ever since he was young, Sol had always viewed dragons as the symbol of strength. They were the ultimate magic beings, capable of trampling whomever they liked with absolute power. They possessed not only overwhelming physical strength and the limitless mana reserves needed to cast dragon magic, but also wisdom and intelligence that greatly surpassed human limits. According to the stories, they never died, simply growing larger and larger by year.

Sol liked the elven queen, the divine beast, the demon lord, and the hero too, but none of them were a match for the dragon, whose forbidding title and

disfigured depiction bothered him a little, but that was true of the other cards too, to varying degrees.

Therefore, Sol resolved himself and decided on “The Bound Evil Dragon.” When he did, one of the chains in the picture promptly started glowing with a white brilliance. It then snaked out of the card, grabbed Sol, and pulled him inside.



True darkness filled this new space. This was supposed to be a pitch-black world devoid of light, but the chain connecting the dragon and Sol was casting a weak glow. The range of that glow looked very limited, but that was relative.

Sol gasped softly as he looked up. The image had vividly depicted how massive the dragon was, but there was no way to convey how intimidating it was actually standing before it in person. The staggering difference in size—Sol's body was smaller than a single dragon scale—drove home in painful detail the fact that even though they were both living beings, an insurmountable wall existed between them.

Despite the glowing chain's best efforts, it was only illuminating a part of the dragon's face. Extrapolating from that, the dragon's entire body, shrouded in darkness as it was, was probably the size of a giant castle. Sol found it hard to believe that there had been someone powerful enough to not only rob this dragon of one horn, one eye, and both wings, but even trap it in this space. If such a person really had existed, they were most certainly not human. Chills ran down his spine and he struggled for words, standing in the presence of the closest thing to a god that he had ever seen in his entire life.

Man, I didn't expect it to be the real thing.

Sol had thought that the illustrations on the cards were merely symbolic, so he was shocked upon coming face-to-face with the actual being that he had selected. The inquisitive part of him wondered what it would have been like had he chosen one of the other cards, but this was no time to entertain idle musings.

"Ohhh..."

As Sol looked around puzzledly, not knowing what he was supposed to do, the dragon noticed the chain's light and, more importantly, Sol himself, and it started to stir.

"OOOOHHHHHHHHH!"

The hair-raising roar reverberated directly through Sol's head. His first experience with telepathic thought was so intense that his mind blanked out, as white as the chain's light, making it impossible for him to form a coherent

thought.

The dragon's sole remaining eye—the left one—opened slowly. The light shone into its giant reptilian pupil, which locked onto him. Even if he had never heard of dragons before, being in his current situation made it abundantly clear to Sol that he was facing a transcendent being in possession of overwhelming power. He froze like a frog in front of a snake.

“ArE YoU...tHe OnE who Will Be mY MAsTER?”

The voice pounding in Sol's head, sounding like the asynchronous ringing of many giant bells, caught him off guard. What it was saying made perfect sense in light of the purpose of the “Summoning: One Time Only” function, but Sol was facing such an awe-inspiring being that he had completely forgotten why he was there. The pressure of the dragon's voice in his mind made him feel like his head was about to split open.

When he grimaced, however, the dragon's giant eye showed clear signs of consternation. *“WAit a mOMent... Is this better?”*

The first half of the sentence was the same as before, but the dragon seemed to have done something so that its voice no longer sounded intimidating.

“That...works.”

This time, Sol was taken by surprise in an entirely different way, as the new voice was very much at odds with the dragon's appearance. He had yet to truly understand how telepathy worked, but the voice that he was hearing directly in his head now sounded like a young girl.

“It's been a thousand years since I last talked with someone. I apologize for my lack of consideration.”

Sol wondered if he was hearing wrong, but the voice that answered him was indeed adorable. He was so distracted by the surprise factor that he failed to register the casual mention of “a thousand years.”

“So...are you going to be, uh, my friend?” he asked.

“I am not worthy to stand beside you. If you are willing to become my master, I swear to dedicate every last drop of my power to your service until the day that

I perish."

Seriously?

What Sol had expected was more along the lines of "If you desire my power, offer me everything that you have!" or "Do you seek power?" So both the voice itself and what it was saying were rather anticlimactic.

Come to think of it, the illustration on the card was also completely inconsistent with the dragon's voice. And the sensation of something with incredible mass moving side to side and the jangling of what were likely chains beyond the range of the illuminated space seemed to indicate that this creature was swinging its tail, which was muddling up the overall impression even further.

These sudden humorous developments were throwing Sol off. At the same time, he had picked up on a slight tremor in the dragon's adorable voice. It almost sounded like she was trying to pander to him while desperately bottling up her emotions. He recognized her tone of voice from the girls who used to fight over Alan at the Royal Academy right before they exploded into outbursts.

"I-If you refuse to be my master...can you at least do me the mercy of ending my life here and now?"

Against his earnest wishes, Sol's sense of foreboding had come to pass in the worst way possible. The quiver in the dragon's voice was growing more pronounced, and what it was saying was taking a very worrying turn. Even if Sol wanted to kill her, he hadn't the faintest idea of how to do it, regardless of how much her disfigurement had weakened her.

"Please...mercy."

Terror and insanity were beginning to creep into the voice, which was quickly being reduced to mere begging. The change was happening so quickly that Sol's mind could not keep up.

"I cannot stand a moment more! Since I fell in battle, it is only natural that I accept the consequences. But at least kill me! Instead, I am robbed of my strength, tied up so I cannot move, and locked up in this place where I cannot see or feel anything! Then I am left here for a thousand years, unable to sleep,

go mad, or die! I cannot take a single moment more of this torture! I cannot!”

The dragon was reverting to her earlier voice, the unbridled one that sounded like a cacophony of ringing bells.

A thousand years?!

While suppressing the sensation of his head splitting apart, Sol finally understood why this dragon was so different from the image of a transcendent being that he had expected. The fact that she had actually lost to someone who had then bound her here was surprising enough, but she had become like this not because of that loss but because of her millennium of solitude.

It was said that dragons had lifespans of tens of thousands of years, with some being practically immortal. If this one had been able to spend the last thousand years as a haughty superior being, it would have been nothing more than her prerogative and she wouldn't have given it a second thought. Conversely, if she had failed to measure up and someone had struck her down in battle, she would have been able to graciously accept death, as befitted a loser.

However, what she had been subjected to after losing was bondage. If her wholehearted lamentation was to be believed, she had been left dangling from countless chains for a thousand years, unable to lift even a finger.

The very thought made Sol shiver. He knew he could never bear it. Not even this dragon had been unaffected. However, regardless of her mental state, her time in this living hell simply marched on with no respite and no end in sight. She couldn't sleep, couldn't go mad, couldn't even die. Being all alone, the only thing she could do was to live inside her head. Sol couldn't think of a worse punishment. Dragons were self-assured in their way of being, accepting both eternal life and the absolute finality of death, but this sentence eroded that at a fundamental level. In the face of true despair, it did not take much for pride and self-regard to fall away before the promise of hope. Sol knew this well from personal experience.

“AH, aaAh, AaAAaaH! You're disappearing! You're leaving me! Please kill me. PLeaSE kILL me! After being given such hope after a thousand years, I cannot bear to suffer another thousand! PLeAsE! PLEASE!”

Before Sol had time to get a word in edgewise, the glow of the chain linking him to the dragon was growing weaker and weaker. Seeing this, the dragon discarded all sense of shame and self-respect and howled for the sweet release of death. Sol had no idea how to respond through telepathy, so he shouted out, “CALM DOWN!” Since it was his intention to become master of this dragon, he used a commanding tone that he normally never did.

It was true that chills had run down his spine. He could empathize with the dragon’s plight by imagining himself in her position. If the beings in the other cards were also in similar circumstances, he could muster up indignation and anger toward the godlike being who had put them there without a second thought.

However, the strongest emotion bubbling up within him at the moment—and he acknowledged that he was a heartless fiend for it—was extremely close to elation.

What a windfall.

This was a situation where he could make a transcendent being fully obedient—no, fully *dependent* on him. It was practically a golden opportunity for someone who was chasing a dream unachievable through conventional means. If this had been orchestrated by a god, the anger that Sol knew he should feel toward them was easily buried by the magnitude of the boon that he was receiving.

With a villainous grin that he wasn’t even aware of, Sol shouted, “My name is Sol Rock. My dream is to conquer every single dungeon in this world. O black dragon bound in this eternal hell, do you swear to obey all my commands and to become my loyal servant?”

The black dragon who had been suspended in hell was desperate to clutch at any shred of hope. Without hesitation, she shouted back, *“If you will be my master, I will obey all your commands, whatever they may be. Even if I am to forfeit my life, I will never break this oath.”*

The fire of desire to fulfill their own wishes burned fiercely in both Sol’s eyes and the dragon’s single eye. They made no effort at hiding it. Both of them saw this as an opportunity that they absolutely had to seize. It could be said that this

was a win-win scenario or a positive-sum game. But if the world occupied by Sol and the black dragon was actually founded on a zero-sum game, which of them would be the one to lose out? There was no way to tell just yet.

“I swear upon my name to become your loyal servant. I am Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon! My true name is Luna. I beseech you to call my true name to bind my soul to yours and to become my master!”

This is Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon?!

So that Sol could make the contract absolute, the dragon had told him both the name she went by and her true name. It just so happened that hers was the same name as the evil dragon from the very myth that had led Sol to see dragons as the ultimate symbol of power. Apparently, “Evil Dragon” was a title that later generations had assigned her and she herself preferred “All Dragon.”

“Very well! Luna, be my obedient servant!” Sol shouted, shaking with joy. “Be mine, Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon!”

The glow of the chain linking Sol and Luna flared bright enough to reveal the Evil Dragon’s entire wretched, bound form for a brief moment, then died out.

The little girl’s voice from earlier said, “Thank you,” not telepathically this time, but audibly. The same moment that Sol registered the switch, he felt a warm presence on his chest and realized that he was in his chair back in his underground room.

It was as if everything that had happened after he used “Summoning: One Time Only” had been a dream. The only difference was that there was now a young girl with tanned skin and a single horn, a single eye, and a vigorously wagging tail burying her face in his chest.

Um, is this Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon in servant form?

Thus ended Sol’s experience using “Summoning: One Time Only.” As someone who did not have an undue preference for young girls, he honestly felt a little cheated.



The story involving Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon was so popular among

children dreaming of receiving talents useful for fighting monsters on the first day of the year they turned twelve that many priests could recite it by rote. Specifically, it was called “Kuzuifabra,” also known as “The Hero’s Epic.”

Lunvemt was the final boss whom the protagonist, the only person in history chosen by God to be a Hero, had to defeat at the very end. It was said to be as massive as a castle suspended in the sky. It held command over dragon magic, which was powerful enough to change the weather, and it had a breath attack that could wipe out armies numbering the tens of thousands. Its scales were impervious to swords, arrows, and even magic, and its claws and fangs tore apart people, beasts, and monsters with zero distinction, as all other life was mere prey.

No one could stand in the Evil Dragon’s way, as it was practically the embodiment of the end of the world. It bared its fangs against God, razing five of the greatest magic cities of Era Gran Magicka and shattering the Tower, a monument said to have reached the heavens.

It was for the triumph of defeating Lunvemt that the Hero was lionized and her story passed down through the ages. In a way, the existence of a big bad threatening the world was necessary for the birth of a savior.

For some reason, however, Sol felt much more drawn to the monster shunned by man and God instead of the Hero. No one could ever beat God, as being infallible was part of the definition of being a god. There was no way that a dragon, who should have possessed intelligence far beyond human limits, hadn’t understood that. And yet the Evil Dragon had still challenged God—alone, no less.

At the height of the era of magical prowess, humans flaunted their God-given talents and threw their weight around, claiming to be made in his image. Lunvemt refused to accept this. Despite knowing that it had no chance of winning from the start, the evil, evil dragon had still fought until it was finally struck down by the Hero. This foolishness and stubbornness was what spoke to Sol. He empathized with the dragon because he was also driven by a goal far too big for himself.

Kuzuifabra was the story of God and a Hero who’d been chosen by him saving

the world of man. In the present day, the demihumans, therianthropes, demonfolk, and dragoneels had either been wiped out, greatly weakened, or enslaved by humans. How ironic it was that it was now mindless monsters who occupied the majority of this world humans had once dominated under the pretext of being more intelligent than all other races.

With such a storied enemy of God as a loyal servant, Sol could seize control of the world back from the monsters by clearing out all the dungeons. The thought of it exhilarated him more than ever before, but his journey wasn't off to a great start.

"Um, I feel scammed."

"My apologies, my lord. My current form is but a fragment, with 0.1% of the strength of my real body, my Augoeides."

"Yes, that's kind of what I thought."

The young girl sitting in Sol's lap and burying her face in his chest was, according to her own explanation, a fragment of Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon. Sol wasn't entirely clear on what it meant to have a divided body, but his own senses confirmed that she was an incarnation with an actual physical form. She very much felt like a living being, not an astral body or an apparition. However, one look told him without doubt that she was no normal human.

Her slender form looked, by human standards, around twelve years old. She had lustrous tanned skin, golden hair that glittered in the light, and a single radiant eye, with the other hidden by bangs. Her facial features were so perfect that instead of the adorableness one would normally find in a girl of her age, it was her womanly beauty that left a stronger impression on beholders. Many would actually believe it if they were told that she was royalty from a southern nation. That was, if not for the giant horn on the right side of her head, which was at complete odds with her stunning looks, and the prominent tail at her back that nearly matched her height in length. It was glaringly obvious at a glance that she was no mere preteen.

In fact, Luna's appearance did not match that of any of the other demihumans in existence, which only made sense, since these characteristics were unique to dragons assuming human form and she was now the last living one. That said,

she was a far cry from what one would normally imagine when thinking of Lunvemt Nachtfelia, the Evil Dragon who had brought calamity upon the world and raised a fist to the heavens. All the more so because she was now looking up with an apologetic expression while her tail was swinging vigorously at the joy of her first physical contact with someone else in a thousand years.

As she had admitted herself, she didn't look particularly strong. Although she was hugging Sol with all her might, what he felt was the fragility and evanescence of an actual young girl.

"But don't worry, I can get stronger."

"I guess it *would* be crazy suddenly having the storied Evil Dragon at full strength in my service."

"For someone who saved me from that hell, you're quite fainthearted, my lord."

The way Luna was looking up at Sol—somewhat frightened and anxious, but mixed with a trace of exasperation—was honestly quite adorable. It wasn't exciting him in a weird way because he wasn't a pedophile, but he could see how lethal her look would be for those who were.

In any case, what Sol had gotten was not an all-powerful servant who could immediately take him to the depths of the world's greatest dungeons but an adorable being aware of her own weakness who triggered his protective instincts. He could hardly be faulted for feeling a little cheated upon comparing this moment with that of several minutes ago when he and Luna had formed their master-servant bond.

According to Luna, her real body, or what she called her Augoeides, was still in that indeterminate space, suspended by countless chains. Her current form was the best she could do with only one chain gone. Furthermore, with one eye, one horn, and both wings gone, she would not be able to regain her full strength even if she was in her Augoeides. That said, being weakened was hardly sufficient explanation for everything.

"Do you *have* to look and sound like that, though? Or is it ordained by God?" Sol did not doubt that, as Luna said, she could grow stronger, presumably far surpassing humans. Or at least, she should. Or might. All he could do was keep

his fingers crossed. In any case, it would be much easier for her to fulfill her role as Player's loyal servant in a humanlike form as opposed to a giant dragon. Even so, he was having trouble understanding the intention of the god who had dictated this physical appearance and voice for a being that was supposed to wield superhuman strength.

Luna blushed abashedly and said in a faint voice, "Oh, no, I'm the one who, um, chose this appearance."

"What? Why?"

"It is my understanding that humans have a fondness for it. Am I wrong?"

Sol brought a hand to his face. "I really want to know what led you to that notion." He had no idea what expression to make in response to learning the almost comical yet pitiful fact that the Evil Dragon whose name silenced babies and brought children to tears had spent the last thousand years devising the form and voice that people would like best.

I get that it's no joke, though.

Sol was not particularly religious and therefore hadn't thought about this much before, but this world most definitely had a god, or at least a being with the absolute powers that qualified them as a god. Humans receiving talents and the Evil Dragon being locked up for a thousand years was most definitely not a natural phenomenon. Everything about Player, including the summoning function that Sol had experienced for himself just now, smacked of intent.

It was now clear that a being who possessed godlike powers was interacting with this world, and with more malice than not. The way they had chosen to punish Luna for having the audacity to challenge them—by thoroughly crushing her heart and sense of self—was probably what they did to everyone who tried to defy them. What made it worse was that, among the five cards presented to Sol, one depicted the Hero, who had supposedly been loved by this god. This implied that if someone failed to live up to God's expectations, they would not be granted even the mercy of death. Sol made sure that he would never forget this.

By Sol's understanding, his dream of conquering the world's dungeons did not go against the will of the being watching over this world. At least, he hoped so.

However, he had no way to make sure that he did not cross forbidden boundaries along the way. This world apparently had strictly enforced taboos, but it wasn't clear where the lines were.

In the worst case, he could earn God's ire on nothing more than a whim. This was something that he would need to be cautious about, on top of his usual worries about hiding his abilities. The hope was that he could eventually learn everything he needed to know from Luna, but he was leery of asking now, as she was clearly in no state to go over what was very likely tied to details that had left indelible trauma on her mind.

Then again, I won't be able to get anything done by being too impatient or too cautious.

It didn't seem likely that God would show up just because Sol partied up with Luna and conquered a nearby nameless dungeon.

"For starters, can you let go of me?"

Their first course of action was to either sleep or, if Luna was hungry, treat her to her first meal in a thousand years. To do either, she needed to stop hugging him.

"Can I...stay like this...for just a little longer?" she asked in a plaintive voice, looking up with teary eyes. What she wanted most at the moment was the reassurance of physical contact to prove that she did indeed exist.

Sol sighed and gave a small shrug to indicate his consent. Luna gave him her very best smile, then nuzzled his chest as hard as she could.

Seriously, what am I doing?

Sol was just thinking about how he would wholeheartedly agree with the reproach in Reen's eyes if she were present when suddenly, the discordant sound of glass and wood shattering rang out from above. The stimulation was too great for Luna, who had been suspended in a place devoid of sound for a thousand years. She jumped up in Sol's lap, raising a scream that was more than a little pathetic for God's most powerful enemy. So great was her shock that her soul seemed to leave her mouth and tears started welling in the corner of her eyes.

“AHHH— *Mfgh!*”

“Shh!” Having expected this to happen, Sol swiftly clapped a hand over her mouth and raised a finger to his lips to ask for quiet. In a calm voice, he said, “We can talk at normal volumes, though. You hear me?”

Though still teary-eyed, Luna nodded several times. She was a little surprised, but the emotion was fading quickly. Instead, though she didn’t understand it, blood was rushing to her cheeks in response to the strange sensation of having the area around her face and lips touched for the first time since she had taken on human form. Once Sol determined that she had gotten his message, he removed his hand and she took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. She struggled to understand why she felt so flustered even though her life hadn’t been in danger. And when she unconsciously ran her tongue over the part of her lips where Sol’s hand had made contact, her breathing, which had calmed down a little, started picking up again. Her tail was making weird, jerky movements that made no sense to her, and for some reason, that made her very embarrassed.

It was Luna’s very first time being treated like a weak and frail being. It was as yet a complete mystery to her why that made her behave this way. In spite of everything, however, she somehow managed to maintain a composed facade.

She kept her face turned up and asked timidly, “What’s going on?”

It was true that there were a lot of things throwing her off, but she had just remembered the reason she’d been saved: she was here as a faithful servant, to protect her master from every single one of his enemies. This was a duty so fundamental to her position that it came before following his commands or helping him achieve his dream. A servant who failed to carry out their duties would be dismissed as a matter of course. And that was something Luna wanted to avoid at all costs. This was no time to be clinging to Sol and breathing in his smell or licking where he had touched her and getting excited.

Oblivious to Luna’s concerns, Sol calmly analyzed the situation. “They’re probably burglars. Word sure spreads fast. But don’t worry, they’ll probably leave after taking what they think is valuable.”

Even though a part of him had expected this, it wasn’t quite going how he

thought it would. Any one of the adventurers who had been present for Steve's announcement could have plotted against him by approaching a gang of renegade adventurers from the slums and telling them only about Black Tiger's breakup and not the warning. At least a few hoodlums who weren't so bright would fall for the bait and target Sol's house tonight. However, he had expected them to do so quietly.

Sol was weak, but that was by adventurer standards. Hoodlums from the slums didn't stand a chance against him in a fight, even if a sizable group was rounded up. His physical prowess was literally on a different level. It wouldn't matter either if they wore armor or brought weapons. The disparity between adventurers and common citizens was simply too wide to be bridged by such things.

In light of this, the fact that the intruders were making a ruckus could only mean one thing: that they considered themselves an equal match for him. In other words, these were renegade adventurers. And with them working together—there were eight red dots on his window—he had zero chance of victory. They knew this too, which was why they had opted to barge in rather than sneak in.

Of course, they would never be able to get through the magic barrier protecting this hidden room. But if Sol had been dumb enough to go to sleep in his bedroom, he could have easily lost his life, or at least been seriously hurt. It would have mainly come down to what the person who had instigated these thugs wanted.

If the instigators were Mark and Alan, Sol would feel deeply hurt. He really wanted to believe the expressions on their faces when they had said, while firing him, that they didn't want him to die.

He crossed his fingers, hoping that it was instead an adventurer who was taking issue with Fiona asking Sol to be her "next."

"Are they your enemy?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Aren't we going to kill them?"

“With just the two of us? How can we?”

The moment Luna received confirmation that the intruders were unwelcome, her whole vibe changed. Although she looked the same physically, she flipped from a fragile girl who tickled Sol’s paternal instincts to a battle-hardened warrior whose presence gave him goose bumps. Even so, he couldn’t see how he, the weakest adventurer ever, and her, a dainty little girl, had any hope of winning a fight against eight former adventurers. These assailants may not have made it far up the guild’s ranks, but they had surely seen their fair share of action.

With a serious expression, Luna murmured, “I don’t feel anyone with the strength of a Hero, but... I see, they must be suppressing their aura.”

Through her own senses, she had an even better understanding of what was going on aboveground than what Sol could glean from Player. He had no idea how strong the Hero had been, but the Kuzuifabra did describe her splitting the clouds, splitting the sea, splitting mountains—basically splitting everything, including the Divine Beast and the Evil Dragon, of course. In any case, there was no way that mere renegade adventurers had such superhuman strength.

Were people of that level the norm in Luna’s time?

Even if they existed in this day and age, there was no reason for them to come after Sol.

“No, no, they’re just renegade adventurers. Erring on the side of caution, I’d say they’re Rank D at best. Hm, but the rankings mean nothing to you. In any case, there are a lot of them, but I’m pretty sure they won’t find this room. Even if they do, there’s no way they can get in. So don’t worry.”

Looking up in the same direction Sol was facing, Luna said calmly, “I can deal with mere humans.”

No trace was left of the little girl who had been clinging to him like a hurt animal or who had jumped and yelped at a loud noise. Luna had an accurate read on the enemies above and had determined that they were insubstantial as threats. It was clear that she was not speaking with empty bravado. For a dragon, run-of-the-mill adventurers were indeed no different from normal humans. She had been alarmed purely because she wasn’t used to the loud

noise, not because of who had caused it.

Despite knowing all this, Sol couldn't help but ask one more time, just to be sure. "Really?"

Luna puffed out her chest. "This body may be a fragment, but I *am* the All Dragon!" She sounded proud, but more so because she could prove herself useful to the person who had saved her and less because of her identity as the All Dragon.

The only thing that scared Luna was being sent back to the prison of sensory deprivation. And yet there was no doubt that such would be her fate should she lose her master, as he had brought her out to serve him. Therefore, anything that threatened Sol was immediately a target for elimination. For the same reason, she was afraid that he would get sick of her and void their relationship. If that ever happened, she planned on begging him to end things by ordering her to kill herself. It would be best if neither situation came to be, of course, so she was very eager to serve Sol to the best of her ability.

Seeing how confident Luna looked, Sol checked her stats just in case, and blurted out, "Oh, that's just not fair."

He had not been able to do this when facing Luna's Augoeides. It hadn't bothered him because he had experienced it before when facing a monster with a base level much higher than his own, so he had just accepted it as one of Player's limitations. Now that the two of them were master and servant, however, he had access to the comprehensive profile of this fragment of Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon, including information that he didn't need to know.

The numbers in each stat and the number of skills in her repertoire made it a joke to compare her to any human. Despite having used Player for five years, even Sol couldn't help feeling overwhelmed by how enormous an advantage she had in any fight. Her numbers were *magnitudes* bigger than anything he had ever seen.

Then again, it only makes sense. I was initially disappointed to hear that she only has 0.1% the strength of her Augoeides or whatever, but there's absolutely nothing a thousand soldiers or adventurers could do against that ginormous

chained-up dragon. I could add one or two more digits to that number and they'd still get mowed down. And if that's the case...

"What's not fair?"

"Sorry, nothing. So, um, can you take care of this situation for me?"

"Gladly!"

Okay, so Luna is practically invincible against humans... WHAT THE—

Upon understanding that he had indeed obtained the absolute power that he had been hoping for, he casually asked for what he thought of as little more than a demonstration. The next moment, he and Luna had switched places. He managed to stop himself from actually screaming out loud, but he definitely made a very weird sound in his head as he reflexively clung to the All Dragon's dainty body with all his strength.

"Wh-Where did you pop out from?! No, more importantly, you're Sol Rock, right?"

Sol could hardly be blamed, being the modern man that he was. Although he now understood how stark the difference in strength was between Luna and the burglars, he had assumed that he and Luna would be dispelling the magic barrier, walking out of the hidden room, and *then* killing all of the intruders in the blink of an eye. Instead, he had found himself suddenly face-to-face with their leader, who was just as surprised as he was, indicating that he and the dragon were the ones who had appeared all of a sudden.

A part of him understood what had happened, but just in case, he asked, "Luna, what was that?!"

"Short-distance teleportation. Why?"

Sol gave an exasperated laugh. "Don't say it like it's no big deal!"

It would have been a lot easier to accept if there had been a fancy, complicated ritual invoking God or something. Teleportation was considered such an incredible feat that many modern-day magic scholars even pegged it as mere fiction. And yet, Luna had performed it as casually as taking a breath. Laughter seemed the only appropriate reaction.

Ruefulness colored Luna's face. "I can traverse much greater distances in my real body, but..."

Sol shook his head, feeling sorry about confusing her with his reaction, but distance wasn't the issue. In fact, it terrified him a little to learn that she could pull off a long-distance version in her original form. The implications would vary depending on what she considered "short-distance" and "much greater distances," but the very fact of being able to teleport was going to alter the fundamental concept of war. Sol couldn't help forgetting his current situation and getting absorbed in his thoughts.

And, not to diminish my surprise at teleporting, but am I floating in midair right now?

Eventually, he had shifted from gluing his whole body to Luna's to holding on to her with his left hand. Thanks to the cape that he was wearing—he honestly had no need for it, as he wasn't a mage, but he had taken a liking to it and had it custom-made—and the darkness of the room, the burglars had thankfully failed to notice how pathetic he had behaved at the start. However, now that he had calmed down a little, he realized that, due to his position above the fountain, he was very much looking down at the intruders, even the ones who looked far bulkier than himself.

If I'm the one who suddenly encountered someone casually floating, I'd immediately make a run for it, but...

"Don't ignore me, damn you! You can try to intimidate us all you want, Mr. Rank B, but everyone knows you were just a deadweight to your party!"

Upon recovering from their surprise, the burglars decided to encircle Sol and Luna. They still had no idea how he had appeared or how he was floating, but it was enough to know that this was Sol Rock's house. They had nothing to fear here. After all, everyone who knew him shared the opinion that he was little more than baggage to Black Tiger.

Based on that assumption, the burglars were interpreting his sudden appearance and floating as mere attempts at intimidation. Or perhaps the phenomena were just so mind-boggling that the burglars couldn't process it any other way. It was certainly possible, through trickery and preparation, to

reproduce the effects of the Teleport and Float spells. However, he would have to have been a very eccentric person indeed to choose this situation to put on a magic show.

Then again, these thugs were probably far from being the sharpest tools in the shed. Sol was honestly quite impressed that they had, based purely on secondhand information, made the conscious decision to break into his house knowing that he had every right to kill them upon catching them in the act. But then again, it was probably because they didn't have the ability to think things through that they had ended up running with gangs in the slum despite having successfully become adventurers.

This is perfect timing. Let's give them their just deserts.

Unbeknownst to Sol, he had a very cold smile on his face right now. Steve was right in that he was usually quite merciless toward those he determined to be enemies. He had yet to lay hands on anyone himself, but quite a few people had tried messing with Black Tiger during its meteoric rise. What Sol did, then, was set things up and leave it to Steve's men to make the final move.

If Reen had been present, he would have probably stopped at chasing the burglars out. She was more than powerful enough to kill them, make no mistake, but she just didn't have the heart to commit murder. Then again, the moment the burglars spotted Iron Wall, they would have scattered like baby spiders.

However, it was Luna who was with Sol right now, and he thought this the perfect opportunity to see how far *she* was willing to go as a party member and a servant whose duty it was to protect him. More specifically, was she willing to kill humans on his command?

Without skipping a beat, Luna asked, "Do you want me to get into it here?"

Apparently, killing was her default solution, and there wasn't even a scrap of doubt in her mind that she could do it. What she was worried about was that it would dirty her master's house. She was in human form but was ultimately a dragon at heart. She saw no need to hesitate before killing an enemy, be they beast, monster, or even human.

"I, uh, would prefer it if we took this outside. Also, can you leave those who

are not hostile alive?”

Taking care of dead bodies in the house would be a hassle. If it was a stretch to ask that the fight be taken outside the city walls, Sol at least wanted it moved to his garden.

“As you command.”

The moment that Sol heard Luna’s vocal acknowledgment of his order, he felt the same bizarre sensation from moments ago. For her, using short-distance teleportation was synonymous with walking on her own legs. What’s more, she could bring both allies and enemies along. This was an extremely powerful form of offensive magic in and of itself.

Well, it makes sense, given how much MP she has.

While humans could only use inner mana—mana created inside their bodies—to cast spells, monsters had “organas,” organs that gave them the ability to absorb the outer mana that filled the world. Luna’s ability to teleport so casually compared to how impossible it was for humans very clearly demonstrated how much of a difference that made.



The only reaction that Sol could manage was to sigh and shake his head a little. He had endured his teleportation rather calmly, as he had known what to expect this time. Now, he was positioned above the fountain in the middle of his garden, as Luna had maintained the usage of Float throughout the teleportation process. The burglars had been taken care of in exactly the same way that Sol had imagined—teleported high up into the air and left to fall.

Sol was hardly familiar with the effects of falling from high up, but fifty meters was almost certain death for humans. The five puddles that he was currently sighing at, however, were the results of falling from more than a hundred meters. Needless to say, it was quite gory.

So this is what she considers “short-distance.” And she doesn’t look tired in the slightest.

If there was no limit on the number of people that Luna could teleport at once, she was more than capable of dealing with an entire squad of soldiers

with that one spell. If the spell could be applied to everyone within, say, a hundred-meter diameter, then anyone who stepped foot inside, irrespective of rank and status, would be promptly subjected to a free-fall experience from a hundred meters up. The only available countermeasures were spells that enabled someone to fly or something that offered resistance against forced teleportation. Sol chuckled numbly at imagining foot soldiers, officers, cavalry, and generals falling from the sky and being smashed to death like a very bizarre weather phenomenon.

The sound that the five men made when they hit the ground was so disgusting that he worried it might haunt his dreams. It took a while after he and Luna had arrived outside for the falling men to come within earshot—their screams were no longer intelligible by then—and the next moment, they were splayed out on the ground in a display that was just as horrific as their screams.

As it turned out, Luna was even more ruthless than Sol. Considering how long she herself had been tortured, maybe she even thought she was being merciful by letting the burglars off with several seconds of terror and an instant of extreme pain. Someone who picked a fight with an opponent formidable enough to hold the power of life and death over them had no right to complain about how the exchange ended up. Luna had learned this lesson herself the hard way.

“What will you do with *those*?”

“Well, I’ve got questions for them, and I happen to need subjects for an experiment.”

Of the eight burglars, Luna had killed five. That meant five had been hostile toward Sol and had planned to kill him. The fact that they’d thought they had the strength to do so—reputation aside, Sol was still officially a Rank B adventurer—meant they were undoubtedly renegade adventurers. In terms of strength, they had probably been top dogs in the slums.

Luna was referring to the remaining three. Despite having come to assassinate Sol, they were not hostile even when face-to-face with him. That meant they probably hadn’t been blessed with a talent that gave them the strength to win. And sure enough, as Sol looked down on them from on high

like a Demon Lord—he physically had no choice, given their respective positions—they returned his gaze with wide-open eyes and trembled so violently it almost seemed like an amateur performance.

Right, so they're the cleaning crew.

If the five meat piles had actually managed to kill Sol as planned, these three would have been ordered to handle the aftermath. They looked a lot younger than their companions; in fact, they were probably younger than Sol himself. Most likely, they had come of age, failed to get a good talent, left their villages with no preparation and no support in hopes of making it big in a large city like Garlaige, and, to no one's surprise, ended up having to eke out a living in the slums.

One was a boy, and the other two were girls. If Sol hadn't been blessed with Player, he and his friends just might have shared their fate. That was hardly the sole reason, but Sol thought they seemed perfect as subjects for something he wanted to try out.

“Who told you about Black Tiger's breakup?”

Of course, if they had been so influenced by their time with the dregs of society that they were to act belligerently in this situation, or if they were so frozen with fear that they couldn't speak, then Sol was going to look for other candidates. So he asked a very basic question as a test.

None of them answered. None of them could. Sol directed his gaze to the well-built boy, who opened and closed his mouth with no words coming out.

“If you can't answer me, then I'll just kill all of you too.”

Not that I blame them. They've probably never fought a monster in their lives, and they just watched five people they thought invincible get turned into paste—and they don't even understand how it happened.

Any adventurer worth their salt had seen more dead bodies than they could count. Sol had been taken aback by the method Luna had used, but he wasn't particularly affected by human paste in and of itself. He had gotten used to much worse.

He wasn't worried about the three staying silent as a bluff, but if they truly

didn't have the backbone to do something when their very lives were on the line, then he couldn't really use them as subjects. They weren't suitable if they were going to just freeze up when facing a monster more powerful than themselves with which communication wasn't even an option. That was why Sol had threatened to kill them as a final test, even though he didn't really plan on going through with it.

Sadly, the boy simply shook his head, seized by sheer panic. Just as Sol was about to give up on the group, however, one of the girls stepped up and, albeit in a shaking voice, managed to squeeze out an answer.

"W-We really don't know. Our boss would, but you just, um, k-killed him."

Sol turned his gaze from the boy to the girl. *Ah, girls really are stronger in situations like this.*

The ability to take action even in the face of inescapable death was a rare talent. There were a surprising number of adventurers who died in dungeons when they had the misfortune of encountering powerful monsters and froze up in fear and despair. Sure, happening upon a tough monster was just bad luck. However, completely freezing up indicated a lack of resolve. In that sense, this girl had just met the first condition of what Sol was looking for in a subject.

As for the girl's answer, it made sense. In all likelihood, they had been treated as little more than grunts, and no one ever told grunts important information. Nothing they *did* know was important enough to hide on pain of death in a situation like this.

"Okay, next question. Who are you guys?"

Although the girl's voice was still a little shaky, she answered right away. "We're one of the gangs from the slums. Our boss is Gafus Nodak, who's now dead over there. We're known as the Gafus Gang."

There was resolve in her face, indicating that she had made the conscious choice to be an experimental subject, no matter how much it terrified her, over dying for nothing right now.

"What's your name?"

"Eliza, sir. I'm Eliza Chantal."

It was now clear that this girl was smart. Judging by the relief that flooded her face, she had made the connection that Sol wasn't going to kill her if he was going to the trouble of asking for her name.

The other two seemed to have caught on to the change in Eliza's aura and inferred that they also wouldn't be killed if they named themselves too, so they did so in a fluster, despite not having been asked.

"I-I'm Johan Nobbak! Sir!"

"I'm Louise Ratul, sir!"

With hesitant hands, Eliza pulled back her deep hood, as if realizing there was no point in keeping her face hidden any longer or that not doing so might displease the person who held her life in his hands. Johan and Louise quickly followed suit.

"Eliza, Johan, and Louise. Got it. From this moment on, you all work for me. All right?"

The three had no choice but to nod right away. They were still terrified about the experiment that Sol had mentioned, but the fact that he had made them his lackeys meant whatever it was he planned on doing wouldn't immediately kill them. In the first place, even if Sol was merciful and simply let them go, they had nowhere to return to now that the Gafus Gang had lost its main fighting strength. Their only recourse would be to join another gang, where they would undoubtedly get even worse treatment, as all new gang recruits did.

On the contrary, being taken in by Sol meant they now had the protection of someone powerful enough to kill Gafus and his men without batting an eye. Depending on how this situation developed, it could be the best thing that had ever happened to them. At the moment, the probability of things ending in fortune or misfortune seemed roughly equal, with the scales tipping slightly toward fortune. Eliza understood that what would decide it wasn't Sol, but her own answers.

The experiment worries me too, but...if I were a normal girl, my chances would probably be higher. Now that I've revealed my face, though, I probably don't have much hope.

Although Eliza was calm, her thoughts were taking a rather pessimistic and self-deprecating turn. There was a deep part of her that was seriously thinking that being granted instant death here and now would be preferable to continuing a life that even she thought pathetic.

“To start, I’ll give all of you the power to fight monsters. Don’t worry about registering as adventurers; I have a contact who’ll take care of it. The three of you are to form a three-person party and train yourselves up by completing quests and missions. Ultimately, I want you to take over every organization in the slum. At least get powerful enough to have sway over them, and I want it done sooner than later. Are there any remaining renegade adventurers in the Gafus Gang?”

Just as Eliza had been lulled into letting down her guard by the knowledge that she wouldn’t die today, she got slapped with an order that her mind failed to process. She understood what the words meant, of course, but they didn’t make sense together as a command that she was to carry out.

Thankfully, since Sol had directed his question to her, she reflexively managed to reply, “No sir, there isn’t. These five were our only adventurers.”

Sol nodded. “Good. We won’t have a problem, then.”

The way that he was continuing the conversation like nothing was out of the ordinary was scaring Eliza in a different way than before. What did he mean when he said he would *give* them power? He had a contact in the Adventurer’s Guild? He wanted the three of them—mere children—to take over the slum?

Is he...God?

Honestly, what Sol had said with a straight face was even more ridiculous than the ramblings of a drunk. If Eliza hadn’t already known how powerful he was, she just might have flipped out on him for making fun of her for not having a good talent. That was how heavy that fact weighed on her heart, as she blamed it for how her life had turned out. She was so bitter that she almost had it in her to make a case for the world she lived in, a world where the strong seized from the weak.

Looking off into the distance, Sol said, “Let’s go with tank for Johan and magic attacker for Louise. Eliza can be a healer. Okay, done. Eliza, you’re the leader of

this group. I'll leave it all to you."

Eliza, who had been directing all her energy toward not letting even a hint of her anger show on her face, was suddenly overtaken by surprise. She finally understood what Sol had said earlier. The words that she had thought were sheer nonsense had come true. Through Player, he had given her not only the skills that enabled her to fulfill her respective role in her party, but also the maximum HP, MP, and stats that he could. Just like Mark, Alan, Reen, and Julia, she had realized it right away.

The same thing was happening for Johan and Louise. The three of them understood with their hearts, not their minds, that this was how it would have felt had they received talents useful for fighting monsters upon coming of age. The adults had told them countless times that such individuals always immediately understood the power they had been given, and that was exactly what they were experiencing.

A little less than a year after coming of age, Eliza's group was finally blessed with a miracle. That led them to question the identity of the man who had done it with such ease. It was common knowledge that the weak-looking man before them was deadweight to his very capable party. And yet, in the blink of an eye, he had killed five men who had been so strong that she hadn't dared dream of defying them. Not only that, he had done something to her and her companions that only God could, and without batting an eye. Truly, there was no one besides God who could bestow talents on humans. Now that she thought about it, Eliza remembered that there were myths about God appearing among them in the guise of a mere human.

"This hardly needs to be said, but don't tell anyone what just happened."

When Sol smiled, he looked like God incarnate in their eyes. A part of it was because, instead of threatening to kill them if they blabbed, he only chided them in a kind tone. For children at the impressionable ages of twelve and thirteen, being given overwhelming power through a practical miracle *and* being spoken to gently was nearly as effective as brainwashing. The three nodded with more sincerity than they had ever shown in their lives. If letting out the secret meant losing their newly given powers, they would choose to die before talking.

“Of course, if you live up to my expectations, I’ll reward you. Oh, I’ve thought of a great example. Luna?”

“Yes?”

“Heal Eliza’s wound for me.”

Apparently Eliza’s newfound god had a pragmatic side too. While bringing up the base topic of reward, he touched on the reason that had made Eliza hesitant to remove her hood even when her life was in danger.

Originally, Eliza had had the looks to secure a happy enough life despite not having a good talent. She also had a sharp mind, as proved by the way she was handling this situation. Together, that meant she could have done pretty well for herself as a noble’s concubine.

The wound that Sol mentioned was a big reason she was living such a deplorable life. Half of her face was covered in a terrible burn that looked even more repulsive than it should have because of how badly arranged it was on what should have been a beautiful face. This burn had been an indelible part of her for as far back as she could remember. Despite the front she put up, she had always been ashamed of it. The thought “If it wasn’t for this burn!” was a constant presence in her mind, no matter how many times she tried to banish it.

Magic existed in this world, which meant that all wounds could be healed. The possibility was very slim, but it existed. However, as in all worlds, only a very limited elite class could enjoy such a privilege. It wasn’t something that a girl born in a remote farming village who now lived in a slum could ever have access to. Therefore, it might as well not have existed as far as she was concerned.

That was why she had prayed every day until coming of age for a talent that would give her healing abilities. When it didn’t happen, she had nearly given up on the rest of her life. But now, someone who could do what God could was offering to heal her.

Luna, the beautiful therianthrope who had been subserviently standing behind Sol, shook her head apologetically. Having been disfigured herself, she was actually eager to help someone else regain their original appearance. Unfortunately, dragon magic’s strength was in destruction. Despite being the All

Dragon, she couldn't use an ability that she didn't possess. "I'm deeply sorry, my lord. I don't possess spells that can heal other—"

Sol interrupted. "You do now."

Clearly, "God" had just done for his follower what he had for Eliza's group. A massive amount of MP was needed to heal old wounds, and Eliza had been unable to receive enough to treat herself. That was probably why Sol had given the order to Luna, who already possessed a vast pool of MP.

"I'm sorry?" Luna blinked, then sighed, sounding deeply impressed. "Oh. You really are incredible, my lord."

While looking up at the breathtakingly beautiful girl, Eliza's group couldn't help but agree with every fiber of their being. At the same time, the fact that they would get to serve the same master evoked a strange new emotion in them. Obtaining the backing of a person with absolute power was sweet nectar for a weakling. No matter what stick they would be hit with afterward, the intoxicating first bite of that carrot would never leave their minds. This was how fanatics were created.

Magical light sprang up around the hand of the girl floating in the air. Eliza immediately felt the hideous part of her face heat up. Gradually, the sensation on the burned side matched up with how the other side had always felt. A warm throbbing in the socket that had once housed the eye she had lost to fire eventually subsided after she realized that for the first time in her life, she could perceive three-dimensional space. There was no need for a mirror. The wound that Eliza had been convinced she would have to live her entire life with had been healed in a few seconds. Now, there was a brand on her heart more indelible than the burn wound she once had.



“Thank you so much!” Eliza said from the bottom of her heart, understanding that she had just been given back her full beauty.

Despite how young she was, the men who were now mere splotches would have undoubtedly laid hands on her now. There was a very real possibility that Gafus, the boss, would even have declared her his personal whore. That was how beautiful Eliza truly was.

From this point on, it would be up to her to develop her charms as a woman. Malnourishment had left her with extremely rough skin and an unnaturally thin body, but surely it wouldn’t take long for her to regain a youthful and healthy look that would seize the hearts of many men. Unfortunately for them, she had just decided to only ever direct her attention toward a single person.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just advance payment. All I ask is that you pay it back with good work. For starters, can you clean up these corpses for me?”

From the way Sol was speaking, what had happened wasn’t a big deal for him. He had seen Julia heal very serious injuries many times using the power he had given her, so it was a matter of course for him that Eliza had been healed, since Luna had plenty of MP. The fact that such a treatment would normally have come with a massive price tag was a concern solely for the Adventurer’s Guild, the Church, and the nobles. It made no sense for him to charge others for simply doing something that he could.

Despite how sharp Eliza was and how wary her keen mind usually made her, the expression that she directed at Sol when he waved away her heartfelt gratitude had turned into that of a religious believer. Johan and Louise were nearly the same, as they too had witnessed the miracles of being granted power and Eliza’s face being healed. For them, cleaning up the goopy remains of their former masters didn’t even count as a chore.

“Come to the Adventurer’s Guild before noon tomorrow. I’ll get everything in order before then. I’ll probably be taking up some of your time afterward too, so just leave your entire day open. Now, any questions?”

They had a mountain of questions, of course. However, the three kids had just experienced so many unbelievable things that they needed time to sufficiently process everything before knowing what they actually wanted to ask. Also, they

felt uncomfortable wasting time asking this and that while their very first order remained unattended to. The conclusion that Eliza arrived at was that they would follow their orders and walk into the Adventurer's Guild—a building they'd never thought they would get near—tomorrow. If they still had questions after whatever was supposed to happen there, *then* they could ask them.

“We will do as you say. If we still have questions afterward, though, what should we do?”

“Just come here. I'm around most nights.”

“Um...are you sure?”

Eliza's request for confirmation puzzled Sol, as it seemed entirely logical to him for those he had accepted as subordinates to knock on his door. That meant he had no intention of hiding the relationship between him and their group. High-ranking adventurers had just as much to lose as to gain from maintaining a relationship with an organization from the slum, but this didn't bother Sol in the slightest.

No, it was more accurate to say that it *no longer* bothered him. He was no longer the weakling who could be erased the moment the government or the Adventurer's Guild got serious. He had obtained absolute power in Luna, power that ensured he had a way out of any situation even if he mishandled it a little. This was why he was now trying out something he had thought up a long time ago but had kept to himself out of fear that it would expose Player and ruin his life. Eliza's group was to be the start. He wasn't interested in something as banal as controlling all of the slums to turn a profit. If he wanted money, he could have as much as he wanted simply by fulfilling quests and missions from the guild the normal way using Luna's strength. What he truly wanted couldn't be bought. He wanted the right to freely explore and conquer the Four Great Labyrinths under the control of the world's four greatest countries, but that was naturally not for sale.

“All right, Luna. Let's head back.”

“Understood.”

Upon confirming that Eliza's group had no further questions, Sol turned back

to his mansion with a flutter of his long cape. Before the cape was once again subjected to the force of gravity, he disappeared from his position above the fountain. The way he used Teleport, a spell so high-tiered that it was only spoken of in myths, further cemented his image as a being of absolute power in the eyes of Eliza’s group.

Their lives had been spared. Not only that, but they had been granted powers that “God” hadn’t granted them, no matter how hard they had prayed. Furthermore, they had been promised that they would get to become adventurers. If they betrayed their new master, they would never get a second chance. This was something that all of them understood on an instinctual level. They had been blessed with enormous fortune tonight. The only way to ensure that it continued was to produce the results their master wanted to see in his experiment.

And yet, what filled their hearts was no longer fear but almost overwhelming excitement and duty, which only made sense, considering how drastically their lives had changed.

Perhaps this was the true essence of Player. This world accepted draconian social stratification as a matter of course, as it was based on God’s whims, but Sol, a mere man, held the potential to overturn it all. This was fundamentally different from the Church, which offered salvation of the soul and taught that it lay in having a thankful heart and worshipping a god who never showed himself. In contrast, Player created followers who would take Sol’s word as law—believers, in other words—by granting tangible benefits. Eliza’s group was the first. One day, the scale of their movement would greatly exceed what Sol had first expected from his little “experiment.”

Now, however, the only thing to be seen was three young teenagers, eyes glittering with hope, shoving five goopy messes into ragged sacks and cleaning up. It was a scene that seemed entirely inappropriate as a theme for religious art, to be sure.



Upon returning to the hidden room, Luna looked up at Sol, who was still holding her in his left arm, and asked, “My lord, may I ask what this is?” She

placed a hand on her flat chest, indicating that she was referring to the healing magic he had just granted her.

As a dragon, she had a lot more experience than humans in gaining spells and skills through the process of getting stronger. The instant she obtained something, she could largely understand what it was, what it did, and how to use it. There were times when she actually tried spells out and learned that there were minor inaccuracies in her understanding, but otherwise, she made them a part of her so that she could use them as naturally as moving her hands and feet. That was the process through which she gained further power, and it was exactly the same no matter if it was due to her own growth or something she had seized by preying on someone else.

Today was the first time she had been forcefully made to accept something by someone else's will, regardless of her own. Despite having been weakened, she was still a dragon. The ability to grant her spells and skills was so remarkable that even she could not help being impressed. If Sol claimed to be an envoy from God, no one would be able to repudiate him.

"That's my talent. It's called Player. I have the ability to grant skills and stats, with some limits, to those I accept as companions. It seems like there's no limit when it comes to you, though, so I'm going to give you all the skills that I have, all right? I don't think you need any more stat points, considering how much you already have, but just say the word if you ever feel like you need more."

Sol was speaking quite fast, but that was because he was embarrassed about being surprised so many times in the same night and was trying to hide his emotions. Teleporting from the hidden room to the mansion and then from the mansion to the garden made sense. The first time, he had practically screamed inside and clung to Luna, but he thought he had done a pretty good job of maintaining a cool face the second time. At least, he hoped so. And yet, he had not at all expected to teleport right back into the hidden room after all the burglars had been taken care of. When he had fluttered his cape with an affected air, he'd thought he would be returning to the mansion in a cool way. Instead, he had suddenly found himself back here immediately.

Maybe I should just accept that teleporting is the default way to go anywhere when Luna's with me.

Luna didn't care that Teleport was classified as a high-tier spell or that it was considered something from myths and legends. She was simply doing things in the way that she found most convenient. However, using it in public would generate an enormous ruckus, so Sol made a mental note to properly lay out guidelines for her later. In the same vein, he was pretty sure he couldn't feel his body weight at the moment, which meant Luna was also maintaining Float as a default. What she was doing was possibly the norm for dragons, but the sight of her constantly floating behind him would draw much more attention than her abuse of Teleport. Then again, he was already plenty conspicuous walking around with a beautiful therianthrope girl in tow, so maybe the point was moot.

I understand where she's coming from, though. Given the size of her real body—her Augoeides, was it?—it wouldn't make sense for her to actually move her limbs or to busily flap her wings whenever she wanted to go somewhere.

"To think that such an incredible talent exists..." Luna murmured, looking deeply impressed.

Sol shook his head with a wry smile. "You're even more incredible than I am. I was very surprised. I take back what I said about feeling scammed."

Sol wasn't merely paying lip service. The fighting potential of Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon was truly extraordinary. Even though she was merely a fragment, her starting HP and MP were both sky-high, and every one of her stats was greater than those of more than a thousand people put together. Anyone she punched with all her strength would be blown to smithereens. If Black Tiger wanted to whittle down her enormous HP, it would take them days of nonstop effort. And that was if Luna disabled her natural recovery, because there was no way they could deal damage faster than she could recover.

In regard to MP, Luna's pool had not decreased at all after using Teleport three times all while keeping Float activated. At the very least, the rate at which she was producing inner mana and absorbing outer mana exceeded what it cost to maintain Float. Perhaps what made dragons special enough to be worthy of their title as the absolute pinnacle of all monsters wasn't their large MP pool but their overwhelming recovery rate.

In terms of actual fighting potential, Luna had finished off five adventurers

who, though no longer officially registered, had seen their fair share of battle against monsters, and she had done so without laying a finger on them. Moreover, her base level was currently “1,” which meant that she was the weakest she would ever be. Going forward, she could only get stronger.

“That’s about how it goes with humans, but I can’t say the same for monsters in the deep labyrinths.”

Although Luna looked adorable the way she was blushing at being praised, what she was saying was quite harsh. To her, it didn’t matter what talent a human had. As she had demonstrated very clearly a short while ago, they were but rabble she could sweep away anytime she wanted.

The only reaction Sol could manage was a dry laugh, as he too was a human, albeit with an incredible talent. Since he now had Luna, as long as the big countries and the Church lacked access to resources that were her equal, he had the power to do whatever he wanted in the human world, which he could use to lord over the entire planet. However, facing monsters in the dungeons was another matter entirely. Of course, this wasn’t in regard to the ninth floor of the nameless dungeon that Black Tiger had barely escaped from; that was a mere cakewalk now. The deep labyrinths that Luna mentioned were far more treacherous and demanding places. And she knew just how powerful the monsters who lived there were.

“So you’re saying that to achieve my dream, I’ll need to make you even more powerful?”

Then again, Luna’s apprehension was largely based on her using a fragment that was only level 1 at the moment. If she and Sol gradually cleared out the territories and dungeons they could handle at their current strength, they would obtain the strength they needed along the way.

“My apologies for making you go to the trouble.”

“Hey, you’re doing this for my dream. Don’t worry about it. In the first place, I’m the one who roped you into serving me by taking advantage of your situation.”

“Now *that’s* something you needn’t worry about. Regardless of your character, I would have thrown myself at you in the same pathetic manner. In

fact, I would have done it to anyone, so long as they rescued me from that hell. I am but a mere servant with no integrity or pride. Please feel free to make use of me all you like.”

“Perhaps...we should both refrain from debasing ourselves.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Sol absolutely needed Luna to realize his dream. In turn, Luna absolutely needed to avoid being sent back to her prison, and the only way to do so was to remain an obedient servant whom Sol absolutely could not do without. It was enough that their interests were aligned. For now, at least.

Given that, debasing themselves held no benefit, and they were better served by nurturing a cordial and cooperative relationship. When Sol saw how Luna delivered the last line with a cool face, he chuckled a little at the realization that there was simply no winning against a dragon who had lived for thousands of years.

“Let’s get back on topic, then. To power you up, besides working our way up the steady way by killing monsters...”

“Indeed. The organs that I am currently missing are a horn, an eye, and both wings. Retrieving any of them would give me a dramatic boost in strength.”

Dragons, also known as the apex of all monsters, had three characteristic organs: dragon eyes, dragon horns, and dragon wings. Sol had yet to learn what power each one provided. However, the fact that someone had gone to the trouble of robbing Luna of them and sealing them in the Four Great Labyrinths assured him that retrieving them would be a shortcut to restoring her full abilities.

In the Kuzuifabra, after the Hero defeated the Evil Dragon, she bound it instead of finishing it off. There were many theories, with some people believing it was because the Evil Dragon was immortal while others theorized that killing the last dragon would trigger a resurgence of the entire race. There was no longer any way to know for sure, of course.

In the first place, the Kuzuifabra was generally considered a fairy tale and not a historical record. The most practical use anyone ever got out of it was as a

reference for how the myths of this world were to be interpreted. However, now that the Evil Dragon featured in the story was right here before Sol, smiling all sweetly at him, he made a mental note to definitely ask for her perspective. Later, though, when things weren't so hectic.

“Does retrieving your organs affect your fragment too?”

“My fragment is linked to my Augoeides. Restoring the part to this body is the same as restoring it to my real self.”

It was said that the Hero had stolen from the Evil Dragon one eye, one horn, and both wings so it could never break its bondage through its own strength, and then sealed the parts in labyrinths monitored by people of the time. These were now, in the current day, known as the Four Great Labyrinths. This worked out great for Sol, because it meant that the more progress he made in his dream to conquer the world's dungeons, the more power Luna would regain. In turn, the stronger Luna became, the tougher the dungeons they could face. It was a positive feedback loop.

“And our final goal would be to free your Augoeides, then.”

“Are you sure about doing that?”

“I'm willing to do whatever it takes to realize my dream. Do you know where it's hidden?”

“I only have a vague sense of the general direction.”

This wasn't exactly a “if you're eating poison, you might as well lick the plate” situation, but there really was no point in being wary of Luna after having come this far. If Luna really wanted to stay bound, she could stop Sol anytime she wanted, and it would take her less effort than flicking a finger. He had already considered and accepted that possibility when he took her on as his servant. Therefore, there was no reason for him to *not* free Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon and help her regain her full strength.

Furthermore, Sol had yet to learn what it meant and what consequences there were for a dragon to impart its real name and for someone to speak it during their first encounter.

“Well, being impatient doesn't help any. Let's start with conquering one of

the nearby dungeons. That in itself is plenty remarkable, after all.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Although Sol already knew the locations of the Four Great Labyrinths, conquering them wasn’t going to be easy. Very little of the advancements made during Era Gran Magicka remained in this day and age, which meant that the four great nations that were supposed to manage these large dungeons were doing little more than keeping them sealed off. If Sol suddenly walked up and asked to go in, they would doubt his sanity. So what he needed to do was to first conquer nameless dungeons with fewer than ten floors to build up a reputation. He was done trying to keep a low profile, as he had been doing so far.

“Since we’re done planning, let’s hit the hay. Or are you hungry, Luna?”

It had gotten rather late. Unlike Luna, who had survived a thousand years without sleep, Sol was still a normal human and therefore susceptible to the negative effects of pulling an all-nighter. So he suggested going to bed, as he had a lot to do tomorrow, but also proposed grabbing a bite, just in case Luna was feeling peckish.

“I can eat... I can sleep...”

To Sol’s surprise, Luna’s face figuratively melted with the thought of both options as drool leaked from the corner of her mouth. The opportunity to enjoy either after they had been denied to her for a thousand years was too exciting even for the almighty All Dragon.

“Ah! Human servants have to attend to their masters at night, right? I know about this! Come on, master, let’s do that first!”

For some reason, Luna suddenly made a strange assertion based on information that Sol very much wanted to know the source of. Judging by how she was acting, it was clear she had no idea what she was talking about.

“Uh...no, thanks.”

And don’t reptiles reproduce with eggs?

While Sol was getting distracted by unrelated thoughts, however, Luna

seemed struck by a flash of understanding.

“Why? Is it because of my current appearance?”

“Just saying, you’re cuter than any girl I’ve seen. But you’re way too young.”

It was true that Luna was pretty, and even though Sol still didn’t quite understand love or romance, as a seventeen-year-old boy, he wasn’t entirely uninterested in that sort of thing. That said, he wasn’t a pedophile, so he naturally felt no desire looking at someone with the appearance of a twelve-year-old.

“How about now?” With a poof, Luna adopted a bewitching appearance that seemed ten years older.

Oh, right, she said that her appearance was a deliberate choice to appeal to the largest demographic of people.

Now that Luna looked like a woman older than himself by a few years, Sol couldn’t help reacting a little. The fact that she was wearing the same outfit as her younger appearance but was now filling it out with curves in all the right places made the presentation that much more provocative. The predatory smile that came over her face when she noticed Sol blushing made her look like a dragon before prey. If he had had more experience, he just might have recognized the look—it was the same one made by beautiful women familiar with using their wiles the moment they knew they had acquired a target.

I wonder if she actually knows what she’s doing and she’s messing with me on purpose... Come to think of it, she’s lived so much longer than me, it’s actually quite likely.

As a last-ditch effort, Sol said, “I, uh, heard that it hurts, though.”

“It hurts?” Luna visibly recoiled.

Based on this reaction, Sol deduced that Luna knew what the act involved, but she had no experience nor much knowledge. She was also excessively sensitive to touch at the moment due to her thousand years of solitude. In the first place, she likely had very little experience with pain, as she was protected by a vast HP, as all dragons were. In fact, based on how she was suddenly starting to seize up with fear, the moment she had been struck down by the Hero a

thousand years ago was probably the first time she had felt pain.

Sol chuckled, regaining his composure. "I don't mind waiting until you naturally grow into this appearance, you know."

"Are you sure?" Luna looked somewhat put out, but she also clearly needed more time to overcome her fear of pain. She mumbled, "If my lord is fine with it..." while reverting to her original appearance, which she had apparently taken a liking to.

"Since that's the case, can we at least sleep together?"

"Sure, sure."

Luna leaped at Sol, and he caught her and started stroking her head. She purred like she was a cat and not a dragon. He made his way to the bed, thinking about how he would have to make breakfast tomorrow, a meal that he usually just skipped.

Wait, no, it's going to be her first meal in a millennium. Maybe we should go out and eat at a place that's open in the morning instead.

In the end, Luna requested that Sol feed her by hand, and he complied while feeling a little weirded out. Perhaps *she* was the biggest fanatic born that night. Not only had she told him her real name, with which he could control everything that she was, she had even displayed her power and yet had been treated like a cute girl. This made her the happiest she could be.

Chapter 5: The New Order

The majority of adventurers woke up late, but the city of Garlaige itself stirred early in the morning. This was only natural, of course. Although Garlaige was famous as a city of adventurers and had a massive local guild branch that had jurisdiction over the entire northern frontier, it was important in other ways too. A settlement of this size naturally had many things going on.

Garlaige was foremost a crucial military outpost, as it oversaw the numerous territories in the north that neighboring countries also laid claim to. Of Emelia's three neighbors, the one that it was most wary of was the Istekario Empire, which possessed the most powerful military on the continent. That said, none of the countries in this era were serious about laying claim to the frontiers. Since they were filled primarily with territories under the rule of monsters that no one could ever hope to kill, seizing and defending them wasn't worth the effort. However, if not for Garlaige, the fertile lands in the heart of Emelia would be wide open to invasion. As such, the kingdom couldn't afford to skimp on its defenses. After all, a fundamental part of what made a country was the ability to protect its own land and citizens.

In light of all this, Emelia saw Garlaige much more as a bastion that served to keep Istekario at bay, and therefore it kept the city heavily fortified. However, the biggest part of the city's defenses wasn't its looming walls or standing army. Naturally, it wasn't the adventurers either, as they generally didn't get involved in disputes between countries. No, the crux of Emelia's national defense at Garlaige was the Garlaige Order, a force of knights composed of the crème de la crème of the national army. Very few other cities on the continent had such a large gathering of people blessed with talents useful for fighting monsters. If the adventurers were included, Garlaige was literally second on the list, behind only Istekario's capital. This was more military strength than what Emelia kept at its own capital.

The Adventurer's Guild branch in the city was largely empty at eight in the morning, striking a distinct contrast with the hubbub that had already begun

right outside its doors. Regardless of how long their quest or mission had taken, it was common for most adventurers coming back to go crazy with the money they had just earned. Because of this, the scale of the red-light district there also ranked within the top ten on the continent. This, too, was one of the reasons so many adventurers suffered from the chronic disease of being unable to wake up early.

Naturally, Sol knew all this and was therefore choosing to drop by the guild so early on purpose. Despite yesterday's announcement, the sight of him, the boy who was getting special treatment, bringing around a therianthrope, which were considered second-class citizens, was likely to cause trouble. In fact, he was pretty sure it would.

Even if he couldn't avoid it forever, Sol wanted to give Steve a heads-up. That was why he had come at this time, even though he was just as bad at rising early as other adventurers. Then again, he had been forcefully awoken by Luna, who had gotten up first, so it couldn't really be said that he himself had made much effort in that regard.

"You *did* say that you had something in mind, but this is just... Really?" As it turned out, even Steve looked weirded out, and he didn't try to hide it. Visiting at this time had been the right call after all.

Currently, Sol and Steve were in the same room where Black Tiger had broken up the night before. Fiona, who had escorted Sol there, had looked put out too, so Steve's reaction was by no means unnatural.

Even though he was the general manager—no, *because* he was the general manager, Steve had arrived early that morning and remained at his desk since. That was after he had almost pulled an all-nighter making all sorts of preparations so he could support Sol no matter what direction he chose to take starting today. And *this* was what Sol had shown up with. Steve could hardly be blamed for reacting this way.

Luna was indeed a beautiful girl, but beauty mattered very little in the adventurer business. What's more, she was a therianthrope, a race that was considered inferior—to be blunt, a target for discrimination—in this day and age because they, like other demihumans, were considered weaker than

humans. What Sol was doing would definitely be interpreted by many as him publicly bringing around a sex slave, which was still a thing even though it was technically banned and therefore a rare sight in major cities.

All things being equal, therianthropes were stronger than humans. However, they did not receive talents from God and therefore were no match for those with proper talents. Furthermore, the arrogant belief that humans were the dominant class had seeped into the very fabric of society over a long, long time. The Holy Church, which managed the world's religion, even taught that therianthropes were the descendants of depraved humans who had besmirched the sanctity of being made in the image of God by lying with beasts and practically held them up as a symbol of the evil of mankind. Therefore, no matter how beautiful a therianthrope was, many people would still see them as something to scorn. Generally, therianthropes submitted to the rules of the governments where they lived and did their best to eke out a living away from public view, either as slaves or whores in red-light districts—there was *some* demand for them, though not high—or in tiny, nondescript settlements.

The way they were painted couldn't be farther from the truth, but it was always those in power who got to spin the public narrative. Over time, the victims who were being unfairly represented also began to believe what was being said about them. Unfortunately, this was a phenomenon that inevitably happened in all societies helmed by humans.

"No, Steve. Calm down and listen to me. Before anything else, take a good look at her."

"I'm a freaking adult! What are you asking me to—"

"Can we just skip the cliché misunderstanding?"

"*You're* the one who phrased it weirdly!"

Of course, when Sol asked Steve to look at Luna, he meant for Steve to see Luna's abilities as the All Dragon. However, after living forty years steeped in this world's beliefs, Steve had trouble stepping away from the assumption that demihumans and therianthropes could never have talents. To make matters worse, Luna was wearing a very thin yet high-quality dress and very fancy ornaments. When Sol pushed her forward and insisted that Steve take a good

look at her, Steve's mind naturally went *that* way. It certainly didn't help that Luna had shown up clinging to Sol's cape anxiously and, upon being pushed forward, looked back at him with a frightened expression.

"Wait...what's going on here?"

When Steve finally got the message and used his talent on Luna, however, he could immediately tell that there was something special about her. Even though therianthropes and demihumans didn't receive talents, he wouldn't draw a blank when he "looked" at them. He might see, for example, "Wolf" or "Forest Elf," which were basically equivalents of "Villager." And yet, even though he could still see "Player" from Sol, he couldn't see anything at all from Luna.

"So you can't see it either."

It would have made it a lot easier for Sol to explain if Steve had been able to see with his own eyes, but there was no helping it. Sol had half expected this, as he himself hadn't been able to see anything with Player until he and Luna had officially established their relationship.

"No, I get it. This is a first for me, and I've lived more than twice as long as you. There's definitely more to this girl than meets the eye. So, who is she?"

Steve was more surprised than Sol had expected. The position he had spent his life building up was rooted in talents, and although he wasn't a religious man, he believed in the existence of God because it was God who had bestowed those talents on humans. The fact that Luna was beyond the purview of his God-given talent was nothing short of exceptional. For all he knew, it could even be a hint that she was a being greater than God. For example, the enemy of God and man described in the holy scriptures and ancient myths who was supposed to have been struck down. In spite of Luna's dainty and adorable appearance, alarm and reverence colored Steve's tone.

"She's Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon—I mean, the Evil Dragon. Or at least, this is a fragment of her. That's what she claims."

"I'm sorry, she's what?"

"I'm not kidding."

"So you say, but..."

Steve couldn't just take Sol's words at face value and accept that he was in the presence of the final boss in the Kuzuifabra. Although he was old enough to be nearing the end of his prime, there had been a time when he, too, was an innocent boy with an active imagination. Countless times, he had listened to the Kuzuifabra with dazzling eyes, feeling his heart beat with excitement as the scene of the Hero defeating the Evil Dragon came up. Countless times, he had woken up late at night, trembling at the thought of what would happen should Lunvemt Nachtfelia, the symbol of fear, break free from its bondage one day.

It would have been different if, like Sol, he had been able to see Luna's Augoeides in its prison, bound by innumerable chains. However, what he was actually looking at was a beautiful young girl with a horn and a tail.

"Luna."

"Okay."

"WHOAaaaAAAH!"

As planned beforehand, Luna used Teleport on Steve when Sol gave the signal. Caught completely by surprise, Steve screamed so loud and so long that Sol had to tell him to shut up.

Yep, that's the normal reaction when it's done to you all of a sudden. I totally get it.

Sol felt like he had one-upped Steve because he had somehow managed to keep his own scream from coming out *his* first time. Hardly an attitude to be emulated, indeed.

When Steve realized that it wasn't Sol and Luna who had suddenly disappeared from his sight but that he himself was the one who had been repositioned to stare at the corner, he turned around with trepidation. What he then found was Luna floating comfortably in midair. Sol was floating too, but just because he was with her.

Seeing that Steve's mouth was hanging open but no words were coming out, Sol explained, "What you just experienced was Teleport, and we are now floating because of Float. By the way, there's no limit to the number of people she can teleport at once, and the effective area is a sphere. As for Float,

supposedly there's no height limit. Ha ha ha. After this, I just might try flying through the sky like the archmages from long ago." Even Sol had yet to get used to what he was describing.

"This isn't something you can laugh off, but...fine. I'm not just taking your word for everything, but I can play along. I clearly don't have a choice. But answer just one thing. This is important."

The effect of Float could probably be explained as a magic trick, and if Sol and Luna had used Teleport on themselves, there would still be room for doubt. But the fact of the matter was that it had been done to Steve, and he'd had no chance whatsoever to resist. Rather than trying to explain it as a highly complicated trick that he wouldn't even know where to begin with, it was far more logical to accept the existence of teleportation magic.

Also, Steve had properly understood the implications behind Sol's explanation. First off, he had experienced for himself that targets could be teleported regardless of their will. Next, even though he had been moved on a horizontal plane, if the effective area in which a target could be targeted was a sphere, they could be teleported vertically as well. As most humans did not have the ability to fly or float, this could be employed as an attack with near-certain fatality. Case in point, that was exactly how Sol's intruders last night had been killed. Lastly, if Sol's point about there being no limit to the number of people who could be targeted at once was true, that meant this magic could be used to eliminate an entire armed force in the blink of an eye. Considering all this together, Steve understood that Sol's claim indicated that he now had army-scale magic that belonged solely in the realm of myths and legends at his fingertips.

Put simply, anyone wingless facing Luna was putting themselves within range of guaranteed death at any given moment. Even with his position, Steve had never heard of anyone who knew how to use flying magic or floating magic in this day and age. In other words, not a single human on this entire planet had any hope of beating her in a fight.

"Sol, is this girl one hundred percent under your control?" asked Steve. This was the one question that he simply had to ask, no matter what.

Sol paused, then replied, "Should be."

This answer was far from reassuring. In fact, it was even concerning. Steve couldn't help shooting him a reproachful look and blurting out, "Are you serious?"

The reason for Sol's cagey answer was that he didn't want to promise what he couldn't be sure he could deliver. He knew that Luna was fully obedient to him at the moment, but he had no guarantee that this wouldn't change in the future. In the first place, even if Sol said with a straight face, "No, I can't control her," Steve could hardly say, "Then I'll deploy the entire Adventurer's Guild to eliminate her." If he did, she just might flatten every single person in Garlaige the way the myths said she had obliterated Windalion, the member of the five great magic cities also called the City of Silence.

What's more, right after Steve posed his question, he realized that even if Sol did indeed have complete control over Luna, that was no guarantee of safety for the world at all. Given that absolute power was now present in the world, the fact that everyone's lives were at the mercy of a third party wouldn't change whether that third party was Sol or Luna herself.

As the adult here, Steve had to be aware of why Sol had come to divulge this fact to him before anyone else. If Sol had not thought Steve trustworthy enough and gone to consult another person instead, that would still have been preferable to the worst-case scenario. If Sol had been someone who had gotten sick of this world and wanted to erase everything and then take his time slowly thinking about what to do afterward, they would have been in a massive pile of trouble.

There was no need to maintain the world in its current state in order to realize Sol's dream. He would be able to enjoy civilized living conditions merely with the demihumans, who would wildly celebrate the collapse of human rule, and the bare minimum population of humans to maintain a semblance of society.

Steve, who now understood everything, and Sol, who perceived that Steve understood, exchanged knowing, cynical grins. Although Sol knew that destroying the world was shortsighted and had no intention of doing so, he

wasn't going to take the option off the table. On the other hand, Steve had no obligation to protect the world like a savior or the Hero. As an extreme stance, what Steve should now concern himself with was to be included in the bare minimum of humans Sol deemed necessary to retain, as opposed to saving a bunch of people whose names and faces he didn't know.

Interrupting the strange vibe going on between the two guys, Luna spoke up. "My lord, your doubt saddens me. I will always carry out whatever order you give me, and I will never take any action without your express approval. If I am ever about to make a terrible blunder, please do punish me unsparingly."

What she had wanted was for Sol to confidently answer Steve's question with "Yes, there's nothing to worry about." She was willing to do whatever it took to convince Sol of her absolute loyalty. She would even perform night services or accept being treated like a sex slave without batting an eye, though she didn't fully understand what that meant.

Luna huffed and rested her hands on her hips, but the looks that her own master and his acquaintance directed at her did not lighten up. It was all too clear that they did not fully believe her claim of absolute loyalty. For her, this was beyond upsetting.

"My lord, I told you my true name of my own will, and you are the first person who's ever used it. That's why you hold absolute authority over me."

She had told Sol her true name and had him call it in order to escape her hellish prison, so being distrusted by him to this degree hurt her pride as a dragon.

Could it be that he suspects I lied about my true name?

In general, dragons would much rather die than do such a thing, but she herself was a failure of a dragon who had discarded both pride and self-respect to be saved. So she understood why Sol was doubting her, but it made her so sad that she looked completely crushed.

"Huh? There's special meaning in using your true name?" Sol asked with surprise.

Luna, who had sworn to give him her heart, body, and soul for saving her

from her hell, was at a complete loss. With actual tears welling up in her eyes, she cried, “Excuse me? Have you been using it without knowing that?! That’s just cruel!” *He thinks so little about using a dragon’s name for the first time?!*

“Huh?! Uh, I’m...sorry?”

Despite how flustered Sol was, he didn’t understand what he was doing or saying that was so cruel. The way he understood it, Lunvemt Nachtfelia was Luna’s full name, and Luna was little more than a nickname. If there was any special meaning to be attached anywhere, it was probably the vows that he had exchanged with her, which could have been similar to the ones exchanged during marriage ceremonies. In this world where dragons had long since been extinct, even Steve, who had lived significantly longer than Sol, had no idea that the first person who called a dragon by their true name was effectively becoming master over their entire existence. This was knowledge that had been completely lost to humanity over the ages.

Upon learning that he had been practically trampling over the gift of chastity that Luna had offered him, Sol promptly prostrated himself on the floor. Although they were master and servant—no, it was precisely because they were master and servant that there were areas where doubt must never be cast over. Making light of such things would make it very difficult to forge a proper relationship based on trust. That said, this current incident had been the result of ignorance, not malice, so Sol sincerely hoped that Luna would forgive him.

“Looks like we’ve lost a lot more knowledge than we thought...” Steve murmured profoundly. Then he chuckled wryly at the realization that just by knowing information that was probably hidden away in a forbidden text held by the Holy Church, he had automatically sealed his fate as a part of Sol’s group.

Steve could tell that Sol had purposefully arranged for the conversation to go this way, and he was thankful. It was now set in stone that his name would go down in history, even if it was as a mere side character. His feelings wouldn’t change even if his name was known anecdotally or just a passage in another forbidden text. If he was someone who would have let such an opportunity slip through his fingers, he wouldn’t have worked so hard to climb the ranks of the Adventurer’s Guild that his hair had already turned white.

Having no qualms about misusing his authority for the sake of securing his place in Sol's story, Steve asked nonchalantly, "Anyway, all I have to do is register the girl with the guild, right? And I assume you'll be forming a party together, so I'll register that too. What name do you want to give it?"

"I'm actually thinking of forming a clan, not a party. I'll think about our party name another day. Please make Libertadores our clan name."

"May I ask why?"

"The first step of my plan is to unseal all monster territories."

"Well, that's definitely going to create a splash."

If Sol actually succeeded, he would definitely be worthy of the name of "liberator."

"To put things in context, take yesterday's basilisk. Luna can kill it with a single punch. The only issue is getting there."

"Yesterday?" Luna asked.

"Yep, we killed a basilisk."

"Mere trash. Is that notable?"

Apparently, the almighty Evil Dragon thought of the basilisk as nothing more than a pathetic lizard with a needlessly large bulk vainly asserting its territorial dominance.

"Uh...in that case, please let us provide you with transport."

"Please and thanks."

What Steve had intended as little more than small talk revealed details that nearly staggered him. If Sol wasn't just blowing smoke, Steve's misuse of authority might even be praised as brilliant on-his-feet thinking by headquarters.

In the first place, the guild's ranking system was basically a promise of special treatment. If there was indeed an incredible adventurer capable of accomplishing several Rank A promotion missions in a day, they just might bring "Rank S" back out, something that had only been used during the age of myths

and legends.

If Sol really unsealed all territories around Garlaige, it would drastically alter the power balance between the surrounding countries. An adventurer with the power to overturn the world's accepted rules would undoubtedly gather the attention of all power brokers on the continent. Depending on how the situation developed, this might be the dawn of a second Era Gran Magicka.

As Steve gulped with the realization of all these implications, someone knocked on his door. Upon being granted permission, Fiona walked in with a roguish grin.

"Excuse me. There are visitors for you, general manager. And for you too, Sol."

"Strange. It's not just a group of three teens? Who's here for *me*?"

"Reen and Julia."

"Oh, this isn't going to be pretty, Sol."

"I'd probably cry if I were him," Fiona giggled.

"*Can* I cry?"

Sol beat himself up a little for not thinking about the possibility of his childhood friends coming to look for him at the guild. In all likelihood, they had dropped by his house first, found it empty, and then come here. Truthfully, when Sol had used the summon function, his expectations had been on the level of a familiar, perhaps a pet or a battle companion. He had always looked up to the summoners described in past records.

Noticing how Luna was looking up at him with a puzzled expression, Sol said gently, "Don't worry, you haven't done anything wrong."

Even Steve, who's a guy, looked weirded out at first. I'm sure it won't take long for them to understand Luna's strength, but that's probably beside the point. When word spreads that a young girl like Luna calls me "master" and goes on about how she should act as a servant and whatnot, my reputation's gonna take a nosedive.

Even Sol would feel hurt if his two female childhood friends looked at him like

they were looking at filth. That said, he shuddered when imagining the commotion that would ensue from Luna appearing above the city in her true form as Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon.

There was no denying *that* would be a much easier conversation to have than what was currently awaiting him, though.



“Okay, got it! Registration for these three and basic adventurer induction, right away. Fiona, come on. Let’s go.”

“Aww, I wanna stay and watch, though!”

“Do your damn job!”

“Fiiiine.”

After the comedy act between superior and subordinate, Steve briskly made his exit and Fiona reluctantly returned to her work. Sol sent one final mental thank-you to Steve for being so ready to help register Eliza’s group.

There was actually a significant portion of adventurers who had never attended the Royal Academy. Even if they couldn’t fight, they could gather resources from dungeons and territories. Some clients had need of those with specific skill sets, like how there were missions that asked for scouting. The greatest requirement in getting registered as an adventurer was really the resolve to put one’s life on the line. Unfortunately, this meant the survival rate of the profession was laughably low, and word had been getting around recently. As such, the number of people applying for what was starting to be seen as a roundabout path to suicide was nearing a trickle. This was one of the reasons kids like Eliza chose to live in the slums rather than become adventurers.

However, Steve understood Sol’s talent enough to know that he was bringing in kids who were nearly as capable as the members of the now-disbanded Black Tiger. Based on that, the guild would still come out ahead if it became guarantors for them and took on everything else that entailed. Steve had personally watched a group of Villagers climb to Rank A in record time. Even if Sol wasn’t participating as a member, it wasn’t going to take long for this party

with a tank, a magic attacker, and a healer to surpass other Rank C parties in terms of quests cleared. They were going to become a small but elite force that would do just fine without him trying to bolster their roster with veterans.

Above all, Steve couldn't be happier that he was able to earn a favor from Sol now, when what Sol needed was still under the purview of his authority. This was why he had left so quickly and swiftly headed for the office—to throw around his weight as general manager so that the applications of Eliza's group would be finished as fast as possible.

What Sol actually wanted, however, was for Steve to stay so that he wouldn't be left in this room with Luna alone. No, he wasn't alone with her like he had been last night. Currently, the two of them were sitting across from a sofa occupied by two friends of his whom he had known when they were all younger than Luna currently looked.

Reen was giving him the dirty look that she had to break out rather often. Julia was looking at him with a mixture of amazement and disbelief but, thankfully, seemed somewhat sympathetic to his situation.

After Steve shouldered the task of explaining everything—and wisely left the room in a hurry—and Reen and Julia were also subjected to the teleportation demonstration, Reen finally said, “I see.” However, even though she was smiling, she seemed really scary for some reason. Regardless of her nickname as Iron Wall, she naturally couldn't hold a candle to Luna. And yet, Luna was tightly clenching Sol's sleeve as if being cowed by the girls. This in turn made the aura that Reen was emanating grow even more intense, thus completing a negative spiral.

“I'm taking back what I said last night about going back to Ros Village.”

“Huh? What're you going to do, then?”

Sol had been racking his brain for how to explain that he wasn't the one who had dictated Luna's preference to two people who had never had the opportunity to see her Augoeides. And so, Reen's unexpected declaration caught him off guard. He could sense incredible resolve coming from her, but the true intention behind it was beyond him. Even if he wasn't distracted by how Julia was shaking her head as if to say “I knew this would happen” next to

Reen, he hadn't the faintest idea what the correct reply was here.

"You're going to form a party with Luna, right? Fine. Her identity was a surprise, but I accept it. The problem is, she can't live alone, can she?"

"Probably not."

"So, she'll be living with you?"

"Probably...yes."

The idea of Luna living alone was worrisome on so many levels. First, it was unreasonable to expect her, a dragon, to maintain a human lifestyle. Second, since she looked like a therianthrope, it would be hard to even get her a place. Most importantly, since the easiest way for Luna to get rid of people who directed hostility or malice toward her was to drop them from a great height, the city just might be hit with a mystery that would be spoken of for years to come, where people frequently died from what could only be a long fall.

All the abovementioned problems would be solved if Luna simply lived with Sol. He had plenty of money, so he could feed her. It had seemed a hassle to him to hire servants like Mark, Alan, and Julia did, but he was willing to do so if necessary.

Right after the members of Black Tiger had graduated and debuted as adventurers, they had lived together in a place near the outer wall of Garlaige that, though not quite in the slums, didn't have very good public order. It hadn't lasted long, since they'd started earning serious cash soon enough, but it was a fact that they had been older than the age Luna now looked—Sol decided to banish the memory of her transformation last night—and there had been no problem back then. Sol didn't see what the issue was now.

"In that case, I want to live with you too. I myself know best that I can't come along when you go off to dungeons and territories. But may I wait for you at home? I'll cook, clean, do your laundry, and do absolutely anything you ask for." Reen's eyes shone with a strong will, but her tone sounded desperate, almost as if her life hung in the balance. "Please?"

Despite her strong-willed appearance, Reen's voice was fading to a whisper and tears were welling up in her eyes. She had made the noble decision to go

back to Ros Village and wait for Sol's return because she didn't want to come across as clingy or possessive. However, she had felt safe making this choice out of a strange sense of faith—or was she just thinking too little of him?—that Sol wouldn't get taken in by another girl in the meantime.

Sure enough, when Fiona made a half-serious pass at him, his reaction had been informed much more by aversion to the trouble that he could see coming rather than lust or pride from having a pretty girl pay him attention. Reen's trust—or underestimation—wasn't that far off the mark. However, having someone like Luna staying with him twenty-four seven changed everything. Although she was much younger, she had exceptionally beautiful looks, and if she really was a dragon, she wouldn't care about human morals.

Though with her horns, her distinctive eye, and her big tail, it's true that she doesn't look like any normal demihuman I've seen.

The biggest issue was that Reen could instinctively tell that Luna had gotten attached to Sol from the bottom of her heart. It hadn't been a full day since they'd met, and yet Sol already treated her like family, and that spoke volumes about her potential as a romantic rival. If they went on to spend years together conquering dungeons and unsealing territories, it would be a flash before they turned from teenage boy and little girl to two people who seemed made for each other. To top things off, Reen knew that Sol had always had a fascination with dragons. Luna was basically a magic bullet for getting to Sol's heart, being both dragon and drop-dead beautiful girl. No way on earth was Reen going to leave the two of them alone together.

To Reen's surprise, what even she had thought a highly forward and improper request made entirely out of sheer desperation was received with delight.

"You'd do that for me?!" Sol exclaimed.

"Uh...huh?"

"That would actually be an enormous help! I'm so bad at cooking, my room gets dirty in the blink of an eye, and I've been at a huge loss for how to take care of Luna. If you're willing to come live with me, I'd be super thankful!"

"Wh—Y— I...see..."

It was indeed Reen herself who had brought up cooking, cleaning, and laundry to talk up her own usefulness. However, as a girl who had always worn her heart on her sleeve regarding her feelings for Sol, she was quite crushed that he was giving no attention to the part where she had offered to do “absolutely anything.” Him saying yes was much better than saying no, but what would have been perfect was if he had blushed and turned her down and eventually settled on the compromise of her living nearby and commuting every day. Julia, who was holding in her laughter at the whole exchange, was feeling a little taken aback by how sincerely happy Sol seemed about the idea, but the person most taken aback was Reen herself, who was shocked to learn that she was such an easy woman that her general emotional response to the whole affair was still elation.

Regardless, there was no doubt that through this move, Reen had significantly increased the time that she would get to spend with Sol and decreased the time that Luna would have alone with him. There was nothing she could do about the nights they would spend out in dungeons or on the road, but the lurking danger in such situations should be effective enough at preventing them from getting up to weird shenanigans. She determined that she could trust Sol’s unsociability until Luna grew a bit older. At least, she hoped she could.

Reen never had any intention of showing restraint. However, that did not mean she had to constantly see Luna as an enemy and remain hostile toward her. Doing so would be counterproductive. No matter how things turned out, if she failed to make her presence beside Sol a positive effect, spending the rest of her life with him would be a mere pipe dream. Since Luna had already made herself indispensable to Sol in regard to realizing his dream—a position that Reen herself could never secure no matter how hard she tried—Reen wasn’t going to get complacent just because Luna looked young. In the first place, the very idea of a mere village girl pulling her punches in a struggle against the final boss from the Kuzuifabra was nothing but a joke.

In terms of appearance, Luna was but an adorable little girl who showed no sign of being an evil dragon. However, after Reen personally experienced being teleported, she found it strangely convincing that someone powerful enough to casually use legendary magic looked so different from expectations.

“Is she to live with us, then, my lord?” Luna asked timidly.

Reen smiled. “That’s right. I’m Reen, one of Sol’s childhood friends. You can think of me as a big sister. I hope we get along, Lu.”

Unlike in a physical brawl, fighting strength was but a single tool in romance. It was definitely a massive advantage since it was crucial to realizing the dreams of their target of affection, but Reen was determined to surpass it with her status as his childhood friend. Sure, there was a cliché that childhood friends always lose in the end, but she couldn’t care less.

According to Reen’s objective analysis, she was currently a little ahead in terms of overall attractiveness as a woman. This wasn’t based on cold, hard stats, which she could never hope to match in a thousand years. But what mattered most to her was how likely Sol was to see her as a member of the fairer sex, and she was probably right on that front. Regardless of how adorable Luna was, she could hug Sol or even go in the bath with him and he’d still only ever see her as a little sister and not be fazed. On the other hand, even though it had been made painfully clear to Reen over the years that he hadn’t a shred of romantic interest in her, she had already confirmed that he would go red if she hugged him, and it wasn’t hard to imagine how flustered he would get if she offered to bathe with him. After all the time that she had spent with him in the Royal Academy and in Black Tiger, she knew for a fact that it wasn’t that Sol had no interest in girls—he simply didn’t know what love was yet.

Every time Reen went out drinking with Julia alone, Julia made a serious effort to light a fire under her. According to Julia, there was no need to be bound to the convention of first liking someone before entering a physical relationship with them, as the other way also worked more often than one would expect. In fact, it was even more effective if the other person had no experience. As long as they did not already have someone in their heart, the fact that they had no romantic interest in you at the moment was no reason to not take action. Now that Reen had thrown all caution to the wind and secured Sol’s permission to live with him, she was more than willing to crack out the last resort that she had been setting aside all this time.

In contrast to the conflict roiling in Reen’s heart, the only thing on Sol’s mind at the moment was respect for Reen’s ability to naturally call Luna by a

nickname despite knowing her identity as the Evil Dragon. That, and plans to ask for rabbit stew for dinner that night.

“Luna, Reen’s cooking will blow your socks off. And unlike me, she’s very well put together and really knows how to take care of a house, finances, everything. I didn’t know what clothes to get you, but now that she’s with us, you’re set. She’s gonna make you look as cute as her.”

Sol very highly valued the various skills that Reen had developed in hopes of becoming a wife and eventually a mother in the future. What he didn’t know was that Reen showed him and only him this matronly side of herself knowing full well how effective it was, given his past as an orphan.

“Um...nice to meet you.” Luna had no choice but to meekly nod in acceptance of Reen. As she saw it, being rude to someone who clearly commanded a certain level of respect from her master was simply out of the question. Since he was so receptive to the idea of her living with them, it wasn’t her place to object. Because she was merely his servant, even if he said something like “Reen is my number one, you’re my number two” with a sleazebag smile, she would still say yes and accept it.

Being a girl, Luna understood the meaning behind the offhand inclusion of “as her” in Sol’s comment. The fact that it made Reen turn as red as a tomato but Sol showed no sign that he had noticed made it hard for Luna to determine whether her master was simply a natural player or if this was all intentional.

Julia sighed with a tinge of envy. “It’s like you’ve skipped marriage and suddenly become a family with a child of one.”

“I...kinda dig the whole young mom thing,” Reen murmured, looking abashed for some reason.

To become a young mom, one had to become a wife. To become a wife, one had to become lovers with someone. To get a child, one had to live with one’s significant other and sleep in the same bed to get the stork to do a delivery. Or not.

“Uh, so I’m the child in this scenario?” Luna asked.

In this case, even if the stork system was real, the child in question wasn’t one

that a stork could handle. And yet, the All Dragon was being treated like a child, which was most certainly not a potential partner. Indeed, based on appearances alone, Sol and Reen could perhaps come across as a young couple and Luna their child. Anyone who gave it more than a second's thought would then wonder how old the parents had been when they had conceived a child of that age, but since this was merely a mock family, to protest one's position was really quite pointless.

"So much for the dignity of the Evil Dragon," Julia chuckled.

Luna groaned in mock chagrin, prompting Julia to laugh again and to relax the tension in her shoulders that she had been trying to conceal. Being a normal human, she had been understandably feeling intimidated by the sudden appearance of a being with overwhelming strength. However, upon confirming that Luna could participate in the frivolous yet deeply important chatter between girls, Julia decided that she could trust her.

Well, all stories depict champions having a strong sexual appetite anyway.

Perhaps Sol simply hadn't yet awakened in this regard. By this point, it was clear that he was going to go down in history as a champion, as he not only possessed a remarkable power but also had in his service a dragon who was so far superior to humans that their lives meant nothing to her. Well, it was either a champion or a demon who had plunged the world into despair. In any case, there were going to be people doing all sorts of things to curry his favor, even people he didn't want to get involved with. In that respect, Julia approved of Reen's decision to make a move now, when her only romantic rival was an extremely beautiful little girl. It was her hope that Reen could eventually become another bond that tied Luna to the world that she possessed the power to obliterate.

As she'd declared last night, Julia herself was only interested in having a happy marriage of her own and living out a quiet and uneventful life. Now that Sol had grown so powerful, her association with him practically guaranteed that no one would be able to stand between her and the person she wanted to be with. She sent Sol a small thank-you in her heart, acknowledging how blessed she was.

Steve, who had definitely been waiting for the right moment from outside, asked through the door, “Hey, Sol, I’ve just finished registering the three kids you brought in. What do you want to do for their equipment? Do you want me to lend them some from the guild’s armory?”

Oh right, those kids are now a part of this too.

When Julia had bumped into the group earlier downstairs, she could tell that the tank boy and the offensive magic girl seemed to worship Sol but wouldn’t be a threat to Reen’s plans. It was clear that, although young, they had a deep, trusting relationship and feelings for each other. But when Julia bumped into the girl who, like Julia herself, was going to be a healer, she had seen a trace of envy and appraisal of Julia and Reen flash across her face for a split second. The girl also had the ability to effortlessly hide this in Sol’s presence. Both times she was in this room—when she was first escorted in and now that Steve was bringing her back in—she was the perfect image of an innocent girl whose only desire was to be of use to Sol.

Hmm, she’s going to be a little troublesome. Though I suppose I won’t have to worry about Reen and Lu. Three is still rather small for a champion’s harem.

This girl had a dependency bordering on zealotry and a pragmatic way of thinking that pushed her to make sure that she never lost her guardian’s protection no matter what she had to sacrifice, including herself. On top of this personality, she had looks that, though currently diminished by malnutrition, were more than attractive enough. Indeed, she was going to measure up just fine as the third member.

“Thank you, Steve. Don’t worry about their equipment; I’ll get them sorted myself today. By the way, how much say do I have in who the materials from yesterday’s basilisk get sold to?”

“The organas, which include the core magic stone, the eyes, and the horns, definitely have to go to the officials. But you can do whatever you want with the claws, teeth, bones, and satellite magic stones. If you really want, I can mark a few organas as damaged to give you control over them too.”

“Ooh, yes please.”

Sol and Steve’s conversation was getting into details that most other

adventurers would never have access to, but Reen and Julia were used to it by now. When Black Tiger finished a mission or a quest, Sol didn't simply take the payout and call it a day. By controlling where the materials that his party had brought back went, he had managed to build relationships with capable merchants that went beyond that of a mere customer and gain access to weapons and armors that a normal customer couldn't obtain regardless of how much money they offered. Sol was now using the connections that he had nurtured on Black Tiger's behalf for the sake of his new companions.

Oh, that's definitely making an impact on the slum kids.

Just like Reen, Julia had grown up with Sol. It would be a lie to say that she had never once taken an interest in him as a boy. Not only had he given her the power that became the reason she was known as the Saint of Healing, he had pulled off what could only be described as miracles time and time again in their battles with monsters. Julia was both proud of her abundant sexual allure and hated it at the same time, but the fact that Sol never looked at her in a dirty way—though it did make him embarrassed every now and then—made her feel comfortable being with him.

Overshadowing everything, however, there was a part of Julia that was afraid. Every once in a while, there were moments that made her feel like everything so far had been a mere act. This was something that still happened—she had felt it again last night when Sol declared that he was leaving Black Tiger. In fact, seeing what he was doing with the slum kids was making the sensation even more pronounced.

Maybe it'd be easiest if I stop thinking and just join Reen in vying for Sol's affection, ha ha.

The world could be careening on a path toward doom and she wouldn't have a clue because she decided to keep her distance out of prudence. But oh well, it would be up to Reen and the tough newcomer to do something about it if so, then.



"Is this everything?" Sol asked nonchalantly.

"I, uh...think so, yes," Eliza replied with great effort. Her eyes were burning

holes in the ground because she could no longer bring herself to look him directly in the face.

They were currently at what looked like the fanciest terrace café located along the busiest main avenue in the fortified city of Garlaige. The establishment's stylish chairs and tables were set out right there beside the bustling street, and the entire area was covered by a roof made of high-quality enchanted cloth that had probably cost a pretty penny. The building that the roof extended from provided shade from the gentle sunlight, while the roof itself offered protection from precipitation and the chilly seasonal winds to ensure a comfortable environment for all customers. This store, which was favored by high-end clientele, was actually a branch of a franchise based in the capital that had built a reputation in many other cities.

Living in the shadows, Eliza's group would normally have never come to a place like this. At the moment, they didn't have enough money in their pockets to pay for even a cup of coffee, the cheapest item on the menu at the counter. In fact, if they had come here yesterday in what they considered their usual garb, they would have been politely yet firmly turned away by the waitstaff regardless of how much money they had. Today, however, the waitstaff showed them cheerful smiles and the well-trained service that was likely the norm at high-end establishments like this one, surprising them again after who knew how many times that day. The treatment they were receiving wasn't entirely because they were with Sol, Reen, and Julia, adventurers with well-established reputations. No, it was also because not a single person would suspect that they were from the slums based on how they looked at the moment.

The clothes that Eliza, Johan, and Louise were wearing were the very best that could be bought in Garlaige. Although they were still a step down from specially tailored clothes, they had been properly adjusted to fit just right. Naturally, besides their clothes, the trio's hats, shoes, accessories, and even underwear—in short, every thread they wore—had been changed out such that they looked like children from high-class families from head to toe. Specifically, Eliza looked like a nobleman's daughter with a somewhat unhealthy pallor, whereas Johan and Louise looked like children from proper backgrounds who were serving as Eliza's attendants.

Eliza's sickliness was actually due to malnutrition, but it could easily be attributed to the unhealthy lifestyle of a secluded nobleman's daughter who never left her mansion. Some said that a product's excellence lay in how effective it was in presenting an intended impression, regardless of the truth. Due to this feature being applied to the full extent, Eliza's group actually looked more refined than Sol's group to the untrained eye, as the others were wearing equally expensive attire but in a rougher way.

Because their group was composed of three famous adventurers whom everyone knew and three kids who looked like children from noble families, no one dared approach them to publicly make an issue of the fact that they were accompanied by Luna, a therianthrope of never-before-seen characteristics. She was happily clad in an outfit that Sol, Reen, and Julia all called "adorable," but even though her horn could be hidden with a hat, there was really nothing that could be done about her tail, and it was definitely drawing attention.

Last night, Eliza's group had already received the strength to unify the underworld. To ensure that people didn't take them lightly and force them to use that strength, Sol had decided that they needed to look the part, so he had bought them everything they would ever need.

When someone without power dressed like they did, it was a mere bluff for their own sake. When someone with actual power dressed to broadcast that power, it was a show of force not only for their own sake but the sake of others as well. What Sol had bought for Eliza's group was much more than just the outfits they were currently wearing. He had thoroughly upgraded their living standard, switching out even their furniture, and made arrangements for the uniforms that would be worn by members of their organization.

Sol had spent a massive amount of money. While they were at clothing and accessory stores, they had even summoned staff from other stores. He had also left instructions for necessary foodstuffs to be regularly delivered to the organization's base of operations. Before Eliza and her friends could take in what was happening, they had been transformed into a young lady and her attendants, then made to pick out a staggering number of furniture and decor.

After the dreamlike experience, Eliza was understandably in a state of shock. Johan's and Louise's faces were even paler than when they had been cleaning

human remains last night, and they were practically having a staring contest with the ground.

What terrified Eliza's group the most was the discovery that items sold in high-end stores did not have prices listed. And yet, Sol's group was still conversing with lines like "This looks good" or "That'd go well with this" as if everything were normal. The kids were shaking at the thought of the total amount they were racking up when they were told, "Okay, we'll take everything we've chosen so far. Eliza, Johan, Louise, choose something to change into. The staff will do the coordinating for you, so only worry about picking out one thing you really like."

In a way, they were even more afraid of Sol at that moment than when he was floating above the fountain. There was a saying, "There's no woman an adventurer can't woo if he gets serious." As a girl, Eliza was irked every time she heard it used. But now, she felt like she understood what it actually meant.

So, the point of the saying isn't to put women down; it's just a crass way to describe how ridiculously rich high-ranking adventurers can get.

Eliza had realized that the saying stood even if the stated genders were flipped. Not to make light of sincere love, but the thing about money was that it was, in a loose way, a standardized quantifier of a person's abilities and powers. A high-ranking adventurer "getting serious" was willing to put all their money and strength—and love, of course—on the line to woo someone, which meant that the phrase couldn't be farther from a put-down. It could even be said that this was a clumsy way that men who didn't know better tried to mask their embarrassment. Of course, none of this changed the fact that it was a very dislikable saying.

That said, when a guy spent money on a girl like it was an endless resource, it gave the impression that he was saying "you're worth all this." Someone who had never been on the receiving end of this experience wouldn't get it, but it evoked a sense of euphoria that was as compelling as narcotics. If Sol had actually spent all this money because he thought it was equal to Eliza's worth as a girl, she didn't have the confidence to insist that she wasn't someone who could be moved by materialistic things. He hadn't, so the point was moot, but the fact that he was willing to spend all this money on her made her terrified of

displeasing him. This was why Johan and Louise were as pale as sheets and Eliza couldn't bring herself to look Sol in the eyes.

Investment implied expectation. Sol investing this much in the three of them meant he expected them to be worth more than this as the subjects of his experiment. The sheer thought of what would happen to them should they prove unable to produce commensurate results made them sick to their stomachs. If this money really had been an investment in Eliza's worth as a girl, at the end of the day, she only really had to offer herself as compensation. The knowledge that it *wasn't* enough was weighing heavy on the shoulders of her whole group. The person feeling it most was probably Johan, who couldn't offer his body even if he wanted to.

Last night, the three of them had been shown a miracle. The renegade adventurers who used to be their masters had been annihilated in the blink of an eye, then the three youngsters themselves had been granted power in the manner only God could. And as a freebie, Eliza's wound was healed as well. That was why they came to worship Sol, and that should have been it. However, today wasn't a reward, but an investment. What was happening couldn't be farther from a miracle; the amount of money being moved was actually profane. This was happening to Eliza's group for the first time, and they were just learning how heavy the subsequent pressure felt. For a normal person, the expectations of someone who held absolute power was like a whole mountain. This was by no means a "He bought us whatever we wanted! Yay us!" situation.

"What's wrong?" Sol asked. He was expressing sincere concern for Eliza's group, as he had noticed the obvious change in their demeanor throughout the shopping trip. However, he didn't understand that his friendly manner frightened them more than anything else at the moment. Honestly, a part of them even wanted him to be more pompous and haughty and to act more like the typical demanding slavemaster.

Reen sighed. "Sol, think back to how we were when starting out."

"What do you mean?" Sol frowned, still not understanding. When Julia started laughing at him out loud, he made the incorrect deduction that his financially responsible friends were poking fun at how much he had spent today. In a rare display of indignation, he protested, "But it was all stuff that we

actually needed!”

Reen thought, *That’s not the problem, Sol.*

Julia thought, *Nope, he doesn’t get it.*

Eliza thought, *Aaaaaah...*

Johan’s and Louise’s minds were just blank.

What Reen had wanted to remind Sol of was that just because someone needed something, they wouldn’t always have the wherewithal to buy it, and that was normal. That was how it had been for their own group early on. She understood how much pressure someone in that position would feel when someone else came along and spent this much money on them, and was hoping that Sol could too.

Watching Reen rub her temples, Julia laughed. “He never changes in that respect.”

“I get that it’s stuff we need. But boy, he sure didn’t hesitate.”

“If I need something and I can buy it, why would I hesitate?” he asked. Everything he had bought today had been for a reason, but the total cost had been a rather eye-watering amount. Even Julia, who was aware that she was the Black Tiger member who splurged the most, would have felt hesitant about spending so much on people she had only met yesterday. Sol, however, looked genuinely mystified.

Chances were high that the Sol from yesterday might have understood how Julia was feeling now. In other words, the possibility of being betrayed by Eliza’s group no longer meant a thing to him as of today. When someone chose to betray someone else, it was always because they stood to benefit. However, Sol could completely eliminate that possibility because he had obtained power so absolute that no matter the situation, being on his side was always going to be the choice with more to gain. At the same time, obtaining this power had also changed Sol’s perspective of money. For him, it was now merely something that he could get as much of as he wanted whenever he wanted.

“What my lord is saying makes sense to me too.”

The “power” that Sol had obtained—Luna—was equally mystified by what Reen and Julia were saying. The way she tilted her head quizzically looked so funny in light of the situation that it set Julia off again.

In between chuckles, Julia conceded, “It makes logical sense, yep.”

She wasn’t being sarcastic. From the perspective of someone who had the strength to enforce what they considered the truth, any attempts at protest were nothing more than mere sophism. Additionally, even though the amount spent was objectively a large number, it was but a drop in the bucket in the context of Sol’s entire fortune. If he planned on outfitting Eliza’s party with gear of the same quality Black Tiger had been using, then what he had spent today was truly chump change.

I forget it sometimes, but a single set of our equipment is enough to build an entire mansion on prime real estate in Garlaige.

And that was one set for one person, not for the whole party. As the tank and healer, Reen’s and Julia’s equipment was even more expensive by a considerable margin. And yet, whenever Sol asked them to upgrade it, they did so without a word of complaint. The fact that their own lives depended on it was a big reason, but most of all, it was because they understood that it was all thanks to him that they had the financial leeway to do so. Because Mark and Alan didn’t have that awareness, although they still kept on top of their weapons, they started cutting corners with their gear, eventually even switching to using other outfitters.

In any case, the point was that Reen and Julia fully understood the sense of gratitude and obligation induced by being on the receiving end of a priceless gift from an absolute being. What they were feeling toward Eliza’s group wasn’t jealousy, but sympathy.

Sol produced a special card made from the scale of a monster and pushed it across the table. “I’ve made arrangements so that you can buy whatever you want from any of the stores that we visited today. They’ll know if you show them this card, so feel free to send someone else from your organization if need be. If this card ever gets lost, let me know immediately. The stores will send me a breakdown of all purchases made at the end of each month. I want

you to also keep a record of what the card is used for and to give Reen a monthly report.”

Of course, even current Sol wouldn't go so far as to give Eliza free rein. The way he casually chucked the full burden of oversight at Reen was pretty terrible of him, though. And yet, Reen looked so elated that the only way Julia could think of to describe her was “she's a riot.” That said, as a fellow woman, she sort of understood the joy of being entrusted with the management of such colossal assets with absolute confidence. Absolute trust from a loved one evoked a very different kind of joy from fleeting and fickle feelings of love.

All adventurers at Black Tiger's level naturally gained the view that money was simply a quantifier of one's strength and therefore not an ultimate end, but this was a perspective that people in other circumstances could never truly understand. Sol's current mindset was simply that, but taken to an extreme. Having been chosen by Sol, Eliza's group would come to this understanding too, sooner or later. Until then, though, they simply had to suffer through the pressure of being so heavily invested in, and there was nothing that Reen or Julia could do to alleviate that load. When they got there, however, they would realize that although they could repay a debt of money with money, there was no way to pay back the gift of the power that enabled them to make all that money. That was where Reen and Julia were at the moment.

“Understood. We will submit detailed reports clearly laying out what we bought, the quantity, the reason we bought it, its effects, and what we intend to do with it. However, when we need more high-end things like what we bought today, can we ask you to accompany us?”

“No, you have full license to make purchases similar to today's at your own discretion.”

“That's... Yes, sir.”

Unfortunately, Eliza had yet to reach the state of mind where money wasn't the most important thing in life and therefore understandably wanted Sol's express permission when spending his money. When her entreaty was summarily turned down, she cast her eyes down again in despondency.

Sol wasn't just being cold, of course. His idea was that it didn't make sense

that he had to get personally involved every time someone wanted to buy clothes. If the organization did what it was supposed to, then it wasn't a big problem if they enjoyed a little luxury here and there. With the power that he had granted them, it wouldn't be long before they could earn enough to fund their own extravagances.

On the flip side, it *would* be a problem if they were too reserved to buy what they needed because they were overly conscious that this was Sol's money. If Eliza was to unify the slum and lead it, she had to learn how to make decisions of this degree herself. Sol didn't mind the occasional mistake, because he had plenty of capital to fix it. What he absolutely couldn't accept was inaction induced by fear of failure. The fact that he was asking all this of a thirteen-year-old girl did make him quite the harsh taskmaster, though.

"All right, time for the main event."

"What?"

"We can hardly call it a day after only buying clothes and furniture, right? The whole point of today is to get you and your group the weapons and armor you need to be adventurers."

"Oh...right." Eliza was smart and therefore more or less understood what Sol wanted from her. Because of that, she was feeling more pressure than Johan or Louise. And so it had completely slipped her mind that everything thus far had been merely the appetizer and that the headliner for the day was the gear that they would be using to perform as adventurers and to bring order to the slum.

Sol turned to Reen. "Ah, when they buy new equipment, I'll do my best to go along. Is that good enough?"

He was asking Reen and not Eliza because when he had turned down Eliza's invitation earlier, Reen had looked as sad as if she were the one being rejected.

"Uh...sure, I guess," Reen replied, looking down and blushing furiously at the realization that Sol had seen through her. What had been in her mind hadn't been thoughts about Eliza being a romantic rival or a newcomer, but an understanding of how painful it felt to be rejected by the target of her affections.

The world at large tended to call such sympathy indulgent or perhaps even condemn it as unconscious condescension, but Sol liked that part of Reen. And if that was what Sol thought, it didn't matter to Reen what others did.

At least, that would have been the case if she actually knew what Sol thought.

“Okay, you’ve *got* to be doing that on purpose, right?”

As a third party who could only judge based on what she was observing from the outside, Julia could only see this as a situation where a man with overwhelming power was effortlessly messing around with a girl who had feelings for him. Despite how long Julia had spent with Sol, she had never been able to figure him out completely. At times, he seemed like an innocent boy who had never grown up, while at others, he seemed like a mean-spirited adult.

“What do you mean?” Sol asked smilingly, tilting his head like the little dragon girl sitting naturally on his lap and making it impossible for Julia to press the issue any further.



“I see you still don’t have the self-awareness of someone in the service industry, pops.”

This was the first thing that Sol said upon walking into a store like he owned the place. The group with him had left the bustling street where Café Telia was located and turned into an industrial district closer to the city walls to find this street, which was lined with older buildings housing amalgamations of stores and workshops. And Sol was justified, because their entrance had been greeted not with a “Welcome!” but resounding snores. His jab was actually more a wake-up call than anything, really.

The snoring stopped. “Who the—? Hey, if it isn’t Sol! It’s been ages, squirt. Wait, the last time you were here, you were crying about how you would never be able to get better equipment made again. I thought you were never gonna come back!”

As befitted a weapons store, the decor was quite lacking, and though the goods on display appeared cluttered at first glance, someone who knew the signs to look for could see an odd orderliness to the chaos. The place was

surprisingly clean and did not feel filthy or grimy despite the age of the building.

The mustached old man who had been taking an afternoon nap got up languidly from behind the counter at the back of the store. This indicated that he deemed Sol a customer worthy of his attention. In fact, Sol was a valued customer here, as evidenced by the fact that the man recognized him by his voice. If either of those points were not true, the man would have continued napping.

This fellow somewhat advanced in years was Gawain Baccus, one of Garlaige's most renowned arms craftsmen. Despite his apparent indolence, he knew how to make weapons and armor from a huge range of monster materials.



As Sol pointed out, a weapons store was definitely in the service industry. However, the reputation of stores like this one, which specialized in one-of-a-kind gear that people who made a living fighting monsters trusted their lives with, weren't determined by their level of hospitality, how fancy their interior decor was, or even their cleanliness. No, they were evaluated based on only one unshakable metric: how competent their products were. It didn't matter a lick that Gawain had a gruff personality, that he threw out everyone he deemed unworthy of using his goods, or even that everything in this store had prices that would make a normal person faint.

Gawain didn't have to advertise either, as the adventurers who managed to live another day thanks to his products automatically did it for him. The fact that his store was the go-to place for Black Tiger, the party who had climbed to Rank A in two years, gave his clientele reassurance so firm that it wouldn't be rattled by him merely taking a nap.

It wasn't only because Sol was Gawain's much-appreciated walking advertisement that the man recognized his voice, though. Their relationship was actually a mutually beneficial one where they were both each other's customers. In other words, Sol provided the store with monster materials that could be turned into special weapons, and the store sold those finished products back to him. Thanks to Sol's behind-the-scenes ties to Steve, he had the ability to divert monster materials where he wanted, which was something that normal adventurers couldn't do. The crying that Gawain mentioned was due to Sol's realization that his party had reached the upper limit of monsters within their reach.

"Ha ha ha. There's been a little change in my situation."

"You call a party slated for a Rank A promotion being disbanded 'a little change'? You got balls of steel, squirt."

"You pick up on news as fast as ever, I see."

"Of course I do." Gawain grinned toothily, drawing a wry smile from Sol. Naturally, Gawain had plenty of high-ranking customers besides Black Tiger. It would have been nigh impossible for him not to hear news of the breakup within a day.

When he saw Reen and Julia, the tank and healer who formed the heart of Black Tiger, showing up with Sol, he immediately understood the general gist of the breakup. He didn't know the true nature of Sol's talent, but he knew all too well how fierce the party's battles were due to what they asked him to make and the state of their gear when they turned them in for maintenance. If Reen had truly fallen in love with Sol, there was no way he was merely deadweight for the party like the rumors said. The adventuring business wasn't so forgiving. Someone who was not only constantly there for the fights of a party that shot up to Rank A in two years but also commanded steadfast trust from other members was much more likely to be a leader than baggage.

Since Julia, the Saint of Healing whose name was known by every last person in Garlaige, treated Sol pretty much the same way Reen did, even an idiot could tell that Sol was the true core of Black Tiger. That was why whenever Gawain heard a customer talk about Sol, he evaluated them according to what they said. If they were buying something that even an idiot could use and had all the cash on hand, then sure, he'd sell it to them. He would refuse to sell them things on credit, however, and he would write them off in his mind. The way he saw it, if they were the kind of person who would make light of someone else's strength without proof, they didn't have long to live anyway.

Gawain wasn't normally one to get worried about others, but news of Black Tiger's breakup did bother him somewhat, especially because he didn't know the specifics. Now that three members were visiting together, however, he could relax enough to tease them a little.

"So, what're you here for today? What, you're gonna send me the materials from the basilisk you killed?"

"Ooh, good guess. Bingo."

"Wait, are you serious?" Gawain leaned forward eagerly over his well-worn counter. "You sure you want me working on something like that? If you send me such high-quality materials, I'm gonna make something that's gonna make your eyeballs pop out, ya know?"

"Hah! I'm gonna hold you to that."

The smile that Sol gave indicated that he was not joking. That meant from this

moment on, it was time to talk business. Gawain quickly switched gears.

“Just saying, it’s gonna draw the eye of every damn person you pass. Do you not care about that anymore?”

No true craftsman would ever give up the opportunity to work on materials from a century-old territory boss. However, since Gawain was running a business, he had to take his customers’ requests into consideration. Sol had said time and time again that he didn’t want to stand out. That said, since he was a member of a Rank B party with the next promotion in sight, people naturally knew about him. All the more so because his party had graduated from the Royal Academy *and* got to where it was so fast. Before all that, the members of Black Tiger had started right off the bat with a certain amount of renown as “the Miracle Children.” In Garlaige, at least, people who didn’t know Sol’s face and name were a tiny minority.

In light of all this, Sol’s insistence on staying inconspicuous would normally sound like a joke, but apparently he had rather clear-cut criteria. He didn’t mind all that much when his entire party stood out as a whole. As for his particular role, however, suffice it to say he actually welcomed being thought of as the party’s baggage a little. What he didn’t want was for people to realize that he had the connections to do things like influence the guild and make personal requests of renowned craftsmen. Gawain honestly couldn’t understand the subtle distinctions, but he did understand that what Sol was now asking went completely against everything that he had said before.

When a territory boss was killed, what normally happened was that the guild would buy the entire carcass from the adventurers who accomplished the feat at a high price and then offer the whole thing to the country that the branch was in. No law mandated this, but it was sort of an unspoken agreement between countries and the Adventurer’s Guild. Regardless of the wishes of the involved adventurer, materials from the boss’s body would normally never go directly to a single craftsman.

With how huge the basilisk was, it seemed logical that it would be easier to make off with little bits of it. In actuality, the rarity of the monster meant it would be monitored even more strictly than normal, and any misappropriation that was discovered would be a huge deal. This was one reason someone who

didn't want to stand out should never wear anything made from such materials. All adventurers knew how valuable it was to have a powerful weapon, but it was never worth making enemies of both the country they resided in and the entire Adventurer's Guild.

"Ha ha ha. Okay, there's been a *big* change in my situation."

"Oh, now you're scaring me."

Although Gawain was drawing back, there was a huge grin on his face. If someone who would describe the breakup of a Rank A party as a little change turned around and talked about a big change with emphasis, ten to one it was trouble. A wise man would know to give Sol a wide berth and not get involved, but a craftsman possessed by creative spirit was far from wise. If there was danger, bring it on.

Since Sol was no longer worried about remaining inconspicuous, Gawain was more than eager to meet all his expectations and demands. No matter what, Gawain did not want to lose the opportunity to work on the basilisk materials. As long as he got to make a good sword out of it, he couldn't care less about any trouble that it would bring.

"I want you to use the materials to make equipment for these three. Bill me, as usual. Make one set for a tank, one set for an offensive mage, and one set for a healer."

"You got it. But what's going on? After kicking out the guys, aren'tcha gonna form a harem party?"

If a customer's request wasn't unreasonable, then abiding by it was the natural course of action. Gawain wouldn't have complained even if he were asked to make a sword from the basilisk materials that would never be used and would forever hang on a wall as a family heirloom. However, the three that Sol pointed to were very obviously kids, so Gawain couldn't resist the urge to ask for confirmation when instructed to deck them out with the unbelievably rare materials.

"I'm the one who got fired, just saying."

"Hah, that's a joke if I've heard one. Anyway, you sure, though? Not to toot

my own horn, but this is gonna be the best work that I've ever done, hands down, since I'll be using materials from the freaking basilisk. You really don't want to use it on Miss Iron Wall and Miss Saint of Healing?"

In the two years since Gawain had made Sol's acquaintance, he had made a lot of equipment using high-tier monster materials, and the wealth of experience had helped him grow a lot as a craftsman. He may not have shown it, but he was very thankful to Sol. And now, he was going to make something using materials from the basilisk. Sol was definitely not a member of royalty or a prominent noble family, which meant the end product was going to be miles better than anything he was likely ever going to see. Gawain was too self-conscious to call this repaying Sol's favor, but there was definitely a part of him that wanted Sol to seize the opportunity for his own party.

"Oh, we're retiring as adventurers," Julia commented.

"And I'm changing my profession to a caretaker in Sol's house," Reen added.

"Not 'newlywed'?"

"That's you!"

Iron Wall and the Saint of Healing, members of a fast-rising Rank A party with the ability to take down monsters normal people could never hope to stand against, were declaring their retirement like it was nothing special. They even did so through a weird little straight man-funny man comedy bit. Gawain wanted so badly to tell them to be more aware of how important they were to this city, to the Adventurer's Guild, and even to humankind as a whole.

"You little..."

He couldn't help letting out his inner voice a bit. The comment about a harem party had been a joke, but he had been almost sure that Sol's next move would be to bring on an attacker who would actually listen to his instructions and form a new party with them and Reen and Julia, whom he already knew well.

"Sorry about them," Sol chuckled, then moved on, completely unfazed by his friends' retirement announcement. "So, I know it'll take some time to make the basilisk stuff. Can you find something for these three to use for now?"

"Uh...as in, something at the level that Black Tiger was using?"

“Yes, exactly. However, it’s just for the time until the basilisk stuff is ready, so don’t bother adjusting it to them. I’m pretty sure you have some spares in the back, right?”

Gawain knew better than anyone that the equipment he himself had made was significantly pricier than most normal products. However, Sol’s attitude indicated that the difference was little more than chump change to him and that money had never been an issue. The fact that he was just casually buying it for a bunch of greenhorns as a mere stopgap or training wheels did stun Gawain a little, though.

“I do, but...what I’m asking is, can these pip-squeaks who’ve barely finished school handle it?”

“Oh, yeah, no worries.”

It normally took adventurers with a certain level of ability to bring out the true potential of the level of equipment being discussed, but Sol was confirming that this wouldn’t be a problem. Then again, if the kids were supposed to use basilisk equipment later, it wouldn’t make sense that they couldn’t use something lower in quality.

The question to consider, then, was who on earth had made it possible for these absolute beginners to put on such equipment as their very first set and to fully utilize it. Up till now, Gawain had thought of Sol as basically a really good supporter. Short of directly dealing damage to monsters, he had enough personal virtue, ability as a commander, skill to provide actual backup in fights, and pretty much everything else that substantiated the level of devotion shown by his tank and healer. But it was now clear that there was a lot more to him.

“Maybe I should stop calling you ‘squirt.’”

“I would appreciate that very much.”

If, say, Sol had the ability to instantaneously make anyone as powerful as a high-ranking adventurer, it wouldn’t be a stretch to call him God incarnate. Anyone who treated him with disrespect could very likely get clobbered to death by his believers, even if he himself wasn’t offended at all. Reen and Julia were already used to Gawain’s attitude, but the three kids and the cute little therianthrope girl who simply couldn’t be an adventurer were staring at him

hard for his brusque manner. There was no blatant anger in their eyes, but he could imagine them attacking him with zero hesitation the very moment Sol expressed any displeasure, as if they were religious fanatics taking umbrage at their god being mocked.

“Well, *Sol*, can you move on to telling me the real reason you came all the way to my humble establishment today? You’ve always said that you want to keep a low profile, but pulling strings at the guild to send the basilisk materials my way is a very blatant and noticeable move. On top of that, you’re telling me to use the special equipment I make with it on these rookies. Is the big change in your situation that you mentioned something that you can tell me about?”

Determining that the right move here was to inquire further, Gawain spelled everything out so he could ask for elaboration. He even made it a point to call Sol properly by his name. He thought he heard the little girl snigger at him, but he chose to not let it bother him.

“Just now, you said that if I provided you with materials of high quality, you’ll make things that’ll make my eyes pop out. Do you really mean it?”

“Sure I did. A man doesn’t go back on his word.”

Gawain was feeling a little intimidated by the tone in Sol’s voice, but no true craftsman would balk at an exchange of this level. It was indeed daunting to work with the basilisk materials, but Gawain had full confidence that what he made with them would definitely not disappoint. Their current relationship was established on the fact that he had proved his competence many times already. It was odd that Sol was asking for confirmation.

Sol smiled as if Gawain’s answer was exactly what he wanted to hear. “In that case, pops—no, Magic Blacksmith Gawain Baccus, my new clan, Libertadores, would like to sign an exclusive contract with you and your store, Baccus Arms.”

“Uh...isn’t that already practically the case at the moment?”

Apparently, the “big changes” were leading Sol to see the need to ask for this exclusive contract. Since he had established a new clan, it was clear that he had no intention of retiring as an adventurer. However, Gawain didn’t understand why he wanted to put into words and officialize what they already had going on. He had never sold equipment made with materials provided by Sol to

anyone else, and he had no intention of ever doing so.

“I’m not just asking that you not sell items made with the materials I provide to other people. After exchanging this contract, everything that you make will first be bought by Libertadores.”

In other words, Sol wanted Gawain to work exclusively for Libertadores.

“I earn *quite* a lot, you know.”

It made Gawain happy that Sol put so much stock in his abilities, but no business was founded on merely a sense of achievement or sentiment. It was a point of pride for him that, by selling equipment made with materials obtained the normal, aboveboard way to high-ranking adventurers, he had built Baccus Arms into a store with profits that equaled major merchant firms in the capital.

Gawain shunned obvious luxuries because he would much rather spend that time in his workshop polishing his skills. The only things that money was good for were high-quality materials, outstanding tools, and delicious booze. The reason he still had to tend to his own store was because he had once gotten burned from hiring someone who had been excessively ardent about upping profits. Now, Baccus Arms’s dedicated workshop was manned by a sizable number of apprentices, and Gawain himself stayed glued to the counter most of the time when they weren’t handling special materials.

“I understand your concern. To convince you that my clan has what it takes to take you on exclusively, allow me to make one suggestion.”

The confidence on Sol’s face was giving Gawain a bad—no, an indescribable excitement, just like two years ago when Sol had shown up out of the blue and asked, “If I hand you materials from high-tier monsters, can you make me equipment the likes of which the world has never seen before?” What Gawain was feeling now was even more intense than that time. The expression that Sol was unconsciously making seemed so devious yet so childishly innocent that Gawain was sure this was how devils looked when tempting humans. As a man possessed by the unquenchable desire to create, however, he had no way to resist despite knowing how dangerous the invitation was.

“Please order the bosses of the monster territories in the vicinity of Garlaige by how much you want to work with their materials. This includes taboo

territories. I'll deliver, hmm, up to five to you within a single month."

"What...did you...say?"

The casual aside that Sol threw in left Gawain so shocked he forgot how to breathe. "Taboo territories" were areas that the Adventurer's Guild and countries declared absolutely forbidden to step inside. This was a rule that must never be violated for any reason, because the bosses of these territories possessed overwhelming strength. They thankfully never left their domains, but each and every one was capable of annihilating a country. If someone from, say, Country A entered a forbidden territory to instigate the boss into wiping out Country B—knowing full well they would likely die attempting this—all surrounding countries would gang up to obliterate Country A. That was how strictly the rule was enforced by all nations, as there was no guarantee that a forbidden territory's boss would stop after destroying only the country that happened to claim that land.

These days, this rule was not only enforced internationally by countries. The Holy Church, which oversaw the world's faith, also made it an actual taboo to enter such territories. Honestly, that was probably much more effective as a deterrent. After all, even an atheist wouldn't want to purposely do something that would get them branded a heretic or an enemy of God by a religion with believers practically everywhere.

In actuality, people who had the ability to fend off the normal monsters living in a taboo territory long enough to reach the boss were practically nil. Even if someone managed to do so thanks to sheer luck, they would be killed by the boss merely flicking a finger at them, so chances of such encounters coming to nothing were nearly a hundred percent. This was why, through scouting parties organized several times over the long annals of history, mankind had been able to gather very basic information on the monsters and bosses in these taboo territories.

There had been an incident roughly two hundred years earlier on the western side of the continent where a feudal lord tried to instigate a taboo territory boss into destroying a neighboring country, but the boss had ended up wiping out seven whole countries in the vicinity, including the lord's own. After that, all countries standardized the penalty for entering taboo territories without

permission as capital punishment. There were no exceptions, even if the criminal was a citizen of another country. To this day, the area in the west remained abandoned. It was designated the largest taboo territory on the continent, dominated by the colossal slime called Country Eater.

Normal territories were considered barely within the upper limit of what humans could handle, so the Adventurer's Guild honored adventurers who succeeded in unsealing one by promoting them to Rank A. Taboo territories, however, were considered completely beyond reach, and therefore no one was to touch them even with a ten-mile stick.

As Gawain remained too stunned for words, Sol continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "I've already obtained permission from the Adventurer's Guild. As for Emelia, well, I think I can manage something. And just saying, I don't plan on hoarding all the weapons you make. I'm just making it so that my clan owns the full rights to selling them. You will be more than adequately recompensed."

Clearly, Sol had already been laying the groundwork for his plans and had zero intention of proceeding with things in a hush-hush way.

Yeah, he definitely doesn't care about keeping a low profile anymore.

If Sol had obtained the power to make good on his promise, then no wonder he was so blasé about how the basilisk materials were used. The bosses of the taboo territories around Garlaige were presumably just as powerful as Country Eater, and there were nine of them. If any one of them went on a rampage like two hundred years ago, there was a possibility that the other eight might be triggered too in a chain reaction. If they ended up fighting each other, then great. But if they ended up spreading out over the continent, in the worst-case scenario, every single country on this continent could get annihilated.

The vicinity of Garlaige was called Gio Nest, which meant "den of monsters." This was one reason war never broke out between Emelia and Istekario, two of the most powerful countries on the continent, even though they bordered each other. And now, Sol was claiming that he would unseal more than half of the taboo territories of Gio Nest in a month.

Before Sol was an adventurer, he was a citizen of the Emelia Kingdom. If he secured the forests, plains, and mountain chains surrounding Garlaige—a total

area that greatly surpassed the territory that Black Tiger had unsealed the other day—Emelia would gain enough national power to dominate the entire continent. As long as the powers that be weren't complete idiots, Emelia was very likely going to respect Sol's wishes. The immediate gains were a definite benefit, yes, but more than anything, they would be desperate to do everything they could to gain some measure of influence over a person who held such immense power.

"If you're not just pulling my leg, then I only need enough money to buy good booze and good dishes to go with the booze. Are you sure you can take down the boss of Taboo Novem, though? As in, the ninth one. Really, really sure?"

Gawain no longer had any intention of negotiating with Sol. His soul as a craftsman was screaming at him to stop quibbling over trivial things like money or benefits. Everything else paled to mere insignificance before the possibility of working with materials that no one had touched in a thousand years.

Although Gawain was aware of his own lack of education, he also understood that while Sol's exclusive contract was intended to earn Libertadores money, it was also meant to be a way to protect Gawain himself. Very soon, individuals whom Sol had close ties to were going to be caught up in schemes and plots on an international scale. Since there was no way to prevent this from happening, Sol was taking precautions by first establishing his own clan and bringing everyone he cared about into it. That way, third parties couldn't easily lay hands on them. Sol was getting serious.

The possibility that Sol was merely seized by delusions of grandeur due to the shock of Black Tiger breaking up did cross Gawain's mind. However, when he saw how calm Reen and Julia were throughout this whole exchange, he dismissed it.

"Ah, I knew you'd choose Kuzuryuu," Sol said. "Okay. That's number one, then. I'll get to bringing it in, so please decide on numbers two to five in the meantime." His attitude only showed delight that the first boss Gawain had chosen was the one he had expected and nothing more.

For him, going to kill Kuzuryuu had the same nuance as a party at Black Tiger's level going to kill a Rank C monster and bringing back its materials at the

request of a novice craftsman. He wasn't just putting on a brave front. This truly was a mere errand for him.

"My lord, are there still such impressive monsters outside of dungeons and on the surface of this planet?" the mysterious therianthrope asked, her mannerisms indicating that she thought Sol's attitude a matter of course. Having gleaned from Gawain's demeanor that this monster given the name Kuzuryuu was quite feared by humans, she expressed great interest in how powerful it truly was.

Indeed, everyone from Garlaige and its vicinity was more than familiar with the name of Kuzuryuu and would even grimace upon hearing it. The reason was that they had all grown up being told by their parents, "If you're naughty, Kuzuryuu will come at night and tear you apart with its nine heads!"

Luna was looking at Sol with sparkles in her beautiful eye, as if she were looking forward to seeing him gallantly in action. The seeming innocence brought a smile to even grumpy old Gawain's face. In actuality, she was excited about how powerful the monster she would get to kill for Sol was, but this was so far out of left field that it would have gone completely over his head even had he known.

"It's basically a hydra that's lived a very long time. It's also called the Nine-Headed Dragon. Armies and adventurers of this age can't do a thing against it. It's the most powerful monster out there, but for some reason it doesn't leave its territory, and that's why the world hasn't ended yet. Then again, if the monsters living in the labyrinths came pouring out, the world would end that same day as well, so I guess being able to wipe out the world isn't much use as an indicator."

Her interest deflating, Luna muttered, "Oh, it's just a hydra. The nerve of a mere snake to have the name of 'Nine-Headed *Dragon*.'"

She looked crushed with disappointment that the boss monster with such an impressive name was a mere hydra. Then, she looked highly indignant that what she considered a mere snake had the audacity to claim to be a member of her own race. In this world, there were dragons, then there were drakes, which were technically still dragons but a step down. According to Luna, who stood

above them all as the All Dragon, it was preposterous for a mere snake to be given equal regard as even one of her lesser brethren, much less her kin.

“Uh, Sol, what is this girl saying?” Gawain couldn’t comprehend Luna’s words. No, he could physically see her lips moving and his ears could hear the sounds coming out of her mouth, but his brain didn’t know how to process her treating Kuzuryuu as if it were something that could be merely crushed underfoot.

Sol wrapped an arm around Luna’s shoulder and adopted a tone as though explaining something to a child. “She’s saying that Kuzuryuu is merely a hydra that’s grown oversized over time and that it’s nothing before her, Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon.”

Luna looked up with a happy face while entwining her arm around Sol’s. “My lord, my title is All Dragon.”

“And there you have it.” Sol shrugged. Honestly, he still didn’t really get Luna’s insistence on being called the All Dragon. He figured maybe it was a distinction between species that had been a thing way back in the past.

“Honey, she’s who?”

It didn’t matter to Gawain if Luna was the Evil Dragon or the All Dragon, all that he heard was the name Lunvemt Nachtfelia. He was so staggered that his manner of speech slipped into that of the very first teacher he’d had.

His surprise was understandable, as he hadn’t been teleported, he hadn’t witnessed five renegade adventurers killed in an instant, and what he was seeing was just a cute little therianthrope girl with a horn and a tail. However, his rather facile reaction was evoking little more than resigned smiles from Reen and Julia, which somehow gave it a lot of credibility. The three kids looked surprised but not doubtful, indicating that they had undergone an experience that made this revelation a mere surprise.

Gawain could see how it made sense, though. This unbelievable claim would indeed explain how Sol could unseal taboo territories, something that any normal person would be branded insane for even considering. The problem was that Gawain simply couldn’t see the girl currently messing around with Sol with a pouty face as the final boss in the Kuzuifabra, an epic that had made his eyes dazzle countless times as a kid.

Noticing Gawain's wordless stare, Sol laughed and said, "Yes, she's the real thing. She's just in human form right now."

After a long pause, Gawain finally muttered, "Oh man." He realized that if Sol was lying, he'd have gone with something more believable. The fact that he hadn't made this seem believable in turn. And it wasn't like not believing Sol was an option here. Gawain was afraid of asking for proof, in case the Evil Dragon decided to do so with something flashy like destroying the city.

So Gawain decided to stop thinking about this entirely. The girl squealing with merriment and now trying to clamber onto Sol was the Evil Dragon—no, the All Dragon, and long may she live. It wasn't like her identity was a problem for him. The day it became a problem, he'd probably be forced to say bye-bye to this world anyway, so it still wouldn't be a problem that he had to do anything about.

The moment that Gawain accepted Luna's identity, he chided himself for being irreverent, because the first thought he had was that he really wanted a piece of her horn or nail. If Luna did actually give it to him one day, he would give his entire existence to Libertadores in exchange for only food and board. He wouldn't even think twice about calling Sol "master" if he had to.

Talented craftsmen were truly irredeemable yet precious beings indeed.

Chapter 6: The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters

The world was dyed in madder red and shadows when Sol's group—now members of the newly established clan Libertadores—returned to the Adventurer's Guild. After having bought all basic necessities, it was time to work out a more detailed plan of action with Steve.

Now decked out in armor from Baccus Arms, Eliza, Johan, and Louise looked nothing like they had when they'd nervously walked through the doors that same morning. But of course, that was only in appearance. The thought of how much money had been invested in them in the span of a few hours had them hanging their heads like sheep being led to slaughter.

Eliza did feel surprised the first time she wore top-quality clothing. Having only ever worn rags till today, it boggled her mind that clothes could be so different. And yet, the armor that she was now wearing—according to the maker, the full set cost as much as a mansion on prime real estate—was far beyond the comprehension of even those who prided themselves on having a little relevant knowledge.

Eliza hadn't a clue how it worked, but the entire suit was unbelievably light. At least, that was what it felt like to her, but she was under a misconception. The armor itself wasn't light. Instead, because it was made of monster materials, it was constantly absorbing outer mana and using it to strengthen its bearer. In other words, it was enchanted to provide a constant buff to its wearer. It felt light simply because its wearer was stronger than usual.

Of all the equipment made during the past century, gear that had reached this level of quality numbered fewer than a hundred. Meeting someone who wore such an item was rarer than hens' teeth. Of course, Eliza did not know this, and she had yet to even stand in front of a monster, much less take a swing at one, but she fully understood that she was wearing something that couldn't be obtained merely with money. Her cape alone—properly dyed white to match the color scheme of the rest of her outfit—was tough enough to fully block both

physical and magical attacks from a mid-ranked adventurer.

The three kids were indeed buckling under the pressure of their all-powerful taskmaster's expectations, and their hearts were tattered and torn from living in the slums. This was a cruel burden to bear for those so young, but it was also because of their youth that they were able to enjoy a brief moment of respite when the elation of looking like the adventurers they had looked up to their whole lives slightly surpassed all anxiety in their hearts.

Eliza alone was different in that she was really bothered that Sol was looking their way with envy. Needless to say, he still nursed the longing to wear armor himself and to directly exchange swords and magic with monsters. When he had dreamed of conquering the world's dungeons in his youth, it was himself he had pictured mowing down monsters with sword and magic. The talent that he had actually received, Player, denied him that possibility in no uncertain way. He was aware that there was no point in pining for what he didn't have, but he couldn't keep the envy out of his gaze. And that gaze was perhaps a major reason Mark and Alan had come to look down on him.

Of course, Eliza didn't know this, and all the interaction that she had had with him so far was basically him displaying his omnipotent strength last night and spending money on her and her companions like it was a limitless resource today. She couldn't think of a single reason for him to look at her with envy, so it made her extremely uncomfortable. It still scared her to receive looks of desire from men, but if it was from Sol, the one who had healed her wound, she preferred it over envy.

The moment the large doors to the Adventurer's Guild opened, however, all of Eliza's thoughts were blown away. Although the sun had yet to set fully, the guild was bustling, as rookie and somewhat veteran adventurers who had finished relatively easier quests and missions had gotten back early. Therefore, the bar area attached to the lobby was starting to fill up.

The stark difference from how the place had looked in the morning made Eliza flinch, but the reaction from the adventurers wasn't the disdain or scorn that she was used to receiving as a slum child. Rather, she was getting looks of yearning and appreciation, as if the adventurers acknowledged her as someone above them. Some even vocalized their thoughts, with comments like "Damn,

wow..." or "Who're they?" coming up here and there. She had no doubt that these were reactions to her and her companions, not Sol's group.

And she was right. Sol, Reen, and Julia were in casual attire. Their clothes were high quality, but there was nothing about them that would draw the interest of those from the same industry who could promptly buy the same item themselves should they want it. There was only a small subset of novices whose eyes were drawn by Reen, who was a little more animated than usual due to Sol's presence, and by Julia, whose curves were as pronounced as usual.

In contrast, Eliza was wearing a glowing cassock and holding a staff topped with a floating ball of light. Johan was wearing full-body armor and holding a massive sword and shield. Louise had on a mage's pointy hat and a staff that several layers of tiny magical symbols were circling around. Everything about them was immediately of interest to their fellow adventurers, many of whom ardently hoped that they would get to wear the same someday.

Not a single adventurer knew these three new faces who showed up wearing top-quality gear like they had every right to. After all, adventurers lived in a completely different world from the dregs of society, who had to eke out a living forming gangs in the slums and dipping their hands into questionable businesses, and therefore had no interest in them. Unlike the general populace, who at least feared these underground forces, adventurers had the strength to fight back and win, short of being caught completely off guard. Adventurers looked down on slum residents as powerless weaklings worthy of zero concern.

As such, the only conclusion the local adventurers could draw from seeing Eliza's group covered head to toe in gear completely beyond their reach was that they were battle-hardened veterans from a different city who were moving their home base to Garlaige. Since they had the strength to obtain such equipment, their age didn't matter. Among adventurers, might made right.

Them being with Sol, Reen, and Julia added further credibility to the image. Many even assumed they were candidates for the new party Sol was likely setting up. Of course, that would be an odd thing to do, as Sol's new party would then have two tanks and two healers, but even mid-rank adventurers had trouble discerning someone's role in their party based on their equipment alone. Then again, parties other than Black Tiger lacked such clear-cut roles

anyway.

In any case, though Sol was with them—no, *because* Sol was with them, and in light of Steve’s announcement yesterday, everyone saw Eliza’s group as high-ranking adventurers who had the ability to stand shoulder to shoulder with the former members of Black Tiger. As a result, in addition to the envy directed at the trio, a sense of spectatorial expectation also began filling the air.

“Uh...hey there, Sol. Buddy.”

“Hey, Sol. How’re you doing?”

The expectation was not entirely baseless. After all, Mark and Alan were already in the building, and Sol, Reen, and Julia were now running into them. Black Tiger, the up-and-coming party with a Rank A promotion in the bag, had disbanded with a three-two split. Interestingly, Julia and Reen, who had formed the core of the party as healer and tank, had chosen to go with Sol, whom everyone had thought was merely deadweight. All the adventurers present were pricking up their ears to listen in on the ensuing conversation. This was going to make for a great story to tell over drinks.

This encounter was by no means a coincidence, however. Mark and Alan had been waiting there almost the entire afternoon.

“Mark. Alan.”

Thanks to Player, Sol had stepped into the guild fully knowing his former leader and vice leader were there. However, he figured that he had nothing to be ashamed of and that Mark and Alan had no reason to approach him either. Clearly, that assumption was wrong. What further surprised Sol was the strangely friendly manner the two were adopting. He couldn’t help frowning at the fixed smiles on their faces, which gave him the impression that they were being forced to talk to him. This was somewhat understandable coming from Alan, who prided himself on being a good actor. But not so Mark, especially not after the “Forget it!” that he had said just last night, and most certainly not the day right after. There must have been a very pressing change in their circumstances that was now compelling them to talk to Sol, even if they had to swallow their pride to do so.

This was bound to be trouble, and Sol only just managed to not grimace.

Though it had been barely a day, it was far too late for them to approach him, no matter what they wanted. Never again would the five of them take on missions and quests like before. And yet, Sol found himself receptive to the idea of helping Mark and Alan out if they were truly in a tight spot. He knew he felt this way on account of them being his childhood friends, and he hated himself for it.

“Ha ha, what’s this? Are you gathering children to play make-believe adventurers with? Look at all the fancy stuff that you’ve decked them out in!” Alan exclaimed with his customary snide.

All emotion drained out of Sol’s face as something snapped in his head. In that very moment, something had changed in a very permanent way.

“Are you going out of your way to pick a fight with us? You must have a lot of time on your hands,” Julia shot back. After learning that she, along with everyone in Black Tiger besides Sol, were merely Villagers, she now found Alan’s disdainful tone very grating.

“What’re you saying, Alan?!” Mark cried, looking flustered. He wasn’t surprised about Alan being more caustic than necessary, because he did that to people he disliked all the time. No, he was surprised about how wrong Alan was.

In all likelihood, it was indeed Sol who had equipped the three new faces. It wasn’t easy even for high-ranking adventurers to obtain gear on par with what Black Tiger had been using. However, the effortless way in which this trio wore such gear left no doubt that they were at least as good as Mark and Alan themselves. And there was no reason for Sol’s group to go to the trouble of making fakes, forcing three random children to wear them, and bringing them to the guild.

A look of regret flashed across Alan’s face, then he lowered his head graciously. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

The words had come out of his lips before he’d known it. The reason was that he knew the three were mere grunts from a gang in the slums, which meant whatever Sol was up to was a farce. Due to his lack of understanding regarding Sol’s talent, he had determined that there was no way the newcomers were his

equals, thus this could only be “playing make-believe adventurer.” He was apologizing only because he had remembered why he and Mark were standing here like idiots waiting for Sol’s return and realized that his comment had been detrimental to his aim.

Saying something provocative and then politely apologizing was a common strategy used by Alan. As he loved to explain, the other side then had to accept the apology to avoid coming off as immature, but in doing so, they were effectively yielding the initiative of the conversation. Somehow, Alan was under the impression—an impression shared by no one else—that this was how a true sage would act. Put simply, he had gotten too used to being more powerful than others.

It was a simple matter to imagine what would happen if Alan did this with someone stronger than him or what would happen if someone weaker than him did the same thing to him. This was why those who were truly strong understood that there were plenty of people above them and therefore never changed their attitudes based on whom they were addressing. They saw no need to act tough unless a situation specifically required it.

“Oh, no. Playing make-believe was what I was doing up till yesterday. *Now* I’m going to become a proper adventurer,” Sol retorted with equal sass to hide his reaction to what he had figured out from the brief exchange so far. “That’s why I created a new clan today. These three are the first new members of Libertadores.”

A buzz of hushed conversation immediately sprang up among the riveted adventurers. By calling his time with Black Tiger “make-believe,” he was basically spitting on their achievement of having reached Rank A in two years. And when he declared that he was finally going to become a proper adventurer, he was insinuating that he was the one who was finally free of the deadweight that had been dragging him down.

Alan was extremely sensitive to insults of this nature. First off, not letting a slight go unanswered was in the nature of all adventurers. That it came from Sol, someone Alan considered beneath him, made it all the more impossible to let slide. To top it off, they were in a public setting with countless ears listening in. Although Alan’s face remained expressionless, his cheeks and ears flushed

red, and he wordlessly took a step toward Sol.

Everyone else seemed to move all at once. Luna swiftly took up position in front of Sol as Mark grabbed Alan's shoulder, preventing him from taking another step. Reen and Julia imperceptibly lowered their center of gravity and lifted themselves so that they were standing on the balls of their feet, ready to spring into action anytime. Eliza's group wasn't capable of such movements yet, but they also tightened their grips on their newly bought weapons, albeit with shaking hands.

As a result, the entire guild became enveloped by the tension that only high-ranking adventurers could generate. Everyone held their breath out of fear of being the spark that set off the powder keg. Considering that it was a face-off of six against two, Mark and Alan were at a huge disadvantage. Furthermore, while they were still bound by the rules of the guild, Luna and Eliza's group clearly couldn't care less about them. Most of the onlookers agreed that Mark had made the right call stopping Alan.

At the same time, the adventurers also got confirmation that the three newcomers, despite their seeming youth, did indeed possess the strength of high-rankers. The intimidation that they were emanating wasn't a mere bluff substantiated only by the quality of their gear; no, they did indeed have the bearing of those who possessed a powerful talent and were fully aware of how to use it. The way that their fear came across as hostility further added to this impression.

This surprised Alan, who knew their true identities. It made absolutely no sense for mere kids from the slums to have the same aura as he himself, a tried-and-tested veteran adventurer.

What trick did he use? Completely blind to the possibility that his own abilities worked the same way, Alan raised his guard as if he still had the power to affect how this encounter would end.

With a strained smile on his face and his arm still around Alan's shoulder, Mark asked, "Hey, Sol. Can you at least hear us out first?" Behind his expression, there was relatively little anger or panic. Instead, his main emotion was bewilderment at how he had found himself in his current situation. He had

thought that he would be fine alone, as all he'd wanted was to join the army. And yet, his plans had gone down the drain in a single day and here he was trying to mend bridges with Sol with a stupid fake smile on his face.

The fact that Mark thought he could get back into Sol's good graces merely by approaching him deferentially after everything that had happened indicated that he, at his core, was not all that different from Alan.

"Really? After everything?" Sol asked bluntly.

Having seen him this way many times, Mark knew full well that this was extremely close to how Sol acted with those he deemed enemies. Not quite there yet, but dangerously close. So Mark looked to Reen and Julia for help, but the former returned his gaze with a blank face, while the latter sighed and shrugged. Underneath it all, however, there were still faint traces that they still acknowledged Mark and Alan as childhood friends. In contrast, this was completely absent in Sol, the one who was usually the most lenient and forgiving. This baffled Mark greatly.

From the moment Sol walked into the building all the way up to when Mark and Alan had approached him, he had been giving off more childhood friend vibes than the girls. Mark could tell by his face that he was still the same old good-natured Sol—as in, he might use harsh words and have a standoffish attitude but would eventually fold if Mark really insisted. Unable to understand how that had changed so completely in a split second, Mark sank into silence like Alan had.

"Heh. We'll be here all day leaving this up to you two." A massive man at the nearest table who had been drinking juice instead of alcohol got to his feet and stood in front of Mark and Alan, facing Sol. "You don't mind if I take over the talking, do ya?"

Without particularly raising his guard, Sol asked, "Who're you?"

Mark and Alan were seen as success stories, and their standing reflected that. Of course, this was mainly only in Garlaige, which somewhat made them frogs in a well, but their promotion to Rank A was recognized by the entire guild, which was an organization with influence across the continent. There was no such thing as a percity promotion. And yet, the two of them didn't immediately

shut down the man or berate him for speaking for them without being asked to. This meant they acknowledged him as someone above them in authority. In all likelihood, it was this man who had ordered them to talk to Sol.

“My apologies. I am a Rank A adventurer named Hans Occam. As you can see, I’m a close-quarters fighter wielding a battle-axe. I am here on behalf of the clan Hecatoncheires, also known as the Hundred-Handers.”

The man brandished his weapon as if showing it off. While doing so, he studied Sol with interest, aware that Sol had noticed him being unfazed by the volatile air in the room and yet was facing him without being on guard. The rest of the people sitting at his table—probably his party members—got up as well and lined up a pace behind him. Every single one of them had impressive physiques. There was no doubt that not only was their party Rank A, but each of them was individually also Rank A.

In comparison, the members of Black Tiger were themselves only Rank B, and their party had failed to get officially promoted to Rank A. Though talented, Black Tiger had nowhere near as much experience due to being only two years old. That difference was plain as day. Without Sol’s intervention, if the two sides were to fight, Black Tiger would lose, hands down.

“Nice to meet you, Hans. I’m Sol Rock. Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t it Hecatoncheires Alan was interested in?”

Since Hans had introduced himself properly, Sol decided to respond cordially. As he wasn’t an enemy, there was no need to create unnecessary ill will. Sol did at least have the time to let Hans say his piece, so he indicated that he was open to the conversation by bringing up what he had heard last night.

“He was the person we were in contact with, yes. But, thing is, our intention was to scout your entire party as a whole.”

“Well, that doesn’t make sense. Our former leader was planning on joining the army.”

“They retracted their offer.”

From what Sol knew, neither the army nor Hecatoncheires was interested in him. Hans talking to him now probably meant they had determined that he

came as a set with Reen and Julia. In other words, Mark and Alan weren't big enough catches on their own to merit special treatment. Apparently the army shared this opinion and had therefore refused to recruit the leader who had lost control of his party under their previous terms. Mark himself probably had opinions on this ruling, but based on what he'd said last night, he had probably been trying to promote Black Tiger to them as a whole, so he was the one who had gone back on his word. The army had every right to retract their offer.

Mark knew this, so his new plan was to rejoin Alan to consolidate their worth and settle for being part of a major clan. From Hecatoncheires's point of view, there was enough value in bringing in the whole of Black Tiger, even if that meant also accepting the member who was extra luggage. As a bonus, they would also be showing up the army, who would then come off as being hasty and shortsighted for turning Mark away when he was alone.

"It's like, what were the army guys thinking, right? We're more than happy to accept Alan. We're more than happy to accept Mark. And if they're together, even better! We can never have too many members capable of fighting Rank A monsters."

"I see..."

"Which is why we really want Reen and Julia too. And being honest with you, how this negotiation goes will also affect my own evaluation."

"Huh."

"Which is why I'm here to invite you so we can have the whole Black Tiger on board! I promise we'll give you the exact same treatment we give the other four. I'll talk it out with HQ and make sure of it."

As Sol relegated himself to merely listening, Hans gave a spiel that was largely what Sol had expected. It wasn't so much that there was value in the five of them being a set, even if that included luggage. Rather, the value lay with Iron Wall and the Saint of Healing. Without the two of them, the gains from this little recruitment trip weren't enough to make a splash. On the other hand, Hans would come out on top if he managed to net the two of them while making concessions for their deadbeat friend. He was even kind enough to guarantee good treatment for said friend.

It was true that tanks and healers were considered far more important than attackers, who were much easier to replace. Mark and Alan probably resented it, but this particular tank and healer cared more about Sol than the two of them.

“You...dare?” Luna growled, indignant at Hans’s blatant contempt for Sol. She tried to take a step forward like Alan had moments before, but Sol grabbed her from behind, throwing her into a fluster with the unexpected contact.

Hans looked down at her. With a warm gaze, to be sure, thinking her nothing more than a young slave getting angry about a slight on her master’s honor. But he was indeed looking down at her. He hadn’t the faintest idea that Sol had just saved his life.

What Luna couldn’t forgive most was that Hans truly thought he was giving Sol a really good offer. He was basically giving him special treatment as a show of appreciation for being such a lady-killer that he had successfully seduced two highly capable fighters even though he himself was lacking as an adventurer.

To be fair, I can hardly blame him for thinking about me that way under the circumstances.

Reen and Julia were standing on either side of Sol, and he also had Luna in his arms. Two of the three behind him were also female, though they were significantly younger.

Do I really look like I’m that much of a ladies’ man, though?

Although he knew there wasn’t much that he could do about it, Sol did feel a little insulted that he was being seen as a bastard who treated girls like patsies and exploited them for material gain.

“Thank you for the offer, but I’m good. If you want to scout Reen and Julia, please talk to them directly. I won’t stand in their way if this is what they want, though I would advise them against it.”

Regardless, the offer was entirely out of the question for Sol in his current situation, so the only response that he could give was in the negative. Not that he would have said yes last night anyway.

Hans’s eyes widened in surprise. “These are pretty good terms, though. Is

there anything else I can do to make you say yes?” He looked blindsided, but he was not entirely at fault. Mark and Alan had probably reported what had happened last night in a way that made them look better, probably by omission or alteration.

“I’m good, thanks,” Sol replied, not wanting to drag out a pointless negotiation any longer. If Reen and Julia really did find Hans’s offer more attractive than being a live-in caretaker at Sol’s house and a nobleman’s wife, he wouldn’t force them to change their minds. Knowing their personalities, however, he wasn’t worried. If they were the kind of people who would accept something like this, they wouldn’t have left Black Tiger in the first place.

The amicable expression on Hans’s face gave way to the arrogant one of a man who knew he could strong-arm a bunch of Rank B adventurers into doing whatever he wanted. “Well, that’s a damn shame. Now I have no choice but to ‘convince’ the two of them individually. But if I have to go to that much trouble, I don’t need you anymore.”

All emotion drained out of Sol’s face, just like it had a few minutes earlier when he’d heard Alan’s snide comment. To confirm, he asked, “When you say ‘convince,’ do you mean ‘threaten’?”

“Of course not!” Hans exclaimed, bringing his friendly smile back. He had to, because no matter how high his own rank was and no matter how big Hecatoncheires was, the consequences for threatening or coercing another adventurer were heavy.

The Adventurer’s Guild was a worldwide organization, and it never hesitated to punish those who publicly flouted its rules. There was no room for mercy for those who would mar the guild’s name and in turn affect its profits. It would start with ousting the clan in question and all its members, divesting them of their status as adventurers. Next, it would issue a mission to all clans equal to or greater than Hecatoncheires in strength, demanding that they bring back the heads of all former Hecatoncheires members as though they were mere monsters. If that wasn’t enough, the guild was willing to even pay countries through the nose to deploy their standing armies. The larger an organization, the more it couldn’t afford to make exceptions when people flouted its authority and the more seriously it had to respond—in cases it couldn’t cover

up, at least.

And so, using only words that he could easily weasel out of to avoid incriminating himself, Hans was strongly insinuating that it would be to Sol's benefit to befriend him and that he would regret not doing so. Sol was familiar with this tactic and couldn't be bothered to play along with it any longer. The moment Hans assumed the stance that he could entice Sol into saying yes by promising a few benefits, effectively belittling Sol, he had doomed himself.

"I'm just saying, it's quite inconvenient having a clan of our size as an enemy. Not if you want to continue being an adventurer, and not even if you plan on retiring. You know what I mean, right? Adventurers are real tough out there in dungeons and territories, fighting monsters and everything, but they're surprisingly vulnerable in cities. Especially girls like Reen and Julia here."

For Hans, this level of intimidation was little more than a greeting. He had become so numb that he wasn't even aware that he was being threatening and had meant it more like friendly caution. Basically, he was just pointing out that humans were the greatest threat to other humans, and that when adventurers were denied the advantage of their superior battle strength, women and children were merely women and children.

Unfortunately, this was enough for Sol to designate Hans, as well as the clan that thought it a good idea to send him as a negotiator, as enemies. And unlike the guild, Sol did not have to consider how much of a contribution he was receiving from Hecatoncheires and curry favor with them. By suggesting harm against Reen and Julia, Hans had signed his and his guild's death warrant.

"Luna."

"Yes, my lord."

Hans and his whole party disappeared. The next instant, they reappeared near the ceiling above the stage where orchestras and minstrels often performed at night, where the space was open all the way up to the roof. Then, the sound of the cacophonous clanging of armor and weapons hitting the ground and the splat of something alive exploding from being squashed too hard rang out with vivid clarity. Together, it made for a strangely comical noise. Like a one-trick pony, Luna had forcibly teleported them. Unlike last night,

however, this group was still one step away from death thanks to precise calculations on her part.

The rather boisterous hubbub in the bar area immediately died down, leaving an almost deafening silence in the air. Everyone was completely mystified as to what had happened, but they could definitely tell that the pile onstage was the party from Hecatoncheires.

“Huh? Uh, ah, AHHHHHH! AHHHH! Ahhh? What?”

As a puddle of blood and other fluids spread out around Hans and pain started flooding his brain, he figured out what had happened. The pain was so bad that he wished he was dead, and he could instinctively tell that his wounds were fatal and completely beyond healing. However, his screaming gradually petered out because he suddenly found his body restored to perfect health.

Luna had used the Heal spell that Sol had granted her, fueling it with so much mana that it reversed all effects of the fall in the blink of an eye. For her, Heal was the perfect tool to use to torture those who didn't deserve a quick death. As long as she didn't make a mistake, she could keep someone in agony as long as she had mana.

For a brief moment, relief flooded the faces of Hans and his men, the same faces still stained with their own blood, fluids, tears, and drool. The next thing they knew, they were back at the exact same position as before, and once again they hit the ground with the same comical sound. This was no warning. It was punishment.

The fact that Luna, and therefore Sol by extension, was going this far even though Hans had shown no sign of actually intending to attack sent shivers down the spines of all the onlookers. Now they understood to their very marrow that crossing him led to a fate worse than death.

From then on, hell began, and no one could tear their eyes away. Hans and his men wept and shrieked, pleaded and apologized, cussed and cursed their torturer, but they just kept falling and being healed in a cold, dispassionate cycle. The gallery was struck completely speechless, unable to move even a step, be it to run or to help, lest they displeased Sol and were forced to suffer the same fate. That was the one thing they had to avoid, even if it meant

forfeiting their lives.

Being a prideful lot, adventurers often said “I’d rather die” in a casual way. The majority of those present, staring with fixed gazes and dried throats, had done so before. But now they finally understood what the phrase really meant. It wasn’t meant to be spoken to assert their pride, as if they’d rather die than debase themselves to go through such-and-such. No, it was a prayer howled with sheer and utter despair by those suffering a fate so terrible and atrocious that death, the end of everything, would be a release. It was to be begged for like one would beg for mercy. Even the onlookers wished it for Hans and his men from the bottom of their hearts. The endlessness of the loop of mind-shattering pain and healing made them wish they could die right away if this ever happened to them.

Eventually, the group’s screams turned into unintelligible wailing. A little while later, that wailing turned into what could only be described as broken laughter. The rhythmic sound of falling and somewhat offbeat laughter filled the air, but the onlookers stopped noticing it. No matter how loud or soft the sounds their ears were picking up, when faced with inescapable death, their brains processed it all as the silence that came with the end of the world.

The whole fiasco didn’t last all that long. When the five lumps could no longer even laugh, they also stopped falling. From start to finish, less than ten minutes had passed. And yet, everyone present felt like they had just experienced an eternity in hell.

“Sol, you...”

The first person to break the true silence was Mark, but his mind failed to compose a proper sentence. However, his stirring prompted Alan as well.

“I-It’s just like you to do this. Looks like you’ve found someone even more powerful than us to leech onto, I’ll give you that. However, you’re still just a fox borrowing a tiger’s authority. I hope you have fun relying on other people to realize your stupid dream.”

What was moving Alan’s mouth was more dismay than inner strength, but everyone listening doubted his sanity for maintaining such a snide attitude after seeing what had just happened. To pick a fight with the person responsible for

it was basically asking for death.

Instead of getting angry, Sol merely nodded and said softly, “You’re right. I’ll take that to heart.” Indeed, Sol himself couldn’t teleport people, nor could he cast Heal. Going forward, it was Luna’s power, not his own as Player, that would do most of the heavy lifting as they went about delving into dungeons and unsealing territories. Given that, there was no way for Sol to argue against Alan’s assertion. Not that he had any intention of doing so, as any time spent on a dead man walking was a waste.

“One thing.” Ever the faithful servant, Luna just *had* to say something. “You laughed at my lord for being a fox borrowing a tiger’s authority. However, is such a fox truly a weakling? Can you truly laugh at it for being powerless? If there exists a fox who can freely borrow the authority of a tiger, has it not already surpassed the tiger in wit and acumen?”

Without taking even a step, Luna dominated Alan by merely speaking in a quiet voice. “What do you consider true power? Is it physical strength? Capacity for mana? God-given talent?”

The intimidation emanating from her tiny body was even more suffocating than when she had been demonstrating what true brutality looked like. Despite having no idea of her identity as Lunvemt Nachtfelia the Evil Dragon, the adventurers still imagined they saw a colossal dragon appearing behind her. Alan’s legs gave out and he landed heavily on his behind. Next to him, Mark froze so completely that he couldn’t move a finger.

“By your definition of power, I am indeed peerless and unmatched, as you acknowledged. However, how do you view my lord, he who has my absolute loyalty?”

Now that he was on the ground, Alan was being looked down on by Luna. Unable to come up with a single thing to say in response to her question, he merely lay there, quivering. She bent forward to peer straight into his eyes.

“Power comes in many forms. Someone capable of controlling me, the paragon of absolute strength, is a true ruler. Pound that into your head, *weakling*.”

Luna wasn’t really talking to Alan. She was making it look like she was talking

to him but was really only using him as a prop to proclaim loud and clear how powerful and terrifying her master was to everyone present. As proof, her large tail was wagging, indicating that she was in a good mood. Awe directed at her was awe directed at Sol, and she was proud that in evoking it, she had managed to demonstrate what a good servant she was.

After having said her piece, Luna seemed to lose all interest in Alan. She reverted from being the All Dragon to being a little girl, returning to Sol's side and grabbing his cape. Even Reen, Julia, and Eliza remained speechless, despite already knowing Luna's real identity. The anger of the Evil Dragon wasn't something that a human could bear.

"That was...ruthless."

Steve, who had come out of his office during the proceedings, gave Sol his honest opinion while making no effort to hide the deep awe on his face.

"Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later."

"I'm so glad I wasn't the one to be made an example of."

From the bottom of his heart, Steve was thankful that he hadn't been fooled by Luna's appearance and made a blunder. This feeling was shared by all the members of Libertadores too, despite having already been accepted by Sol as his companions.

"Will this be a problem with the guild?"

"Even if it is, what can we do? Strike your name from our books?" Steve knew that Luna could take a joke, but his stomach tied into knots when she looked at him merely in response to him speaking. "There're no visible wounds on their bodies, so there's no way to make an issue of this anyway. For what it's worth, we'll ask whether they want to press charges if they ever regain their sanity. If they don't, then...well, accidents happen."

Leaving it at that, Steve beckoned Sol into his office to work out their plan of action going forward. Seeing that, Fiona rushed over to help Alan back to his feet while studying Sol and Luna with a blank face.

"As I thought, she was the one who incited him..." Sol murmured, then turned away and walked into Steve's office with his companions.

Chapter 7: The All Dragon

In the fanciest bedroom of a strikingly impressive mansion on prime real estate near the heart of the residential area of Garlaige, the combined sounds of ragged breathing, sporadic moaning, and the slapping of wet skin against wet skin disturbed the usual stillness of the night. Clothes were strewn over the floor, and the fragrance of an expensive wine wafted from a bottle knocked on its side on an end table next to the bed. Together, the alcoholic fumes, the faint hint of body odor, and the heady scent of perfume served to amplify the salacious air in the room. The moon, from the zenith of its celestial trajectory, dyed everything in shades of blue and black, illuminating the two glistening bodies writhing in the creaking canopied bed as one enthralling silhouette.

“Damn it. Damn him. Fucking Sol. Making a joke out of me.”

Alan Lewis—former vice leader of Black Tiger, mage, and childhood friend to Sol—spat out a curse each time his naked form pounded into the female form pinned under him. His ice-blue hair, drenched in his and her sweat, clung to his forehead and cheeks. Contrary to what he was saying, frustration stained his flushed face.

Never had he imagined that Sol would obtain such incredible power the very next day after cutting ties with Mark and himself. In his mind, Sol had been a deadbeat. If he didn’t need him, he could discard him whenever he liked; if he had need of him again, he could win him back just by being nice to him a little. That was all that Sol amounted to.

But somehow, Sol had obtained the power to manhandle big-shot adventurers to whom even Alan himself had to bow and scrape. Within a day of Alan discarding him, to boot. This was absolutely unacceptable. Even now, Alan refused to admit that he was the one who had been discarded. However, as that power—Luna—had said, it didn’t matter whether it was Sol’s strength or the little girl’s strength. As long as he could wield it at will, it was his power. To those that this power was used on, the distinction was moot.

And now, Alan had no right to complain if that power was brandished against him with full force. After all, he was the person who had sent the Gafus Gang to Sol's house last night. Sol had no doubt already figured that out. Alan had basically admitted it with his careless comments, tying a noose around his own neck. He justified it by telling himself that he'd had no idea of Sol's strength when he'd run his mouth, but it was a flimsy defense.

Unfortunately, Alan's situation wouldn't change no matter how much he deceived himself. Even so, he laid the blame on the buffoons who had failed to finish Sol off last night, not himself. When he saw Eliza, the girl he thought had potential to be a good plaything after being healed by Julia, blithely joining Sol's posse, he felt it was his right as a bigger man to make a snide comment or two. Of course, the group that he called buffoons wouldn't have stood a chance if Luna, the reason for his current frustration—no, it was more correct to call it terror—had already been with Sol last night, but Alan firmly turned his eyes away from the possibility.

Failing to kill Sol was a shame, but not the end of the world in itself. If Alan could move past it and keep the fact that he was the one who had ordered it a secret, then he could try again, pivot, or handle the situation any other way he wanted. But he had ruined this because of his own stupidity, and he knew it. That was why he was trying to escape into women and wine. If he didn't, he wouldn't be getting a wink of sleep. The moment the little therianthrope girl looked down at him like he was trash was branded on his mind.

He had looked miserable and pathetic, just like the weaklings he disdained so much. The shame was so great that it enabled him to deceive himself into thinking that his trembling heart was filled with anger instead of fear.

“Damn him!”

“Ah! Wha— What are you...angry...about?”

Even Alan himself could not tell if his voice was filled with pleasure or fear as he howled, “Shut up!”

The woman beneath him, Fiona, obediently closed her mouth. Moans of pleasure from being pounded with force threatened to leak out, but she bit her lips with agonizing effort. The expression she made intensified the sadistic urges

in Alan's heart, prompting him to move with increased violence and to bite her neck so hard it drew blood.

"Ahhh!" Fiona cried out as tears from the potent mixture of pain and pleasure welled up in the corner of her eyes as Alan slammed against her one last time, then convulsed with a guttural growl while his face contorted into a bestial snarl.

The two forms fell still, their heavy breathing filled with licentious fire. Sweat poured from their slack bodies, gathering into drops that flowed off their skin to stain the high-quality bedsheets below in a puddle of lingering ecstasy. As the two caught their breath, a languid air filled the room. Though it was far from hygienic, Alan liked slipping into indolent sleep afterward instead of getting up to shower. Intoxication due to the alcohol and the languor induced by orgasm blended well into an effective anesthetic that numbed the fear disguised as anger in his heart.

Just as Alan was about to give himself up to sleep, a voice brought him back.

"Good evening."

A dark figure had appeared in the part of the room that looked like a world of blue floating in an inky void. The greeting it gave wasn't one normally offered outside someone's bedroom, much less inside when the owner was having relations with a female guest. This defiance of convention implied contempt of said owner.

Sol did not, in fact, intend to imply contempt. Upon teleporting over, he had found Alan occupied and therefore decided to wait for him to finish. Due to the awkwardness of the situation, he had been unable to come up with a more appropriate greeting and therefore defaulted to the most standard one.

"Wh-Who's there?!"

"Ahh!"

Thanks to the moonlight, the part of the room that was illuminated was as bright as day, so it took no effort to notice the intruder. However, the bed was also inside this area, which meant Alan's and Fiona's naked forms were laid completely bare to their visitor. Fiona cried out like a chaste maiden as if she

hadn't just been doing the dirty, but Sol's honest opinion was that there was really no way to obfuscate being found naked in bed with a man at this time of night.

Judging from that reaction, Fiona knows it's me. She probably even expected me to show up.

Sol was hardly in a position to complain, since he was intruding. He was the one who had chosen to come at this time, hoping to catch Alan in bed. Thanks to Player, he'd known that Fiona was here too. He had figured that although he would probably find them naked, the late hour would ensure that he would avoid seeing the graphic sight of two people he knew going at it.

He had, however, arrived just in time for the climax. Had they started late? Or were they so filled with vigor that they'd gone for round two? Was it perhaps...both? In any case, Sol could very much have done without this coincidence. It was terrible for Luna's education, and because he knew both participants, the scene was just graphic and not titillating in the least. He now felt miserable more than anything else.

In contrast, Luna was practically leaning in, and her breath quickened. It was too late for Sol to cover her eyes, so he simply let her be. He had planned on starting off this whole encounter with a stern "Wake up!" Instead, he had been hit with a very uncomfortable wait at the outset, then followed it up with the lamest greeting that he could have chosen. He was actually cringing pretty hard right now.

Determined not to betray his inner thoughts, Sol said coolly, "Hmm? Do you know someone else who can just show up like this?"

"Sol! You're Sol!"

Thankfully, Alan managed to guess right, or else the conversation would have gotten bogged down right out of the gate. His tone was the perfect blend of surprise, censure, and terror, which contributed greatly to restoring the tension in the air.

"Bingo, Alan," Sol replied, inwardly sighing with relief that they had fully moved away from the comical start.

But just then, with sparkling eyes and excited huffing, Luna blurted, “My lord, my lord! Is this what ‘night services’ is?! It is, isn’t it?! Now I know!” Taking Sol’s words as permission to talk too, she completely ruined the flow of the conversation that was finally getting on track in one decisive blow.

Realizing that it simply wasn’t possible to conduct this conversation with the gravity it deserved, Sol sighed and said simply, “Luna, zip it.”

“Yes, my lord.”

I wanted to at least start off on the right foot before purposefully killing one of my childhood friends, but such is life. Guess he’ll have to die like the punch line to a joke, then. Since he went after me first, he can’t complain about me returning the favor or how I do it.

It wasn’t Sol’s intention to torture Alan. That said, he was in need of an experimental subject to find out what would happen if someone he had given skills and stats to died, and Alan fit the bill. If anything, this was only a secondary goal. The top priority for Sol was figuring out the mastermind who had instigated Alan—obviously Fiona Bannister—and the organization behind said culprit.

“You really shouldn’t peep, you know,” Fiona said reproachfully while wrapping the sheets around herself. The way she was doing the wrapping, the slight blush on her cheeks, and the mortification in her expression perfectly emulated the image of a maiden on her wedding night, yet the overall impression still managed to come across as provocative and seductive. It was clear that she was very good at this, to the point where Sol felt impressed much more than aroused. The ease with which she pulled off such a convincing act right after being caught doing the deed made him a little scared of all girls in general.

Thinking back, when Black Tiger first arrived in Garlaige, it wasn’t only Mark and Alan whose eyes had been invariably drawn to Fiona—Sol had been the same. Even now, he remembered his face turning red. Not only because she was attractive, which she was, but also because her refinement drove home how backward and primitive his roots were, despite him thinking that he had grown out of them after three years at the Royal Academy. He didn’t quite get

it at the time, but his reaction had apparently made Reen extremely huffy. As Julia was wont to retell every time she got drunk, she had a hell of a time placating Reen afterward. The laughter they'd shared back then was now a fond memory in Sol's mind.

Sol had been extremely shocked, therefore, to learn that Fiona was bedding both Mark and Alan. Apparently, even Reen and Julia had only discovered this recently. If Sol hadn't had Player, he would have remained clueless to the end of time. Now, he suspected that although Alan knew, Mark was still completely in the dark. A woman who knew how to maintain such a facade was indeed someone to be feared.

"For that, I apologize. I'm willing to do whatever I can to make amends for having seen you and Alan in such an intimate moment. That said, it is serendipitous that you two are unarmed."

The censure from Fiona was well-deserved, so Sol apologized with grace. His senses of morality and normality were starting to get thrown out of whack after everything that had happened since last night, but he was aware that what he was doing wasn't only improper for an adventurer, but a legit crime. Breaking and entering was an actual charge that Alan could get Sol arrested for. There were lines that shouldn't be crossed merely on account of friendship, and being childhood friends was not a valid reason for exemption.

That said, such concerns were perhaps not as weighty between two people already set on killing each other. As long as word didn't get out, there was no problem. Sol did realize that his manner of thinking was starting to veer toward that of a criminal, but as Steve had said earlier, his current circumstances meant that no one could lay a finger on him even if his offense did come to light.

The guards of Garlaige were stalwart and strong, but there was nothing that they could do against a presence capable of suddenly appearing in the sky and raining death on the whole city. Sol was someone who could no longer be made to answer to any human laws. Countries could make a big deal about how the rule of law prevailed in their lands, but what legitimized that law wasn't the citizens' innate goodness or morality. No, it was their potential for violence, given form as their police and military.

Government was little more than rule through force with a “law” placard slapped on its face; in short, it was but a sham. This was why it was so easy for those in power to wriggle around the so-called laws to exploit them for personal agendas and why they were so completely ineffective against Sol, who now had strength at his fingertips that greatly surpassed that of any earthly country. Given all that, his apology was mere lip service.

Then again, considering he was here to kill Alan, it made no logical sense for him to be sincerely apologizing for relative trivialities like trespassing and peeping.

Deducing from his tone that he saw her as the mastermind, Fiona said jokingly, “As an apology, could you let me off the hook?”

“That’s a bit of a tall order.”

Alan had been the one who had sent the assassins, but as Sol had just confirmed, it was Fiona who had instigated him. Sol was the kind of person to return the favor the first chance he got should anyone make an attempt on his life, short of a very good reason. However, the brief exchange just now indicated that Fiona was not daunted by the prospect of facing Luna, whom she had witnessed mop the floor with a group of Rank A adventurers. She even had the composure to crack a joke, despite being within range of Luna’s teleportation. It was clear that she had the confidence to beat Luna or, barring that, escape safely.

At the same time, Fiona was also shrewd enough to not incriminate herself with her words. What she had said so far could just as easily be construed as an entreaty not to tell Mark that she was sleeping with Alan too. Sol would have to be a huge oddball to go as far as to use teleportation magic to get involved in his friends’ love triangle, though.

“Do you hear yourself, Sol?” Alan sighed. “We might be childhood friends, but you’re way over the line coming into my bedroom uninvited.”

Clearly, he was determined to continue the conversation based on the alternative interpretation. He adopted his usual cool face, but it simply wasn’t possible to look cool in underwear, much less stark naked. Not that Sol wanted Alan to wrap himself up sexily in his sheets like Fiona was doing either.

Sol chuckled. “Man, I almost envy your ability to maintain that attitude even in a situation like this.”

“You—” Alan was on the verge of another outburst, but Luna teleported him a few dozen centimeters higher. When he hit his bed with a *boff*, he realized what had happened and fell quiet, his face ashen. He had just been forcibly reminded what happened to people who said things that didn’t sit well with Sol.

While feeling impressed with how Luna had sensed what he wanted from her without having to be told, Sol decided to pose Fiona a question even though he had no intention of answering hers.

“By the way, is Fiona Bannister even real?”

Unable to surmise the true intention behind the question, Fiona asked in genuine bewilderment, “What does that mean?”

Sol heaved a tiny sigh of relief. “I’m just confirming whether you’re assuming a made-up name and identity or if you killed the real Fiona Bannister and took her place.”

“What...would you do if I did?”

“Well, besides the matter of you recently making advances on Mark and Alan and two-timing them, you’ve taken good care of me over the past two years, and you’re an excellent receptionist. However, if what I’m describing is the real Fiona, and the one that I’m now speaking to is an imposter who killed her and stole her identity and life...”

“Then?”

“Then I’ll make your death a pretty painful one.” Sol smiled, but it was a mask devoid of all emotion that merely depicted the expression.

It wasn’t as if he was particularly close to Fiona. However, if someone he had been in the care of was murdered without his knowing, then it was only right for him to avenge them. It was now clear that the current Fiona was working to monitor or perhaps even eliminate the former members of Black Tiger. If that was indeed the case, it meant the real one had been killed because of her association with them.

“Well...you can relax. I’ve been me since before you arrived in Garlaige.” Fiona shrugged. “Do you want to shoot the breeze reminiscing about the past two years with me?”

It didn’t look like she was lying, and Sol was satisfied that she had been the handler for Black Tiger from the start.

That’s a relief. Though we got duped, there’s no “Fiona” who got killed because of us.

Emotion returned to his face. “No need; that’s good enough for me. I’m not sure how much you’d appreciate it, but I’ll give you a quick and painless death.”

Even he would have an uneasy conscience if the real Fiona had been murdered in cold blood. It made him a little sad thinking about how, throughout all the good memories he had shared with her, she had been constantly monitoring him and thinking about killing him, but everyone had things they needed to do and responsibilities to bear, and that was just something that he had to accept.

“You sure talk big. If you think I’m only a spy from another country, you’ll regret it.”

Of course, Sol was not that naive. There was no way someone who could remain calm after witnessing a demonstration of Luna’s power, albeit in a limited scope, was a normal human. Without question, she had to be stronger than a party of five Rank A adventurers. And yet, here she was, blending into human society, instead of being holed up in some dungeon. Up till last night, Sol would have had trouble believing in the existence of someone like her.

In any case, Fiona had the ability to deceive both Player and Steve’s talent, and she looked unfazed by the possibility of being teleported high up into the sky. Sol could not say with certainty that he could beat her in a fight. But since she had made it clear that she intended to take his life, he resolved to put all his faith in Luna, the avatar of his current strength. If Luna won, then great, and if even Luna couldn’t win, he wouldn’t have stood a chance himself anyway. This level of conviction was a must if he was serious about conquering all dungeons in the world.

Since both sides had made clear their positions and obligations, there was

nothing left to do but to duke it out. Or so Sol thought, until Luna spoke up in a cold, hard voice.

“My lord, this one is a succubus. Succubi can steal the appearance and memories of those they devour.”

That comment changed Sol’s demeanor in a split second. “*Did* you devour her?” he asked, all emotion absent from his face again.

The succubus with Fiona’s appearance faltered, which gave him the answer he needed.

“So you devoured her to steal her appearance and memories, then did things using her form that she would never do. Just to monitor us and to kill us given the chance.”

“If I did, then...” The succubus’s sentence broke off for a reason she herself didn’t understand. Then unwittingly, tears ran down her eyes. The appearance and memories that she had assimilated were crying in response to Sol’s words.

In a soft voice, Sol said, “Luna, kill her.” Behind his steely mask roiled emotions that he didn’t fully understand. What did come through, however, was a memory. Back when he was starting out, he had always returned with scratches and wounds due to being the only member of Black Tiger without the protection of HP. One time, Fiona couldn’t bear the sight anymore and discreetly passed him some healing herbs, saying, “This’ll be our little secret, okay?” with a laugh.

This succubus must die. Here. Today.

Sensing her master’s rage, Luna asked in a growl befitting her title as All Dragon, “My lord, may I have permission to consume her?” Discerning that Sol wouldn’t be satisfied with merely killing the succubus, she petitioned for permission to give their enemy a much more appropriate end.

“Consume?”

“Yes, my lord. Instead of outright killing her, if I eat her alive, I am able to obtain almost all her abilities. I can’t take on her appearance or memories, though, as I’m not a succubus myself. The downside is that those present would not be strengthened by her death—I believe you call it ‘leveling up’? This holds

true for you as well, which is why I am asking for your permission.”

“You kiss me off at your own expense, you brat of a dragon!” Apparently deciding to give up acting as Fiona, the succubus bared her defiant nature. Figuring from Luna’s appearance that she was only a young dragon, Fiona cackled with derisive laughter, puffed up with confidence that she would win should they fight.

Luna scoffed. “Were you listening? I’m going to eat you, not kiss you. My lord willing, that is.”

“Permission granted,” Sol said. This was a no-brainer. Leveling up was important, but he would have plenty of opportunities going forward. Giving this succubus the very same death that she had given Fiona took precedence above all else.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of!” Enraged by how the master and servant were still conversing like normal in her presence, the succubus roared and exposed her true form. Spiral horns, wings, and a tail appeared on her forehead and back respectively as a vortex of materialized black mana enveloped her voluptuous body. Unfortunately, the base was still Fiona’s form, which saddened Sol a little.

“It doesn’t matter. A mere succubus who’s lived only centuries has no right to speak to me with insolence. You called me a brat of a dragon. Know that no other dragon will appear so long as I draw breath!” Delight lit up Luna’s eyes at the opportunity to devour someone her master had branded an enemy. She spread both hands like claws as a massive amount of inner mana exploded from her small form. “I am Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon. I am the All Dragon because I ate all my kin. Do not think for a second that a lowly succubus who only eats humans can stand a chance against me!”



More than a thousand years ago, there existed dragons of each element, as well as one-of-a-kind dragons with unique abilities. They all possessed multiple “organs” capable of taking full advantage of the plentiful outer mana that filled the world at the time, thereby reigning above all other living beings.

In the modern age, however, they were believed to be extinct. None of the territory bosses on the continent were dragons. It was speculated that they had retreated to the depths of dungeons, but there was no way to confirm it. Given this, they were considered the ultimate magical beings, but only as fabled figures of myths, legends, and fairy tales. Still, no one doubted that they had once existed, as there were a number of weapons and armor made from dragon materials sleeping inside the treasure vaults of powerful countries. Most convincing of all, there was a mountain-sized skeleton in the north of the continent.

Supposedly, the reason such a powerful race had disappeared without a trace was that the self-proclaimed All Dragon, Luna, had eaten them all. As she possessed the unique ability to obtain the abilities of those she consumed, this meant she was the living and breathing totality of everything that all dragons had ever been capable of. This was why Luna called herself the All Dragon and was so insistent on the title.

Why did she have to do this? Was it truly the Hero who had accepted her challenge, equipped as she was with the power of all dragons, and struck her down before sealing her in that godforsaken prison as the Kuzuifabra depicted? Sol still had no idea what had happened. For all he knew, the Kuzuifabra was completely made up.

“Let’s get to it. My lord wishes despair for you. Feel free to flaunt all the power that you’ve accrued sucking the life force from men for centuries. I shall shatter it all and then devour you.”

In any case, this was not the occasion for such musings. Luna was ready to brandish every drop of power residing in her split body. Her heart was positively bursting with glee at the opportunity to fight on behalf of the master who had freed her from a millennium of bondage. Merely teleporting humans and leaving them to fall to their deaths had been nowhere near enough to satiate her instinctual hunger for battle.

At the moment, they were already high up in the sky above Garlaige, far above even the fortified city’s towering walls, courtesy of Luna’s Teleport. Of course, the entire group was floating in midair, including the succubus and Alan. The former on her own power, and the latter on Luna’s. The reason Alan wasn’t

immediately falling wasn't because of Luna's mercy but because she had determined her master needed him later.

A quick glance reminded Sol, with some chagrin, that his enemies were still completely naked. Unfortunately, there had been no opportunity to say, "It's all right, put on some clothes first." He knew how much Alan hated looking ridiculous, but now his short life was going to end with him in literally the most indecorous state possible. Not that Alan believed he was going to die today, even after all that had happened.

"You're nothing more than the distant descendant of a race long perished, yet you think yourself all-powerful just because you're a dragon?! The sight of you adopting the form of the Evil Dragon from legend makes me laugh! Who's the pretender now, huh?! You seem proud of the massive amount of mana you possess, but you'll learn today that there's much more to strength than brute force!" Despite having Fiona's face and voice, the succubus's real nature was on full display, including horns, wings, tail, and black mana cloaking her alluring curves. That she was floating on her own power and looked unfazed at having been forcibly teleported proved that all her big talk earlier hadn't been entirely for show.

Luna had shown contempt for the succubus being only several centuries old, but a devil of her class who had lived so long and drained life force from humans the entire time was nothing to sneeze at. At the very least, no living adventurer could ever defeat her in a fight. And yet, even this succubus had to acknowledge Luna's mana capacity as "massive." Sol, too, had thought, "Is there something wrong with this display?" when he'd seen her MP stat. It was truly chilling to consider that, according to Player, she was as yet only Level 1.

"A pretty good speech. Very well, I shall fight only using that brute force you so disdain!"

A mana-made replica of the gargantuan form that Sol had seen in the world of the cards suddenly appeared. As proof that it wasn't real, all its horns, eyes, and wings were fully present.

Oh, that's brute force all right. One punch from that could wipe out the whole city.

Sol's reaction was less surprise and more dry hilarity. Those who happened to be up late tonight in the city of Garlaige were no doubt making a huge commotion down on the ground. Rightly so, since a dragon the size of a castle had suddenly appeared in the sky.



Naturally, this was using up an incredible amount of mana. According to Player, Luna's MP was decreasing at breakneck pace. However, she had enough to keep going for quite a few minutes, even if she started throwing around skills and abilities left and right. Additionally, Sol could cast MP Recovery and Cancel Cooldown whenever he wanted, thereby sustaining Luna for a whole day of nonstop battle. This move was probably too big to use inside dungeons, but maybe she could adapt it to increase its mana density instead of its size.

"How dare you make fun of me?!"

The succubus was so overwhelmed that her composed facade had completely fallen away. Being younger than a thousand years, she too had only ancient records to tell her of the might of the long-lost dragons. They were depicted with such profound power that one would reflexively dismiss them as mere fancies or exaggeration. This was all the more common for those convinced that they possessed the strength to stand at the pinnacle of their era.

As she herself had said, however, the succubus still had other methods of fighting when brute force wouldn't get the job done. Mana flashed in the beautiful eyes that she had stolen from Fiona, then her pupils turned catlike and emitted a powerful glow.

"Ha ha ha! Are you trying to kill me with laughter?" Luna scoffed, her arms crossed. "Do you truly expect the likes of Evil Eye and Charm to work on a dragon? Please don't tell me this is what you were referring to when you declared so loudly and proudly that 'there's much more to strength than brute force'!"

The gigantic dragon raised its right hand indolently and slammed it against the succubus. That alone reduced the devil's enormous HP by a third and sent her shooting beyond the city's bounds.

"Ugh!"

Having determined that it would be dangerous to take another hit, the succubus used Teleport to position herself above Luna. She then proceeded to fire off countless lances of light, raining them down not only on Luna and Sol but the entire city as well.

“Hmph!”

Luna looked entirely unfazed as her Augoeides opened its mouth. An extremely thick torrent of light burst forth in accompaniment with multiple rotating magic circles, sweeping up the succubus’s entire barrage. There was no doubt that Luna’s attack would have melted both city walls and mountains like a knife through butter if it had merely grazed either.

Finally realizing how woefully inferior she was, the succubus made a one-eighty in both attitude and direction. Not even bothering with a parting line, she promptly turned tail and started flying away as fast as she could.

“What’s this? Running already? Ha ha ha, you think you can run from a dragon?”

Moments later, the succubus crashed into an invisible wall and bounced off it with incredible force. Luna constantly maintained a spherical barrier around herself that prevented anyone from entering or leaving without her permission. Upon challenging a dragon—like any other boss monster—the only possible outcomes were to emerge victorious or die in defeat. Escape was not an option.

Just then, a light of hope descended from the heavens to lift the succubus’s despair. The clouds that hid the moon were instantaneously blown away as the light fell directly on Luna’s position. However, it never reached her. It merely hit her barrier, then dispersed into nothing. When the last vestiges faded away, she shot a glare at the sky, directed toward where the spear of light had originated.

“Just shut up and watch, ‘Holy Church’! Each time you shoot me, it’ll cost you another one of those so-called ‘Divine Judgments’ that you so love to flaunt as your own power!”

After cursing, Luna turned her gaze back to the succubus who had once again been plunged into despair. Just now, an orbital weapon way above the stratosphere, a piece of lost technology managed by the Church, had been shattered and shot down. The only people who knew this were those operating it from the depths of the Holy See, though.

“Hmph. Now it’s clear you’re a pawn of the accursed Church.” Luna glared down at the trembling succubus and scoffed. “So they’ve taken to leashing devils and using them as tools. What a farce.”

As it turned out, the organization behind the succubus was much bigger than Sol had expected. The realization that he had been monitored by the world's faith soured his mood a little.

"So, do you have any more tricks?"

With the blast from the Church having proved entirely ineffective, the succubus was well and truly out of options. She was now hanging limply before Luna, held so tightly in place by an invisible power that she couldn't move even a finger.

"AaaAAaahh..."

The succubus was left with the ability to speak, but the sounds coming from her mouth were no longer coherent. Apparently Luna was still causing her a great deal of pain in some unseen way.

The face-off between dragon and succubus had been more one-sided than a match between an adult and a child. The fire of battle had already faded from Luna's eyes. That a succubus who had lived for centuries had turned out to be just as much of a pushover as the frail humans with limited lifespans and limited wisdom filled her with disappointment, but she tried to hide it. Being in Sol's presence, she didn't want him to think her a battle junkie or a servant who would underestimate her opponent and get careless.

"My lord, does your, uh, 'Player' tell you what her 'level' is?"

"Unfortunately, the difference between us is too great."

"I see. So her strength is considered substantial in this world."

"Uh, yeah, you could say that."

"Why do you sound ambivalent?"

Of course, the succubus wasn't merely "substantial." The fact that Player wasn't working against her when it had provided detailed information about the basilisk guaranteed that she was, in fact, a formidable opponent. She was also a perfect example of how pure fighting strength was not always the only thing that mattered, as she possessed skills like Evil Eye and Charm that Sol would have easily fallen victim to had he not been under Luna's protection.

Succubi were one of the worst matches for an adventurer party. Similar to teleportation, someone targeted with mind-controlling magic who had no means of resistance would instantly lose the fight. The realization of how weak humans were and how powerless they were against the real monsters out there evoked a sigh from Sol.

In terms of brute force, the succubus did indeed have plenty. Sol knew of no way to defend against the countless lances of light that the succubus had fired off. Reen's defensive skills might have been sufficient to ride out the attack, but the city would have been a lost cause. If the succubus had the wherewithal to repeat that barrage, she could single-handedly take on Emelia's entire royal army. Sure enough, if it hadn't been for Luna's intervention, Garlaige would have been mere rubble now.

If Sol was to freely explore dungeons and unseal territories, he needed to ensure that his base of operations had the ability to fend off assailants with strength equal to that of a succubus. Otherwise, he and Luna would be effectively bound to Garlaige, as there were some people, few though they were, whom he cared about. It simply wouldn't do for the two of them to leave without a care and later find the city razed to the ground—it had to be able to at least hold out until their return. Sol was hoping that tonight's demonstration would contribute to that end.

By the way, I wonder how many levels I'd gain from killing the succubus outright. Then again, I'll probably get plenty when going through the taboo territories.

Sol happened to be zoning out a little, his attention arrested by a random thought that flashed through his mind, when the succubus adopted Fiona's voice and face and pleaded, "Sol, please save me!"

That she was capable of pulling off such a stunt while suffering indescribable pain surprised Luna. The succubus now understood that she was entirely powerless against Luna and had no hope of escape. Even the sneak attack using the Holy Church's lost technology had been shrugged off with no effort at all. She was well and truly caught in the jaws of death, and there was no way out.

Her only venue of survival, therefore, lay with Sol. If he ordered it, Luna

wouldn't hesitate to even shake her hand and become friends with her. There was no doubt that in this situation, Sol was the one who held ultimate authority over her life.

"How do you not see that that's a terrible strategy?" Sol sighed. "You just had to stop and think about it for a second."

Unfortunately, his reaction was revulsion. Of course it was. The person who had killed and devoured Fiona, someone Sol felt a debt of gratitude toward, was now using her voice and face to beg for mercy. Anyone would be revolted by that.

"I'll become this woman," the succubus said quickly. "I'll seal away my own memories and consciousness so only this woman's is left. So—"

"What's the point of that?"

No matter what the succubus said, Sol no longer had any intention of sparing her. However, despite his words, his interest had been piqued by her offer. The real Fiona was dead. In fact, she had been eaten alive, which was a particularly terrible fate that most people who weren't adventurers would never experience. That was not in doubt. But if her appearance, mannerisms, and memories up until the moment of death had indeed been perfectly preserved, and the being responsible abandoned their own will and self, who would that person be? There was no knowing if such a feat was possible, but if it had been done, Sol would definitely have hesitated.

The succubus's mistake was in how she had applied this strategy. She should have just done it instead of offering to do it. If she had cried "I'm Fiona!" while writhing from the agony that Luna was causing, she just might have lived. But it was too late.

"No, I don't want to die... I don't want to disappear... Not before I meet my lord again..."

"I bet Fiona didn't want to die either."

Sol couldn't care less about the succubus's hopes and dreams. No matter how noble she thought them, since she had killed Fiona and attempted to kill Sol in service to them, it only made sense that they would be trampled, as she lacked

the strength to bring them to fruition. Those who were willing to sacrifice others for their own goals had to have the conviction to be treated the same in kind. This was an inescapable principle that not even Sol was exempt from. He had already resolved himself, as he too was one who would not balk at trampling other people's dreams to achieve his own. This was why he always killed without hesitation when the opportunity presented itself. All to avoid the fate of being killed the very next day by the person he had spared.

When Sol turned away, having lost all interest, Luna took it as her cue to begin eating.

"Please, no, AAAHHHH!"

Sol had expected Luna to swallow the succubus whole with her Augoeides's mouth or to absorb her somehow. It was immediately obvious that was not the case, as the air was filled with wet sounds like *squish* and *squelch* and dry sounds like dry branches being stepped on. Mixed with the noise was the succubus's strident, maddened screams, which still sounded lewd for some reason. If he heard her voice alone without knowing the situation, he would have mistaken it for the howls from when she had been in the throes of passion with Alan earlier.

Is Luna literally eating her with her own mouth?! I so do not want to see it!

Firmly resolving not to turn around, Sol turned to his old friend. "Now, Alan."

"Eep!"

Alan was still very much naked, and his face was full of fear. Anyone would be afraid of being this high up in the sky with no support whatsoever—even Sol had yet to get used to it. But that was not the reason for Alan's squeal. No, it was because he was getting a full frontal view of a cute little girl literally eating the woman he had just bedded.

"Don't worry, I don't plan on torturing you."

"S-Spare me. Sol, please. I'm begging you."

Sol determined, based on how shaken Alan was, that the scene unfolding behind him was indeed quite the horror show. The urge to look ballooned inside him, but he held firm.

“That’s not an option. You tried to kill me. If I let you go and you obtain a power greater than Luna, you’ll one hundred percent come for me again. I’m not stupid enough to let that happen.”

“I-I won’t! I swear!”

There were even tears in Alan’s eyes as he gave his word, but they meant nothing now. During the encounter at the Adventurer’s Guild this evening, he was the only one who had regarded Eliza’s group with complete contempt. This meant he knew they used to be grunts from an organization from the slums, which in turn indicated that he had ties to the Gafus Gang.

Alan had never had any interest in the slums before. It was far too much of a coincidence, then, that not only did he know the group that had made an attempt on Sol’s life, but he was even familiar with the faces of the members at the bottom rung of that group. Even if it *was* a coincidence, it was suspicious enough to warrant serious doubt.

Someone who had tried to kill another person once would, upon obtaining power, do so again. There was no guarantee that the stark change that had befallen Sol last night wouldn’t happen to Alan as well. For all Sol knew, the organization that had sent the succubus, the Holy Church, actually did possess the means to grant someone overwhelming strength.

“That so? Then let’s just say that I’m killing you because I don’t like you.”

Regardless of the pretext, Alan had to die. At this point, the reason didn’t matter anymore. Sol had no obligation to justify himself to Alan’s satisfaction.

The only way that Alan could have come out of this alive was if he had pretended to have lost his memories as if he had been controlled by the succubus all along. After all, Sol himself had substantiated the false Fiona’s real identity. Unfortunately, the idea never occurred to Alan.

“Please, no. Sol, don’t do this.”

“No one *wants* to die.”

Sol didn’t think any less of Alan for sniveling and desperately pleading for his life, because he was pretty sure he’d do the same if he himself was faced with inexorable death. He had the resolve required of someone who possessed and

brandished power, but very few could hold on to that resolve and remain dignified to the very end. Expecting someone else to do something that he himself could not and being disappointed was mere arrogance.

“One last thing I want to ask you—was Mark working with you?”

“No, he’s not part of this at all. The decision to kill you was mine and mine alone.”

It was as if making his last remaining friend suffer the fallout from his own mistakes was the one line that Alan didn’t want to cross. Seeing this, Sol decided to believe him. As long as Mark didn’t do anything overtly hostile, Sol intended to leave him be.

Honestly, Sol felt a little jealous of Mark. Despite facing inevitable death, Alan was able to clearly absolve Mark of all responsibility—or even cover for him if he *had* been involved. Despite having spent around the same amount of time with Alan, Sol had failed to build such a relationship with him. And for things like this, fault usually went both ways.

“Got it. Well...bye.”

“Say, Sol, where did we—”

Alan and Sol had probably been thinking the same thing at that last moment, but there was no longer any way to know. As in, Sol knew what he himself was thinking, but not a single particle of Alan’s form remained in this world. Luna was the one who’d dealt the blow—she’d finished devouring the succubus—but it was on Sol’s order. He swore once again to always keep in mind that everything he did using Luna was his responsibility to bear.

Quickly changing gears, Sol analyzed the results of his experiment. “I see, when a companion dies, I get a notice and all the skills and stats that I gave them are returned to me. If so, there’s no downside to accepting the maximum number of companions that I can have.”

If the skills and stats given to a companion disappeared with their death, then Sol would have to be very careful. But clearly, that wasn’t the case. When he leveled up, his capacity for companions went up, as did the number of skills and stat points that he could bestow. As such, his level was his only bottleneck. He

also had to get started with all the experiments that he had talked about with Steve, so he was going to get busy starting tomorrow.

“My lord, how do you want to deal with the succubus’s backer?”

“How much of a threat are they?”

“The Divine Judgment just now is their most powerful attack. At least, it was a thousand years ago. It’s no threat at all to me. Neither are agents at the level of the succubus just now.”

“Then we’ll just leave them be.”

“As you wish.”

Based on the information provided by Luna, Sol decided to take a wait and see approach with the Holy Church. The torrent of light that had hit Luna’s barrier did appear to be extremely powerful, but it had amounted to nothing. This outcome, considered alongside the defeat of the succubus, should make the Church back off and take a more cautious approach. In that case, Sol wasn’t going to give them a reason to change their mind.

At the very least, he needed to make preparations before taking on an organization with members in every country. Chances were high that he would eventually have to take out whatever part it was that was deploying devils, but he didn’t want to make enemies of the clergy who were actually saving people in far-flung villages and the selfless believers who were dedicating themselves to service to others.

The first priority was to take action based on what he had learned from Steve this evening. To that end, he had needed to make a big demonstration of his strength. The fight with the succubus should have sufficed. Sol sighed a little imagining the commotion that must have been happening in the streets of Garlaige at that very moment.

Things went in a direction I didn’t expect, but it generally worked out. I think.

“By the way, how do you feel after eating the succubus? You didn’t get a stomachache, did you?” Sol asked with concern, trying his best not to let his revulsion at noticing the blood at the corner of Luna’s mouth show. For a moment, he had been jealous of her ability to gain a target’s power by

consuming them, but having to physically eat them was a very high barrier. Luna probably thought nothing of it, being a dragon and all, but Sol had been born and raised human.

And it looks like you have to eat every last part. Ugh.

“I feel fine. All her battle-related skills and spells were mere trifles, but she had a large repertoire of, um, are these considered healing? A lot of it is meant to be used on other people outside of combat. Like, um, Sensitivity Manipulation?”

Thankfully, Luna looked none the worse for wear after the process. It was hard to imagine her as the same person who had praised how delicious burnt toast was this morning.

Wait, did she casually mention something really incredible?!

“I guess you *can* call it a battle skill...”

Now Sol deeply regretted being so quick to let Luna eat the succubus. If she ever turned from “All Dragon” to “Carnal Dragon,” he might get wrung to emaciation. Then again, if she was truly deserving of the title, she’d probably have a skill or spell to alleviate that problem too.

In all honesty, the adult form that Luna had shown Sol last night had ticked every last box under Sol’s preferences.

Chapter 8: Royal Succession

It was a brand-new day after the most extraordinary night that Garlaige had ever seen. Residents woke up at the crack of dawn to a city enveloped in an agitated tumult for all sorts of reasons.

Sol arrived at the Adventurer's Guild at the time that he had promised Steve and was escorted to the room for VIPs. When Steve showed up, however, he looked uncharacteristically flustered. And little wonder, as he was accompanied by a very notable figure who had apparently been waiting for quite a while already.

"It is a pleasure making your acquaintance, Lord Sol. My name is Frederica tul la Emelia. I thank you deeply for accommodating our request on such short notice," said the first princess of the Kingdom of Emelia, who was also known as Liliun di Regnum, meaning "Lily of the Kingdom."

On top of being a princess, Frederica was third in line for succession to the throne. She was nineteen this year, which made her two years older than Sol. She had lustrous platinum blonde hair grown straight and long, green and gold eyes characteristic of the Emelian royal bloodline that twinkled with a kindly air, stunningly beautiful features that made her seem open and amiable, and the aura of a holy saint depicted in religious art. As if to contrast this, her shapely form was clad in an outfit that, while clearly of high quality, seemed excessively alluring, especially for someone of her station. Clearly, she had come ready to use her sway not only as a princess but also as a woman.

Conversely, despite the incredible power that he wielded, Sol was a mere commoner. He had indeed attended the Royal Academy, whose students were all considered elites. However, despite being lauded as the foremost educational institution in the country, it did not have a single child from a top-ranking noble family on its roster, much less a member of royalty. The royals truly lived in a different world.

And yet, after properly introducing herself, Frederica greeted Sol as if

addressing someone of higher status than herself. Even Sol, who wasn't one to be reluctant about eliminating governments and the Holy Church if it suited his goals, was struck speechless by Frederica's beautiful mannerisms and the enormity of the gesture. The two guards on her left and right, clad in extravagant armor but respectfully kneeling, further added to the impact of the presentation. Sol inwardly praised himself for having the foresight to bring only Luna today.

"Um, Steve?"

"Yes, Lord Sol?"

"Can you not? That gives me the heebie-jeebies."

"How'm I supposed to stop calling you by honorifics when a *princess* is doing it?! Try putting yourself in my shoes!" Apparently, Steve was just as flustered as Sol was, as all the plans that they had made last night had gone completely out the window due to this unexpected development.

Unfortunately, they were so agitated that what they had intended to be a secret exchange had been loud enough for the princess to hear. Frederica smiled disarmingly. "Please don't let my status bother you. I don't have the nerve to throw my weight around as a royal in the presence of the person responsible for what we all witnessed last night. I would be honored if you simply called me Frederica, Lord Sol."

Way to put me on the spot! Sol thought.

She's really putting him on the spot! Steve thought.

There was no doubt that Frederica was referring to Sol's demonstration. Specifically, the scene of Luna giving a succubus the beatdown.

"Um, Pr— L-Lady...Frederica?"

"Please, just Frederica," the princess said, maintaining her smile.

This is an order, isn't it? Sol looked to Steve for help, but the older man was purposely averting his eyes. While swearing to make Steve pay afterward, Sol decided to acquiesce to the princess's request.

"Um, okay. F-Frederica. I was told that you are a nobleman's daughter with an

interest in monster territories and that you wanted to visit one in person under the protection of the royal guard and Black Tiger. This is wrong, then, I take it?"

"It is. Upon considering the demerits of deceiving you, I decided to drop the pretense. Hearing the cover story spelled out reminds me how patronizing it is indeed. I deeply apologize for being presumptuous. If I could have your forgiveness, I am willing to do anything to make amends. Do you forgive me?"

As it turned out, Frederica was revealing her true identity because Sol had gone too far with his demonstration. In other words, this situation was his own fault. She had drawn the rather sagacious conclusion that making an enemy of him could lead to the possibility of Emelia being wiped off the map.

When Frederica said the word "patronizing," the guards at her side twitched, outing themselves as the ones responsible for coming up with the cover story. Sol didn't blame them for thinking so little of him, as all they had known about him was that he was a mere adventurer, and a deadweight to his own party, at that. Frederica's group had agreed to meet him today—and to stay up and look up at the sky last night—only out of respect to Steve, a high-ranking member of an international organization. Now, she and her guards thought this the single best call that they'd ever made in their entire lives.

"Uh, yes. Of course."

"Thank you very much!" Frederica beamed and grabbed his hands in a seeming display of delight.

That scared Sol. One could lose a hand touching a female member of royalty without permission. It didn't apply to him this time, as Frederica was the one initiating contact. However, the way she was acting was considered almost immodest, especially as she was a girl. And Sol fully understood the implications of her decision to do so regardless.

Frederica was stunningly attractive, but Sol's first impression was that she was an extremely calculating person who used her looks, alongside who knew what else, to bring about the results that she wanted. Someone witnessing this meeting without being privy to the fact that one side was a royal and the other a lowborn adventurer would have seen nothing more than a lovely girl being friendly with a boy. Knowing what he did, though, Sol was terrified. Repulsed,

even.

“You have a situation here, Lord Sol.”

“You’re every bit as involved as I am, Mr. Steve.”

The pair exchanged dumbfounded looks and sighed. While they had their silly exchange, Frederica quickly reviewed what she had noticed about Sol’s character.

First, he was generally a serious person. He was also a bit of a prude, though he seemed unaware of it. He wasn’t entirely uninterested in those of the fairer sex, but his reaction to overtly sexual approaches veered more toward disgust than intrigue. Most importantly, he was fully aware that he possessed overwhelming power and had the liberty to make an attempt at observing decorum with royalty even though he was no longer beholden.

Put another way, his power was very real, but it could be taken advantage of. Not by deceiving and manipulating him, of course. Such an approach was likely to blow up at step one. Instead, Frederica thought that if she offered him everything that she was, both as a royal and as a woman, and if her own goals did not diverge significantly from Sol’s, she could get him to take advantage of her own position as a princess. That he made no effort to hide his repugnance at her coy approach, even though working with her could make it much easier to advance his goals spoke volumes about his arrogance. However, arrogance was the right of the strong. Given her upbringing, Frederica understood this well and could easily take it in stride.

“So...pardon me for being frank, but didn’t you arrange for last night’s spectacle expecting this manner of development? As a member of this country’s royal family, and as a woman, how can I not try to ingratiate myself with you after seeing it?”

In light of what she had learned about Sol, Frederica promptly shifted from trying to seduce Sol to showing him that she, a royal, was being upfront with him.

Luna nodded appreciatively. “A sensible judgment call indeed.”

Hearing the little girl that Frederica knew—after pulling an all-nighter

gathering intel—to be the avatar of Sol’s strength agreeing with her gave her no small modicum of relief.

Sol narrowed his eyes, discerning that his being able to follow Frederica’s thought process was itself a part of her calculations. “You’re a real piece of work.”

“I *am* a royal, after all.” Frederica smiled cutely, looking like nothing more than an innocent young girl.

There was no way that a member of the royal family was incompetent. At least, not a family that had managed to maintain control over a major world power for generations. To Frederica, exploiting the nobleness of being a royal was in itself a perfectly valid strategy. Given the existence of someone with Sol’s strength, using her own beauty to entice him was a no-brainer. There was no point in being pretty if she didn’t use it as a weapon.

Being faced with a different kind of resolve from his own, Sol found himself feeling a little intimidated. He had somewhat come to terms with being so powerful, but while he had essentially stumbled into his power, royals had seized it with their own strength and passed it down through the ages. It would be brash to flippantly say which required more resolve, but the weight of something that had been maintained for years was substantial indeed. Being a royal meant shouldering the accumulation of what previous generations had built up over the course of history.

“I mean, this is generally what you wanted, right?” Steve asked.

“I...guess so, yes.”

Now that he was acquainted with the first princess of Emelia, Sol’s path forward had indeed gotten much easier. As such, this was no time for him to be fretting about something as simple as how to explain the new development to Reen.



This was what had happened yesterday evening right after Hans and his party, representatives from the major clan that Alan had been in talks with, had been plunged into a living hell. Mark and Alan had been left standing dumbfounded

in the lobby as Steve and Luna were escorted to Steve's office while Reen, Julia, and Eliza's group were set up in another room.

After closing the door, Steve sat at his desk and leaned forward with his interlocked fingers propping his chin. "So, what're you going to do now, boss man?"

Last night, Steve had already crossed a point of no return. He had clearly declared that he would be abandoning all efforts to mask his and Sol's relationship as that of general manager and normal adventurer and that he would be openly giving Sol special treatment going forward. However, he had also been completely blindsided by Sol making such a conspicuous move the very next day.

Steve had already done everything within his power. The messages that he had dispatched to those he thought would make suitable members for Libertadores would take half a month to arrive. Factoring in their replies and the time needed for them to make the trip to Garlaige, he had figured that the whole process of establishing the new clan would take at least three months.

After Sol had literally squashed a Rank A party affiliated with Hecatoncheires, however, Steve's efforts no longer held value. Being accompanied by a group of veterans would actually be a shackle for Sol and Luna, who could undoubtedly accomplish so much more alone.

As a result, Steve thought it necessary to ask Sol what he planned on doing next. That was why he had asked Sol to drop by after shopping. Never had he imagined that such a consequential incident would happen right before the meeting.

"Pretty much what I said this morning. My top priority right now is unsealing all nine taboo territories near Garlaige."

Sol also wanted to get around to clearing the nearby nameless dungeon, but he was going to leave it until he had dealt with the taboo territories, as he had already told Steve and Gawain that he would.

"Is that possible, though? I don't mean to doubt you, but they've literally been branded taboo after the incident two hundred years ago. Not only does the guild not make any effort whatsoever to unseal them, we actually arrest the

idiots who recklessly step foot inside. The same goes for both the government and the Church. The Church even brands those who do so heretics, which tells you how seriously they take it. If you succeed, you're going to be kicking up a shitstorm beyond compare."

Steve was aware that he was just repeating what he had said before, but he really wanted to make sure that Sol understood the gravity of what he was proposing.

Just this morning, Steve had been forcibly teleported by Luna and consequently convinced that she did indeed possess the strength of the Evil Dragon. He did not doubt that if she were up against a human army, the fight would be so one-sided as to sound like a joke. That said, the measures taken by the Adventurer's Guild, the various countries, and the Holy Church assured him that the taboo territory bosses and the tragedy two hundred years ago were all too real. It wasn't a matter of whether these bosses could be killed or not—they were simply not to be touched, period. And even if Sol did indeed kill one and unseal its domain, the resulting commotion was bound to be great enough to shake the entire continent. All the more so the closer one was to the ruling class.

Noticing the brief look that Luna shot his way, Steve protested, "I said I'm not doubting him!" as he felt his testicles shrink up. The thought of suffering the same fate as Hans freaked him out, but Luna was surprised at his reaction, as she had no intention of hurting anyone without Sol's permission. Part of Steve really wanted her to properly understand how much she terrified people, but another part worried that she would use it to mess with him if she did.

"What I can say is, according to Player, Luna's skills and stats are beyond just 'in a different league'—they're practically nonsensical. It would be a piece of cake for her to mow down a whole horde of basilisks like the one we killed yesterday. Of course, we can immediately retreat if we find the boss too much of a challenge, but what do you think, Luna?"

Luna puffed her cheeks in indignation. "Running away from a mere snake would bring shame even to dragoneels."

"And there you have it." Sol didn't fault Steve for wanting to ask for

confirmation repeatedly, though, as he had never seen Luna in her prison, and he couldn't see Luna's skills and stats all listed. In terms of appearance, she only looked like an adorable child, especially when pouting.

Steve chuckled drily. "So Kuzuryuu is just a snake to you. Wow."

In contrast to her looks, Luna's words were anything but adorable. In fact, they sounded more unbelievable than the nonsense that a beginner adventurer would shout while fully intoxicated in a tavern. What made things worse, however, was that unlike such braggarts, Luna could probably do exactly what she had claimed. Steve had no choice but to take her at her word and brace himself.

"Luna hates that a mere hydra has the name 'Nine-Headed *Dragon*,'" Sol explained.

"It's not like it named itself."

"So, since it's the Adventurer's Guild that formalized the name..."

"How dare a mere snake claim to be a dragon?! Mistress Luna, please make Kuzuryuu pay for its impudence!"

It was indeed the Adventurer's Guild that had decided to give the boss of Taboo Novem the name of "Kuzuryuu" several generations ago. If the current guild brass wasn't going to take responsibility for it, it had to be borne by someone else. Steve quickly nominated the hydra itself, even though it really had no say in the matter, and made a mental note to watch what he said around Luna.

Then he cleared his throat. "Ahem. So, let's say you succeed in unsealing all nine taboo territories. What'll you do after that?"

"I see two main ways things can play out. One, if Emelia tries to win Libertadores over, we'll accept the offer. Two, if the Holy Church brands us as apostates and tries to rouse everyone against us, well..."

Assuming that Sol did indeed unseal all of Gio Nest, it was only natural to discuss how he planned on dealing with the turmoil that would follow. There wasn't much to say about the first prediction, as it seemed likely enough to happen and would be beneficial to both sides. About the second point, though,

if the Church did indeed overreact, it was worth remembering that many citizens of Emelia were believers too. In the worst case, Emelia and Istekario, the two national powers closest to Garlaige, could join hands and attempt to destroy Sol with a massive combined military force.

Thankfully, Sol thought the second one quite unlikely to happen. After all, who would want to fight an entity who had the power to unseal taboo territories? There were indeed instances when countries and the Church had to give up on benefits to save face, but they were fundamentally still organizations that prioritized pragmatism. Picking a fight with someone who actually possessed the abilities of a god to protect the honor of an absent and silent God was a hard sell. They too could partake in the massive profits that Sol would be generating simply by being cordial with him.

“Well what?” Steve pressed. Having been born and raised in Emelia, and in light of the fact that his entire career was based in the Emelian arm of the Adventurer’s Guild, he needed to know exactly what it was that Sol planned on doing. He refused to let the matter be glossed over.

Sol shrugged. “Well...I guess I might pick a random demihuman settlement around these parts and declare my independence. If it comes to that, I apologize in advance for the trouble, but I’d need you to secure enough resources and human capital for me to maintain a minimum standard of civilized life. Oh, and please help us set up an Adventurer’s Guild branch as soon as—”

“Hold on, wait, wait, wait. Are you seriously going to take on the whole world?!”

“It’s not that bad. After wiping out Emelia’s and Istekario’s armed forces, I’m pretty sure they’ll acknowledge my independence. Honestly, I can just leave the last taboo territory as is and build a settlement inside. I can be self-sufficient to a certain degree simply by hunting monsters, so it’s a pretty valid short-term solution.”

“Ah...right. You’re completely right, of course. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Mere minutes earlier, Sol had declared that he would unseal all the taboo

territories in Gio Nest, even though the collective forces that would get sent after him wouldn't stand a chance against even one such territory boss. Steve realized that he was in the wrong for not yet having updated his idea of what was possible and normal. To avoid Sol and Luna thinking of him as being slow on the uptake, he slapped his own face once to change gears and pounded it into his head that numerical advantage no longer held any sway over Sol.

"Any particular reason you're interested in working with Emelia?"

"It's just easier that way."

Steve knew better than to change Sol's mind once he had decided on something, but given a chance, he wanted to help Emelia walk away with as many advantages as possible. Being a normal person, he cared more about the faces and places near and dear to him than the balance of the world or what was best for the continent as a whole. Sacrificing the former for the sake of the latter was entirely out of the question. Thankfully, Sol seemed to share his opinion on the matter.

"If that's the case, I have fortuitous news for you. Remember how I said yesterday that the army folks Mark approached are actually the royal guard?"

"Right, and they're in town."

"Specifically, a royal is in town. It's the first princess, though she's traveling incognito. She's third in line for succession."

"Huh. Why?"

It was unthinkable for a royal to come to Garlaige, a city not only surrounded by territories but also situated closest to the border with Istekario.

"I hear she convinced His Majesty to grant her the right to succession despite being a woman through sheer merit. Third in line, but still. I've no idea if she's serious about getting the crown or if she's looking for protection from her two brothers, but it's clear she's getting personally involved with bolstering the military strength under her command. That's why she took an interest in Black Tiger."

The way Sol saw it, the princess recruiting for the national army instead of her personal forces implied that she was less interested in protecting herself and

more in usurping the army's influence. The story about her being so competent that the king had no choice but to give her the right to succession was very likely true.

It was reasonable to want to personally evaluate those to whom she would be entrusting her life. Her being willing to come all the way to the front line meant she had guts and wasn't the type to stay safe in the palace and plot and scheme from behind a desk.

"Ah, so that's why she turned Mark away when he came alone."

In light of the role that she had expected Black Tiger to play, she must have been quite disappointed indeed. It wasn't only that she was only getting a fifth of the strength she had been promised—a fractured party couldn't be relied on to perform normal duties, much less contribute to spreading her influence within the army. No wonder Mark had been dismissed when he showed up with his lack of leadership skills fully exposed.

"That's the main gist of it, yep. In any case, she's making an effort to hide her identity, so I'll introduce her to you while pretending not to know."

"I see. And you want me to show her Luna's power to get her on our side."

"Exactly."

Even Steve wouldn't have been able to arrange an audience with her if she had come to Garlaige as the first princess, but since she was traveling incognito, he could manage it by being a little pushy. After all, he "didn't know" that she was the princess. And she was hardly going to complain after seeing what Luna could do.

"In that case, I think I can give exactly the kind of demonstration we need tonight. It'd be a bit late, but can you make sure that she's still awake?"

Coincidentally, Sol had been thinking of settling things with Alan anyway, and depending on who his backer was, the confrontation could get very flashy. There would be no better way to show off Luna's abilities than a fight.

"I mean, I can pass on the message, but...what're you planning?"

"You'll know if you look up at the sky tonight too."

“Sounds romantic.”

“Ha ha ha.”

And that was how it was decided that Sol would be flushing out and dealing with the entity behind Alan in a way that would serve as a demonstration for the first princess. Due to it ending up a lot flashier than expected, the princess’s reaction had taken Sol and Steve completely by surprise.

As Steve put it, the overall outcome was indeed along the lines of what the two of them had hoped for. The only problem was that, underneath her innocent facade, the princess now looked at Sol with the eyes of a predator with prey in its sights.



“About today’s schedule... I had asked to be brought to a territory, but I am now more than familiar enough with Lord Sol’s power. As such, I don’t want to further impose...”

The request that Frederica had made when she was still hiding her identity was for an armed escort from Libertadores, the clan newly founded by Sol Rock, for a territory inspection—a normal territory, of course. However, on account of the strangely ardent insistence from Steve to “please stay up late,” she now knew how powerful Sol was. Given that the bosses of normal territories were still somewhat manageable for conventional adventurers, they were definitely weaker than whatever it was that he had beaten last night. Consequently, there was no longer any need to put herself in harm’s way to gauge his abilities.

This left Frederica free to move on to the next step of building a rapport with Sol. The original plan of staying by his side as he fought had its pros, but as she would be firmly boxed into the role of a guest, that scenario was a little unfavorable to her goal.

In this short period of time, Frederica had figured out that clinging to him in a life-threatening situation and crying “I’m so scared!” would definitely rub him the wrong way. She had also learned that, surprisingly, the term “royalty” made him feel special as much as it did the average person. That being the case, it was likely more effective to express her goodwill toward him in public, especially in places where people knew her identity, such as the local

government office or garrison. After all, bringing the fight to her battlefield of choice was the first step toward victory, both in love and war. If she didn't overdo it, he should be receptive to this strategy, like most men. On the off chance that he got sick of it, she could immediately pivot and take another approach.

Since she was young, Frederica had been perfecting all manner of wiles to retain the devotion of the influential person she would be marrying in the future. Her immediate goal was to try every last one of them on Sol.

He shook his head. "No, let's still do it. It doesn't hurt to have more experience facing monsters. There's one more reason to go, but I'll explain later."

"As you wish," Frederica acquiesced with a smile. If Sol wanted something, it took precedence over all else, even her own plans. She wished she could have at least looked her best when meeting him for the first time, but losing a night's rest wasn't enough to mar her attractive features. "But in that case, I imagine my guards might become a burden. Do you want me to order them to stay here?"

Since the original plan to visit a territory was back on, Frederica wanted to create a situation where she could be alone with Sol. Of course, Luna would be ever present as well, but that was just something she'd have to get used to. Losing her guards would still enable her and Sol to speak and act with more freedom.

This suggestion visibly shook the guards. Given their position, entrusting a member of the royal family to a mere adventurer was entirely out of the question. However, after seeing Sol in action last night, they couldn't bring themselves to voice their protest. It was insulting to be called a burden, but in light of who they were being compared to, the evaluation was by no means unfair. They were at a complete loss.

Wow, even the prestigious royal guards can get flustered. Sol laughed a little at the reactions of the two who had seemed so composed moments ago and said helpfully, "Don't worry, it's generally safe close to Luna. Just stay, I guess, around how close you'd be if we were going dungeon delving. That sound right,

Luna?”

“Of course, my lord. I will not let you down.”

The royal guards had features just as stunning as Frederica’s, and since they were under her direct command and therefore must have been handpicked, they were most certainly extremely good fighters. According to Player, their talents were Blade Conjurer and Steel Wire Master, both of which were extremely rare. Being in the good graces of the royal family would mean having more opportunities to nurture those with rare talents like theirs using Player. It would be a waste to leave them behind.

Moreover, Sol now knew for a fact that Luna’s barrier could deflect even an attack from an orbital weapons system. There was probably nothing on the surface of this entire planet that could threaten her or those she was with.

“Well, you heard her.” Sol chuckled a little at Luna puffing out her modest chest. “By the way, just to confirm, these two guards answer only to you, yes? Ah, sorry, that question was a bit roundabout. Do their loyalties lie more with you personally than with Emelia in general?”

“Who can say?” Frederica smiled mischievously in a brief instant of sincere emotion as she looked at her escorts.

There would be a great deal to gain for those participating in the experiment that Sol was planning on performing. And at the moment, Sol was joining forces only with Frederica, not the whole kingdom. Given that, if the guards’ allegiance was to the throne, there would be a problem, as this trip would make them the most powerful knights in the country.

“I have been loyal to Her Highness alone from the very start, though I realize putting it into words makes it sound suspect. Furthermore, now that I know how powerful you are, and since Her Highness has managed to establish a connection with you, I believe that standing by her is also the best course of action for the country. For the entire world too, honestly. Does that suffice as an answer?”

“Plenty. Does your partner share your views?”

“Ah, yes. Sorry, I’m not good with words, but—”

“That’s fine. Frederica looks happy, so I’ll believe you.”

The answers were perhaps not the best for someone in their position, but Sol was by and large satisfied. Come to think of it, Frederica had handpicked them to accompany her on a journey to bolster her influence. Sol was only asking to be sure they hadn’t been assigned to her by some other authority as chaperones. The happiness on her face when she heard their answers, in addition to the fact that they didn’t yet know what they stood to gain, convinced Sol they could be trusted.

Upon having her reaction pointed out, Frederica blushed to the tips of her ears. Sol thought it rather cute, as it was the first time she had shown real emotion, although he wasn’t completely dismissing the possibility of it being an act.

“Another thing,” Sol said. “I plan on bringing two others as well. Do you mind?”

“I’m absolutely fine with that.”

“Thank you. Steve, can you have someone summon Reen and Julia, please?”

Up until last night’s fight, Sol had planned on striking out with only Luna at his side. Now that he knew how powerful her barrier was, however, there was something that he wanted to try out.

“Sure thing. I’ll send a female staff member.”

Sol faltered for half a beat before replying, “Thank you.” Both he and Steve knew that Fiona was never coming back.

After giving orders to an employee Sol wasn’t familiar with, Steve adopted his general manager face and said, “I apologize for being insolent, but there is something that I want to make clear. Your Highness, are you now one hundred percent Sol’s ally?”

Looking directly into a royal’s face and speaking to them without express permission was normally *lèse-majesté*, but he decided it was more important to speak up at the moment. Naturally, Frederica had no intention of calling him out for it. Her guards also understood that this wasn’t the time or the place.

“Speaking for myself, I swear on my name that I am Lord Sol’s ally from this moment forward. I dedicate to him everything that makes me who I am: my status, my authority, my heart, and even my body.”

A vow made by a royal sworn upon their own name was extremely heavy. But beyond that, Frederica’s manner of speaking seemed like a priestess declaring her devotion to the god she served. Steve was a little taken aback by how far things had gone, but then again, given the power that Sol now wielded, treating him like a god wasn’t all that absurd.

In contrast, it was probably going to be Steve’s duty to maintain a relaxed, casual relationship with Sol going forward. It might earn him ill will from certain people, but so be it.

“Thank you, Your Highness. In light of that, there are several things that I want your opinion on. May I have some of your time?”

For Steve, this confirmation was absolutely necessary. Though it was only a verbal promise, having Frederica’s word made a world of difference, especially since he was about to make moves utilizing his authority as a general branch manager. Being able to say that a royal had also dedicated herself to his cause gave it a lot more weight, though he would have to be careful whom he used that card on.

Frederica looked at Sol. “If my lord is fine with it?”

“It would be helpful to have the perspective of a royal. Do you mind?”

“I’m glad to be of aid.”

Sol thought Steve’s idea of consulting Frederica to be a stroke of brilliance. So while waiting for Reen and Julia to reach the guild, he gave her a rundown of what he and Steve had worked out the day before. It took a herculean effort for her to not let her shock and terror show and to maintain a smile from start to finish.



“G-Given all that I’ve heard, it would be a bad move for Libertadores to work exclusively with Emelia. In fact, you probably need to make a visible effort to convince the other countries that it isn’t the case.”

Frederica's response to Sol's plans turned out quite different from what Steve had expected. He had been quite sure that, after seeing Sol's overwhelming strength, she would do everything she could to make sure that he used it for Emelia's benefit. Truth be told, she wanted to, but it was clear to her that his influence would become far too great to contain within Emelia.

Sol had imagined two possible routes that the future could take. One was that Emelia would try to keep him for itself, and he had been ready to say yes. The second, if the Holy Church branded him a heretic and riled Emelia up into targeting him too, he would choose a demihuman settlement as a new base and declare his independence. Either way, his next task would be the same. He would unseal all territories surrounding Garlaige while trying out a bunch of things that he had in mind. In the process, he would grow dramatically stronger still, consequently increasing his influence on the rest of the world.

Put simply, his ultimate goal was to conquer all of the world's dungeons, but in the short term, he would be focusing on clearing away everything that could prove an obstacle to that. Those who sided with him would be accepted as comrades and reap massive benefits; those who stood in his way would be erased by Luna's power. Those who adulated him would be granted hope, and those who did not, inescapable death. It was doubtful whether Sol was self-aware, but his attitude was exactly that of a god's. He was practically declaring that he would take over the world *to start with*.

What shocked Frederica the most was the true power that Sol wielded. At first, she had determined that his strength lay in his absolute control over Luna, who in turn possessed an unparalleled capacity for destruction, but she had since amended her evaluation. Instead of the fear evoked by his strength, it was the immense benefits to cooperating with him that were the most compelling. Funnily enough, she was more right than she knew, as she still had no idea that Player could award skills and stats and was still under the misunderstanding that it elevated individuals to the status of characters from myths and legends strictly by boosting abilities that talent holders already owned.

Sol talked about how he was monitoring the growth of those from the slums he had already used his power on as they carried out his instructions to take over the underworld. He also shared his plans to test whether his own level

would be affected when his companions defeated monsters in dungeons or territories without him. At the same time, he wanted to try applying Player to demihumans to see how effective it was on those who were physically superior but not blessed with talents. Last but not least, he was thinking of converting the high-quality materials from the monsters that he and Luna would be killing into arms and equipment and setting up the facilities necessary to do so.

The look on Sol's face as he brought up experiments that would turn the world on its head one after the other was that of a child who, after having held himself back for a long time, finally had the wherewithal to do everything that he had ever dreamed of. The more excited he got, however, the harder it became for Frederica to remain calm.

She understood his caution from before he'd been joined by Luna, as most of what he was describing came with severe risks. Because of his caution, he had limited his experiments to his childhood friends, the so-called Miracle Children of Ros Village, and had therefore kept his reputation suppressed, presenting merely as a gifted adventurer.

When she casually asked how many people he could register as companions, he nonchalantly replied that it was in the hundreds. If he did indeed proceed to grow as planned, there was no telling how much higher that number could become.

It would be inconvenient for Frederica if Sol were to use his power only within Emelia. He would probably be satisfied with having just one country under his influence and clearly had no interest in military conquest, but what she dreamed of was a better world. With Emelia at the helm, it might even be possible to bring about an age greater than Era Gran Magicka, the golden age of humanity, with minimal bloodshed and a large number of people reaping massive rewards. She just had to be really careful with the moves she made going forward.

Looking surprised, Sol asked, "Remaining independent is the safer choice?"

"As long as you do it without making enemies of the Church and all humanity," Frederica replied solemnly.

This was no laughing matter. She was objecting to part of Sol's opinion, albeit

in a roundabout way. Put simply, she was advising him against throwing in his lot with demihumans.

“I’d still end up at war with everyone in the end, wouldn’t I?” Having properly understood what Frederica was saying, Sol failed to see what difference it would make.

“That would depend on how we go about things. If we handle the situation well, I believe we can avoid having war declared on us from the get-go, even if the Church does oppose us.”

If Emelia was perceived to be monopolizing Sol, many countries would undoubtedly side with the Church in hopes of stealing a piece of the pie. And since they would have no opportunity to witness Sol’s power in person, it wouldn’t be nearly as effective a deterrent. Sol gaining a reputation as an apostate who supported demihumans would definitely make the situation even worse. No, the key was to make everyone believe they had a lot to gain from being in Sol’s camp, just as Frederica herself now understood.

“If that’s actually possible, wow. How would we go about it, though?”

Frederica smiled. “For starters, would you mind marrying me?”

Sol froze and stared at her. “Uh...what?”

Even Steve’s eyes widened in surprise. And just then, Reen and Julia burst in, fully decked out in their adventurer gear per Sol’s instructions.

“What was that?!” Reen demanded.

“Hold on, Sol. What’s this out of the blue?” Julia exclaimed, then noticed Frederica. “Whoa, what a stunner!”

The indignation that the pair first expressed over the question they had overheard quickly gave way to bewilderment at the stunning looks and refined dignity of the mysterious woman who had presumably said it.

Sol paused, then asked, “May I tell them who you are?”

His friends’ behavior toward Frederica was very much over the line, though they could hardly be blamed for what they didn’t know. Therefore, he wanted to get them up to speed right away so as to avoid any further issues.

“There is no need to trouble yourself on my behalf, Lord Sol. I will introduce myself.” Frederica directed her smile toward Reen and Julia. This was probably the right move, as she was effectively trying to establish her own place in the group. “I take it you are Lady Reen and Lady Julia, both Lord Sol’s childhood friends, yes? It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Frederica tul la Emelia.”



The experience of being greeted with the flawless mannerism of a royal left the two girls stupefied. Not having known that Frederica was in Garlaige, they were completely bewildered about their country's princess showing up out of the blue to ask for Sol's hand in marriage.

"You're...actually a princess?" Reen murmured.

Julia shot Sol a look. "Aren't things moving a bit fast?"

Sol shrugged. "It's not *my* fault. But I agree it's too fast."

After Black Tiger's breakup a mere few days earlier, every subsequent incident had been more unbelievable than the last. What was more, things were likely going to escalate further. Sol wondered how he could obtain the calm and presence of mind that Luna, who was currently sitting next to him happily wagging her tail, had.

"There is no cause for concern, Lady Reen. I am but a concubine, and only a candidate as of yet. Whomever Lord Sol eventually accepts as queen consort will be entirely his choice."

"What are you even saying?" Sol was at a loss over how to react to all this talk of concubines and queen consorts when he hadn't said a word about founding a country. Reen and Julia's entrance had interrupted his train of thought, but he was now back to being confused about what Frederica was getting at.

"My apologies, Lord Sol. It is my wish to become your wife, but I would be more than happy if you were to officially accept me as a concubine in your royal harem."

In contrast to Sol's puzzlement, Steve caught on to what Frederica was getting at. "I see. If it's a royal harem, then girls from any country can join too."

Incredible power notwithstanding, Sol was still only seventeen. It was hardly surprising that he couldn't keep up with a man who had climbed to the upper echelons of an international organization and a royal who had been trained to develop a big-picture perspective since childhood.

"Exactly." Frederica nodded. "I, on behalf of Emelia, will facilitate relations with other countries. Fortunately, all the taboo territories in Gio Nest are

outside of the area contested by Istekario. In the eyes of the international community, they are indisputably Emelian land.”

“So you’re saying that I should establish an independent state in the territories that I unseal?”

“That’s right. Emelia will then publicly acknowledge your claim.”

“And I suppose that’s also when you’ll be announcing your participation in my ‘royal harem’?”

This way, the initiative would lie with Frederica as opposed to Emelia in general. Other countries would therefore get the impression that they could still catch up and usurp her position. They would naturally pour all their efforts into making an attempt, each more eager than the last to build a pipeline to the champion who had appeared out of thin air and achieved what had been considered categorically impossible for a thousand years. It hardly needed to be said that the value of Sol’s affection was now priceless. It would be only a matter of time before each country lined up their greatest beauties and sent them all his way, hoping that he would accept them into his harem.

Having the first princess of Emelia—one of the four superpowers on the continent—as one of the first members of the harem would serve as an example and light a fire under the other countries. If Sol then rewarded the countries that participated by offering to unseal one territory of their choosing within their borders, his standing with them would become nigh unassailable. Depending on how things unfolded, he might even manage to isolate the Holy Church.

Frederica would have greatly appreciated it if they could make an example of someone so as to keep the overall casualties to a minimum. Istekario would be a good candidate, considering how much grief it had given Emelia over the years. However, she would never admit this to Sol. They would first offer a hand in friendship. If the number of those foolish enough to slap away that hand wasn’t too high, then...well, they could simply suffer the consequences. This pragmatic way of thinking was actually very much in line with Sol’s own worldview.

“Looks like you’re skipping from establishing a clan straight to founding a

country, King Sol,” Steve joked.

“It would be a country with no citizens, though.”

“There’s you, our all-powerful dragon here, and Reen. Three people. Good start.”

“That’s not even a village.”

Steve looked quite happy despite knowing that he would soon be worked nearly to death, but Frederica understood him. To a man brimming with confidence after having clawed his way up through the ranks of the Adventurer’s Guild, this cause was an irresistible challenge more than worthy enough for him to dedicate his life to. The thought of being a part of an epic tale or legend, especially as a side character with a rather significant role, would send anyone’s heart racing. The one thing that Steve couldn’t stand was merely sitting on the sidelines doing nothing during such a crucial juncture in his life. That was why he had worked so hard on climbing the ladder that much of his hair had turned white.

“Include me and these two and you’ll have doubled your population,” Frederica noted.

“I’d be the only guy?” Sol protested.

Steve cackled. “It’ll be a harem country, then!”

“This is no laughing matter!”

Julia raised a hand. “Count me in too!”

“Aren’t you getting married?” Reen asked pointedly.

“Not in his harem, his country. With my husband, as a set!” Julia quickly clarified. “Come on, stop giving me the side-eye, Reen.”

“I can imagine the Walden family saying yes in a heartbeat.” Frederica chuckled, joining Steve in teasing Sol.

Despite having been born into the royal family, she almost certainly would not succeed the throne. Not from lack of effort on her part, but because of divine whim. No matter how hard she worked or how hard she fought, the chances of her becoming queen were practically nonexistent. And yet, she

refused to give up. After all her effort, she now found herself in a very unique situation. This was the first time in her life that she felt truly grateful to have inherited her mother's stunning beauty. Since Sol was a guy, her attractiveness was a very significant advantage. It was time for the plethora of womanly skills that she had resigned herself to learning while growing up, telling herself that no effort exerted was ever a waste, to shine.

Thankfully, Sol still held a certain degree of respect for royalty. Frederica resolved to live up to his image of how a member of royalty should act in order to not disappoint him. Part of that was knowing when to back off.

"I was over the line. I'm sorry," she said.

"No, no, I agree it sounds more realistic to flesh out your idea. I guess it was a stretch to develop a demihuman village as a base of operations..."

"It actually isn't a bad idea. It's just that, since I assume you will have nearly bottomless capital, it would be more efficient to properly design and build a brand-new city. That way, you can also screen who you accept as residents."

"I see..."

It only made sense that a royal knew more about establishing a military outpost than an adventurer. Sol valued the philosophy of assigning tasks according to people's fortes. Based on this, it could be inferred that she had earned a certain measure of trust from him. Now all she had to do was make sure she didn't let it get to her head. Take, for example, Reen and Julia, who had failed to keep up with Sol and Frederica's conversation but didn't particularly care. Frederica made a mental note to prioritize building a rapport with the two of them. Given that Sol now had the strength to resolve almost all problems with brute force, his mental stability and satisfaction in life were the most important areas of support that he needed. Naturally, it was the duty of those who would claim to be his wives to stay on top of this, as it was the best way to keep him motivated so that he would eventually grant *their* wishes.

Reen and Julia were the closest to Sol, being his childhood friends. Frederica meant to treat them with the respect that their position was due and ensure that all future harem members did too. Not as a mere act either, but in earnest, as Sol would undoubtedly see through half-hearted pretense. Luna was already

doing that, despite her absolute strength, and would therefore serve as a useful example for the others.

“Admittedly, having more countries turn against you right out of the gate for touting equality for all and protection for demihumans could be exploited to great benefit. However, I believe that starting with more people on your side would make things easier in the long run.”

“Got it. We’ll do it your way.”

Since Sol would win no matter how many came at him, eliminating all possible enemies in one fell swoop was a valid option. That said, once he started unsealing monster territories left and right, the population that he could support would explode, so there would be more to gain from drawing people to his side than killing them.

Of course, being the leader of so many people came with duties and responsibilities, but Frederica planned on shouldering everything on his behalf. All he had to do was reign as an absolute presence and leave all the nitty-gritty to her. She would ensure that he remained unfettered, free to enjoy dungeon delving to his heart’s content. This was actually a realistic goal, thanks to Sol and Luna’s overwhelming power. The future was going to be a world with an actual god present, doling out inescapable punishment and life-altering blessings. Everyone would naturally fall in line, led not by morals but by tangible benefits. Those who resisted could simply be removed with force.

“With that decided, I’m heading out to Taboo Novem now. Steve, please make preparations for bringing Kuzuryuu’s body back.”

“Sure thing.”

At this point, Steve’s responses were reverting to his usual laid-back tone. The land that had been considered taboo yesterday was now fertile and ripe for exploitation. Even the boss, previously a symbol of fear, had become little more than experience points and materials.

“By the way, Frederica, what role do you want to play when we go dungeon delving?”

“Well...when I came of age, I prayed for a talent that would enable me to

punch monsters with my bare fists,” she answered honestly, seeing no reason to lie and assuming that this was just casual conversation. “Sadly, God didn’t answer those prayers.”

In fact, it was probably the hardest she had ever prayed for anything. She had also prayed that she would inherit the special skill passed down through the Emelian royal family’s lineage, but this was not the time or place to go into all the details.

Sol blinked. “That’s...unexpected.”

“I really liked Fist Princess Angelica when I was young,” Frederica explained.

Reen chuckled. “You must have been a handful.”

Julia grinned. “I liked that one too.”

In contrast to Reen and Julia, who expressed great familiarity with the age-old fairy tale, Luna looked completely at a loss but eager to learn.

I’m glad things are going well, Frederica thought. Thanks to Sol not putting her on a pedestal, the other girls were getting used to treating her like one of their own. Though she’d been a little forceful, her insistence that Sol call her by her name was paying off big-time. Now she had to make sure that she maintained an amicable relationship with the other girls.

“Ha ha ha, I see.” Sol laughed, then seemed to look into the distance. “In that case...”

A moment later, Frederica finally realized that she had been under a huge misconception this whole time. The power that she had believed to be capable only of amplifying existing talents now bestowed on her the skills and stats of Fist Princess Frederica.

In fact, she would eventually go down in history as “Fist Princess,” adored by children and adults alike and mentioned in the same breath as the Iron Wall and Saint of Healing, among the most powerful female adventurers to ever live.

Side Story: Aina'noa la Avalil the Elven Queen

Adrateio, the holy city of the Holy Church, was a self-ruling city-state located within the borders of the Amnesphia Sovereignty, the superpower dominating the northern part of the continent.

For a religion that taught honor in poverty, the Church couldn't be more hypocritical with how magnificent and grand its Holy See was. And deep in the heart of the Holy See was a holy precinct only accessible to incumbent popes, sealed and fully controlled by lost technology. Above the tightly shut doors, the words "Human Happiness Reassurance Commission" were emblazoned in ancient text that no one could read anymore. There was no longer any way to tell whether this was meant in jest or in seriousness.

At the moment, Gregorio IX was proceeding to the innermost chamber with heavy steps. For his mismanagement of the god that had been left in the care of the Holy Church, the sitting pope was being summoned by the Old Rulers for the first time in a thousand years.

Just as the tense silence was about to make Gregorio IX scream, several lights lit up around him.

"The release of one Purgatonium, the Bound Evil Dragon, Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon, has been confirmed."

"The loss of signals from Succubus No. 17 and the ninth satellite, Pluto, is also confirmed."

"That leaves only the fourth, Mars, and the seventh, Uranus. Firing without due consideration was a mistake. We knew all too well how ineffective technology of the old world is against *them*."

The strange lights formed complicated text in ancient script that kept changing shape. Upon closer inspection, each light was unique. They spoke so normally it was almost anticlimactic, but each voice was also unique, with the only common characteristic being that they all sounded old.

“I deeply apologize.” The pope, who was usually the one everyone kowtowed to, bowed as low as he could. The Old Rulers had given him permission to use the Divine Punishments—attack satellites, of which only three remained—but he had lost one with nothing to show for it. They had every right to punish him as they saw fit.

The Divine Punishments possessed unmatched potential in buttressing the Church’s influence in its ability to destroy monsters that proved too much to handle for the people of this age. The visual impact of a descending beam of light that blew away the clouds was an extremely convincing argument for the existence of God. And yet, Gregorio IX had lost one, and the weight of this blunder was not light. He couldn’t even claim ignorance, because everyone who had the clearance to come into contact with the Old Rulers had all relevant knowledge burned into their minds. The majority of that information was just facts that he couldn’t comprehend, but still, he understood enough to know he shouldn’t have done what he had.

“That is a problem too, but the bigger one is the Miracle Children of Ros Village. They are not as harmless as we thought.”

“We got careless after receiving confirmation that the leader and vice leader are normal adventurers.”

“There’s no point crying over spilled milk. We all let the ball drop.”

Surprisingly, none of the voices attacked Gregorio IX. Instead, they focused only on discussing the situation in matter-of-fact tones and rued their own lack of foresight. Apparently, their conclusion was that the Holy See had carried out its prescribed duties and that the fault lay with them, as they were supposed to keep an eye on the situation and make judgment calls.

I...might be saved. Gregorio gulped as quietly as he could while resolving not to speak a single word that wasn’t necessary.

“Are the other six Purgatoria still secure?”

“At the moment.”

“It’s only a matter of time. We do not have the means to erase them, and binding them again after they’ve broken free would be nigh impossible.”

“We can’t do nothing, though.”

“We must immediately select a new Hero.”

The other day, Gregorio had watched the footage of the fight between the All Dragon and the succubus. As a result, his belief that no one could stand up to the power that the Old Rulers had given him access to had been shattered. This made complete sense in retrospect—if the Old Rulers had been invincible, they wouldn’t have been the “Old” Rulers.

However, due to his position, he possessed knowledge of what they were talking about and could follow their conversation to a degree. The thought of being the only other pope to ever be involved in selecting a Hero sent his heart racing. The historic texts of the future were bound to dedicate more lines to him than almost all others.

What was more, although his blind faith in Divine Punishment was now gone, he was still entirely convinced that the Church would win the fight at the end of the day. After all, the very same organization had successfully brought down the same enemies a thousand years ago.

“Gregorio, are you certain that Sol Rock is the Wayside God this time?”

The pope had wanted to get through this audience without uttering a single word, but he obviously had to make an exception when directly addressed. Since the Old Rulers considered the handler of the All Dragon a “Wayside God,” it was Gregorio’s duty to eliminate him using the full might of the Church.

“He is in control of Lunvemt Nachtfelia the All Dragon. That much is certain.”

“Then it is obvious who the new Hero should be.”

“Do we truly have no choice but to add an eighth member to the Purgatonia?”

“I see no other way.”

“Unlike the first one, the new one is as yet a mere adventurer. We are short on time.”

“Gregorio, you know what to do.”

“I will not disappoint you.”

The Old Rulers were ordering Gregorio to select the Hero *and* buy enough time to develop that person to an acceptable level of strength. Given his position, the pope had no choice but to nod and say yes, though he was actually wondering why they weren't immediately killing the All Dragon and her handler. She had demonstrated incredible strength, but that was only against a mere succubus, and the Church still had far more powerful cards up its sleeve.

"Very well. Take action the moment the Wayside God makes a move. You merely need to delay him. We grant you permission to use any and all of the lost technology in the Church's possession."

"I am thankful beyond words!"

Now that he had what he wanted most from the Old Rulers, Gregorio was fully convinced of the Church's victory, despite having seen the All Dragon in action. However, he would soon know better. The success of a thousand years ago had been the product of a cascade of many fortuitous coincidences, and time wasn't the only culprit responsible for the Old Rulers having been reduced to mere specters pulling strings from the shadows. They had only asked Gregorio to buy time despite entrusting him with all of the Church's resources, and that was not because they were underestimating him. There was a proper reason the seven Purgatoria had been merely bound and not eliminated outright.

"Humanity does not need a god incarnate, as God is, by definition, beyond their ken," the center light recited. "To be human is to seek evolution through innovation, always worshipping an absent god, always fearing an absent darkness."

Recognizing this as a passage from the secret scripture The Epistles of Adra, Gregorio, along with the other lights, chanted the last line in unison.

"That which kills God and monsters cannot be man."

It would not be long before his faith in the power of the Holy Church would be shattered beyond repair.



The title of Elven Queen was given to she who stood above all elves,

recognized for her overwhelming magical talent. Her elven charges ruled the forests. Despite being humanoid in appearance, they possessed organs in the form of their distinctive long ears, luscious blonde hair, and golden eyes. Devinians and therianthropes were also magical beings who looked like humans, but while they lived roughly as long as humans did, elves had lifespans nearly as long as the dragoneels did.

In general, elves were slight in build and had skin as white and smooth as porcelain. They were also well known for their breathtakingly beautiful facial features. An elf who looked stunning and youthful could turn out to be a sage who possessed more knowledge and wisdom than any human, able to fire off spells of enormous scale without breaking a sweat. In terms of physical skills, their ability to circulate mana within themselves made it possible for them to demonstrate feats that belied their appearance. Their entire race was, in effect, an improved version of humans, able to live in the wilds and fight monsters without the aid of walls and talents.

And yet, in the present day, the entire race had declined so far as to be branded demihumans by the Church. They were placed in the same category as goblins and orcs and, depending on the area, actually treated like monsters.

Their queen, Aina'noa la Avalil, was commonly blamed for this downfall by betraying the Hero as depicted in the epilogue of the Kuzuifabra. Until then, the elves had been extolled as friends of humanity, even lauded as teachers and guardians who protected and guided the weak.

Aina'noa, who had retained the seat of Elven Queen for a thousand years, was said to have been the Hero's very first companion. Her attunement to mana was so great that her hair and eyes glowed turquoise, not gold. The sight of her two ponytails, longer than her own height and floating in the air with magic, was supposedly so sublime and beautiful that one glimpse of her was enough to convince anyone that the title of Elven Queen was hers and hers alone.

Despite her young looks, she possessed more knowledge and quick wit than the oldest sages, contributing greatly to the Hero's remarkable defeat of the Evil Dragon. However, after bringing down and binding Lunvemt Nachtfelia and earning acclaim as a member of the Hero's party, Aina'noa had turned on her.

In fact, she'd even gone so far as to lead a multitude of nonhuman races, including goblins, orcs, and those currently referred to as demihumans, in a massive insurrection. Her reasons remained unknown, but in spite of their normally mild and gentle nature, the attacks of the elves were fierce and relentless, torching many settlements and racking up a staggering number of human casualties.

In the end, the Hero, who had chosen to believe in her regardless, confronted her on the battlefield, but her attempts at persuasion fell on deaf ears. She brought her down with tears streaming from her eyes but couldn't bring herself to finish her off, therefore resorting to sealing away all her powers as she had done to the Evil Dragon. That was how Aina'noa had become one of the cards that appeared to Sol when he used Summon.

Her eyes were covered with an ominous cursed tool, and her dazzling turquoise hair was stained the color of blackened dried blood with a curse. Multiple stake-like earrings were punched into her long ears, and string the color of turbid blood was used to tie up her hands and truss up her entire body, thoroughly robbing her of all freedom of movement. She was then locked up in the Tower of Lament in the compound of the royal palace of Istekario, the Hero's home country, where it was said she remained to this day, living out the rest of her long, long lifespan.



In actuality, Aina'noa was currently on an old horse carriage making a mad dash for an elven settlement.

The elven man driving the carriage spat. "Damn! Guess they aren't letting us go that easily!"

"They're definitely going to catch up to us at this rate," the other elf sitting next to him replied. "And with them being Istekarian mages, we have no hope of beating them the way we are."

Both of them looked like young men with beautiful features, but they were actually veteran warriors more than a thousand years old. Unlike the stories, however, their eyes, skin, and hair were all stained dark. The only characteristic that was "correct" was the long ears. When the Elven Queen had been bound and her power sealed, the curses had had a domino effect that spread to the entire elven race. As a consequence, they had been transformed into dark elves.

With most of their organs sealed, the elves were drastically weakened, their ears enabling them to absorb only a trickle of outer mana. They could manage low-level spells in forests but were nowhere near the level of humans blessed with talents specialized for combat. Against a squad of Istekario's very best mages, they had no chance of victory.

"I know. Damn it all to hell. It's all been one big trap."

"Even so, we couldn't not take action, could we?"

This pair wasn't stupid. A thousand years had passed since they'd become dark elves, and they understood to the core of their beings that they couldn't win. How, then, had they managed to steal Aina'noa from the heavily guarded Istekarian capital and bring her all the way to the contested area in the vicinity of Garlaige? Clearly, they had been set up.

The empire had decided to finally rid itself of a deadweight that it had been saddled with for the past thousand years. Other countries called Istekario's capital "the Corrupted Capital" and treated its people as latent traitors just because they had been left with the one who had betrayed the Hero, but the current emperor had had enough. Without permission from the Church, he had

abruptly announced that he would be executing the Elven Queen.

Of course, since he did not have permission to do this, chances were high that he would be stopped. However, the elves, who had been allowed to live in a special area on the outskirts of the country, rose up in revolt. They broke into the palace, seized Aina'noa, and were now on the run, knowing full well that their actions gave Istekario the justification to kill them, their queen, and their entire race.

"Even if we reach the settlement, they'll kill every last one of us. We knew what we were getting into from the very start."

"I'd rather die than let our queen be defiled any further."

The process of stealing Aina'noa had been suspiciously easy. But having heard that the empire was planning on burning her alive, they simply couldn't sit still and pray for the Holy Church to intervene. As a result, they had walked right into the trap, even knowing it could lead to the massacre of their whole race.

"I totally agree, but...man, can you imagine how mad she'd be if she knew?"

The rescue attempt had the support of the entire elven race. If Aina'noa could speak, she would definitely have berated the lot of them, preferring much more to give her own life in exchange for all of theirs. However, they did not regret their decision. Life was more than just waking up each day and breathing. They had suffered disgrace and humiliation for a thousand years by clinging on to the hope that they would one day fulfill their vow to rescue their queen. Even if they fell by the wayside for their lack of strength, they could take more pride in such a death than a life eked out after abandoning their vow.

"You know what? Even if we're killed in the end, I want to do every damn thing we can first," the driver growled. "If our village is going to be put to the torch anyway, screw the taboos. Thankfully, Taboo Novem is close. Let's try our luck."

The slightly younger man grinned wryly. "Now that's something she'd *definitely* scold us for."

These two knew Aina'noa well enough to know that she absolutely detested the attitude of "if I die, I'll take everyone down with me." And yet...

“Well, there’s almost no chance of us successfully provoking Kuzuryuu and directing it at Istekario. If everything goes awry and it heads for Emelia instead, I’d feel awful, but... No, at this point, I can’t care less what happens to any human country.”

And yet, they were going through with it. If they couldn’t avoid the encroaching death, they wanted to face it head-on. Dying at the hands of Istekario’s mages wasn’t all that different from dying facing Kuzuryuu or even the monsters in Kuzuryuu’s territory. Thankfully, the heart of Taboo Novem was a dense forest. This was the moment to demonstrate why the elves had once been called the “rulers of the forest.” And who could say what would happen? Perhaps one of the gods who had refused to submit to the One True God the Church touted would witness their display of valor and grant their wish.

As luck would have it, their wish would indeed be granted—not by some god of the forests, but by the Wayside God. Aina’noa la Avalil, the Elven Queen, would be saved by Lunvemt Nachtfelia, the very creature she had helped defeat a thousand years ago.

This coincidental encounter would set off a chain of events that went far beyond the expectations of Frederica, the Holy Church, the Old Rulers, and even Sol himself.

To be continued in the arc: The Captive Elven Queen.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up volume one of *The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters*. I am Sin Guilty, the author of this humble work. Thanks to *Syosetsuka ni Narou*, after having been immersed in light novels, manga, and games since childhood, I finally have an opportunity to pick up the support job of “Novelist” alongside my main job of “Corporate Employee” and get a taste of the joys and hardships of those on the creation side. I won’t tell you what level my support job is, so please leave me alone in Jeuno.

First of all, I want to thank HJ Novels for finding my work among the multitude being birthed on *Syosetsuka ni Narou* every day and publishing it. I’m also deeply thankful to those who found my work and gave it enough attention for HJ Novels to notice it. Everyone, thank you very much.

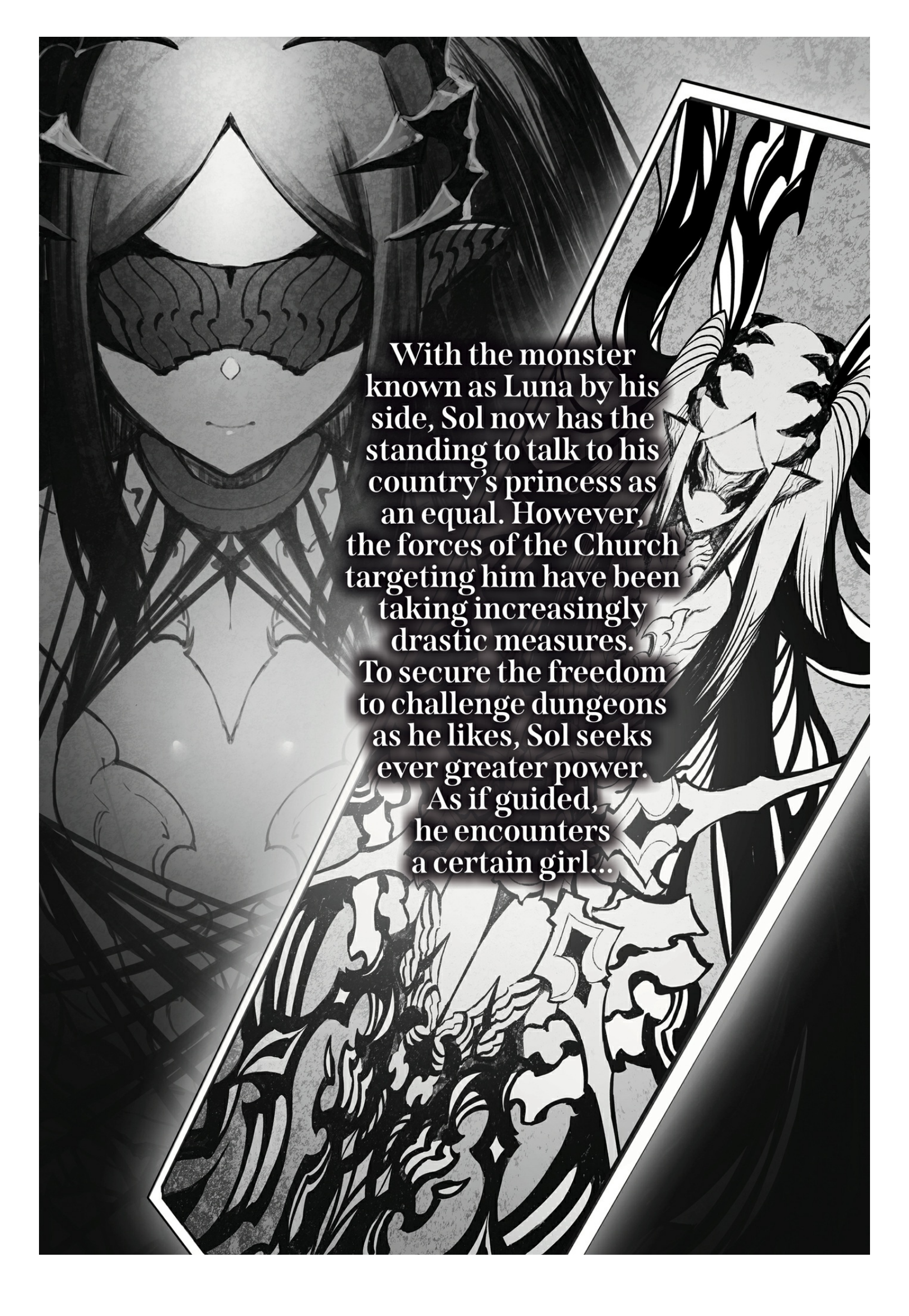
I’m sure that many readers are blown away by the cover illustration, the colored frontispiece illustrations, and the numerous insert illustrations, all of stunning quality, courtesy of NAKAMURA 8. In fact, I myself practically danced with joy seeing what an amazing job he did bringing my characters to life. I truly hope that my work was worthy of his top-tier talent, but I’ll let you, the readers, be the judge of that.

This work is about the protagonist, Sol, pursuing his childhood dream of conquering all of the dungeons and freeing all the monster territories in his world. Along the way, he gains the loyalty of monsters, starting with Luna the “All Dragon,” while bestowing incredible power on his childhood friends, Reen and Julia, and new companions, including Eliza and Princess Frederica. Of course, that power is more than enough to dominate the world with, and Sol’s group will end up going through all sorts of experiences as leaders.

After they finally unseal all territories and reach the deepest parts of every dungeon, just what will Sol and his monsters see? How did the Old Rulers, humans, therianthropes, devinians, dragoneels, and other demihumans come to be? For what reason do the dungeons, territories, and the Tower exist? Upon

gaining the answers to all these questions, what future will Sol, the Boy Who Ruled the Monsters, choose?

I hope that you continue showing me your support as I do my best to tell this story to the very end. For starters, Sol's group will be clashing with the Holy Church and learning a fragment of this world's secrets in volume two, which will be coming out this winter. This is where I'll leave this afterword, hoping to see you again in the next volume.



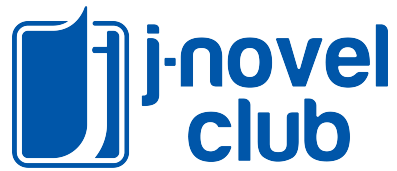
With the monster known as Luna by his side, Sol now has the standing to talk to his country's princess as an equal. However, the forces of the Church targeting him have been taking increasingly drastic measures. To secure the freedom to challenge dungeons as he likes, Sol seeks ever greater power. As if guided, he encounters a certain girl...











Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

The Boy Who Ruled the Monsters: Volume 1

by Sin Guilty

Translated by Kamishiro Taishi Edited by Tess Nanavati

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

Copyright © Sin Guilty Illustrations by NAKAMURA 8

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

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

Ebook edition 1.0: October 2024