



THE CENTRAL
PROVINCES ARC

I

THE WATER MAGICIAN

AUTHOR: TADASHI KUBOU
ILLUSTRATOR: NOKITO



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Character References

Rough Draft

NAME: Ryo Mihara

AGE: 19 years old

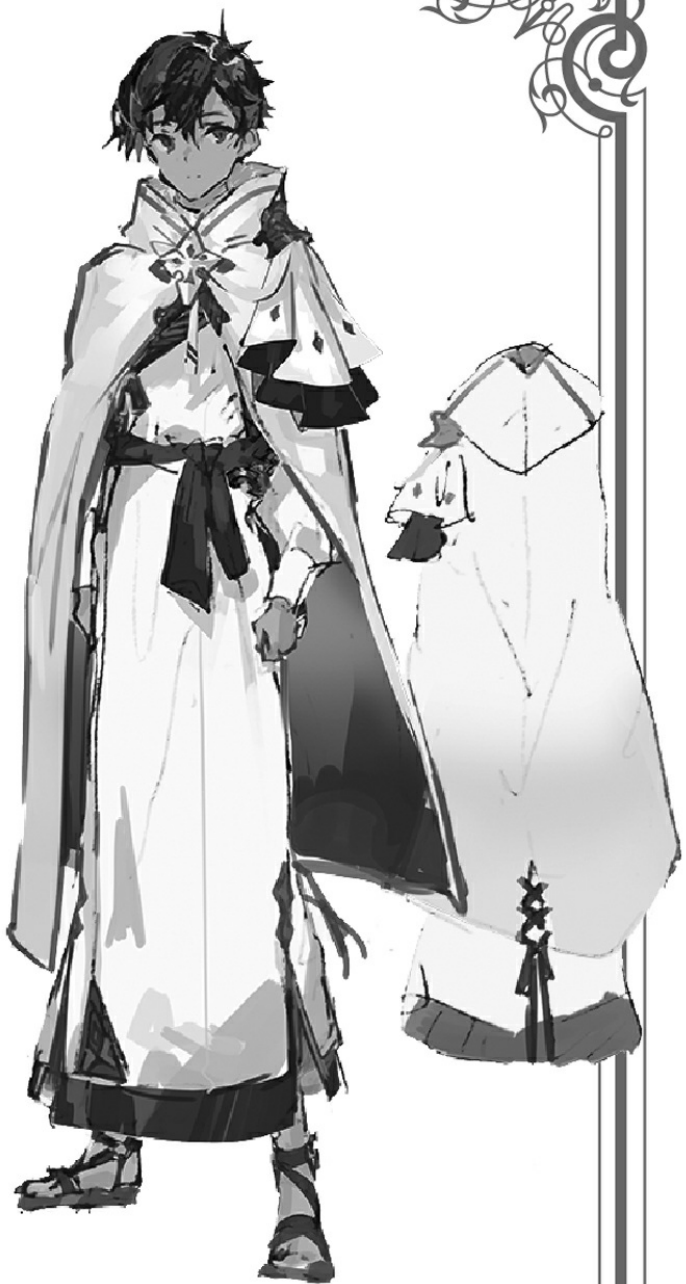
HEIGHT: 175 cm

PROFILE: A young man from Earth reincarnated on Phi. Granted the ability to manipulate water magic and the hidden skill of immortality in his new life, the latter of which will have him remain forever nineteen. Majored in western history in university. Loves comedy. Took him almost twenty years to realize he wasn't aging, so he's a bit of an airhead.

TRAITS: An aptitude for water magic.
Eternal Youth.

POSSESSIONS:

- ✦ Murasame, the Fairy King's sword - The hilt measures roughly 24 cm. It normally looks like a knife with a really long handle, but he can use magic to create a blade, transforming it into a slender sword.
- ✦ The Fairy King's robe - The Dullahan gave this to him when he left the Forest of Rondo. Strong enough to withstand Leonore's air spear attack.
- ✦ A bag with seasonings - Handmade by Ryo. Contains salt and black pepper.



Ryo, you have an ice sword, right?

I do. Its name is Murasame.
You can't have it, though, Abel.



But I don't even want it...

Not like you could generate the blade anyway.



Well, sooo sorry I can't use magic!

Character References

Rough Draft



NAME: Abel

AGE: 26 years old

HEIGHT: 190 cm

PROFILE: A B-rank adventurer based in Lune. Swordsman. Leader of the party Crimson Sword. Though he can be blunt at times, he cares deeply for his friends and is good at looking after others. He actually loves to read. Might be keeping a secret from Ryo...

TRAITS: Combat Skills - Techniques only certain professionals versed in melee combat can use. There are very few who can use them, so research on these skills hasn't progressed much. Sword Skills - These are even higher level than Combat Skills and only swordsmen can use.

POSSESSIONS:

✦ His magic blade - A mysterious sword that sometimes glows red.



NAME: Dullahan

AGE: Tens of thousands of years old

HEIGHT: 185 cm

PROFILE: Looks like a headless knight but is actually the Water Fairy King. Is an extremely inquisitive individual, according to Lewin. Cares for Ryo as his disciple, so he gives him Murasame and a special robe as gifts.



Abel, your sword is magical, isn't it?

Yeah, but you know you can't have it, right?



I challenge you to face off against Murasame! Winner takes all!

Uhhh... What the heck would I even do with your sword? I can't use magic, so... Hard pass.



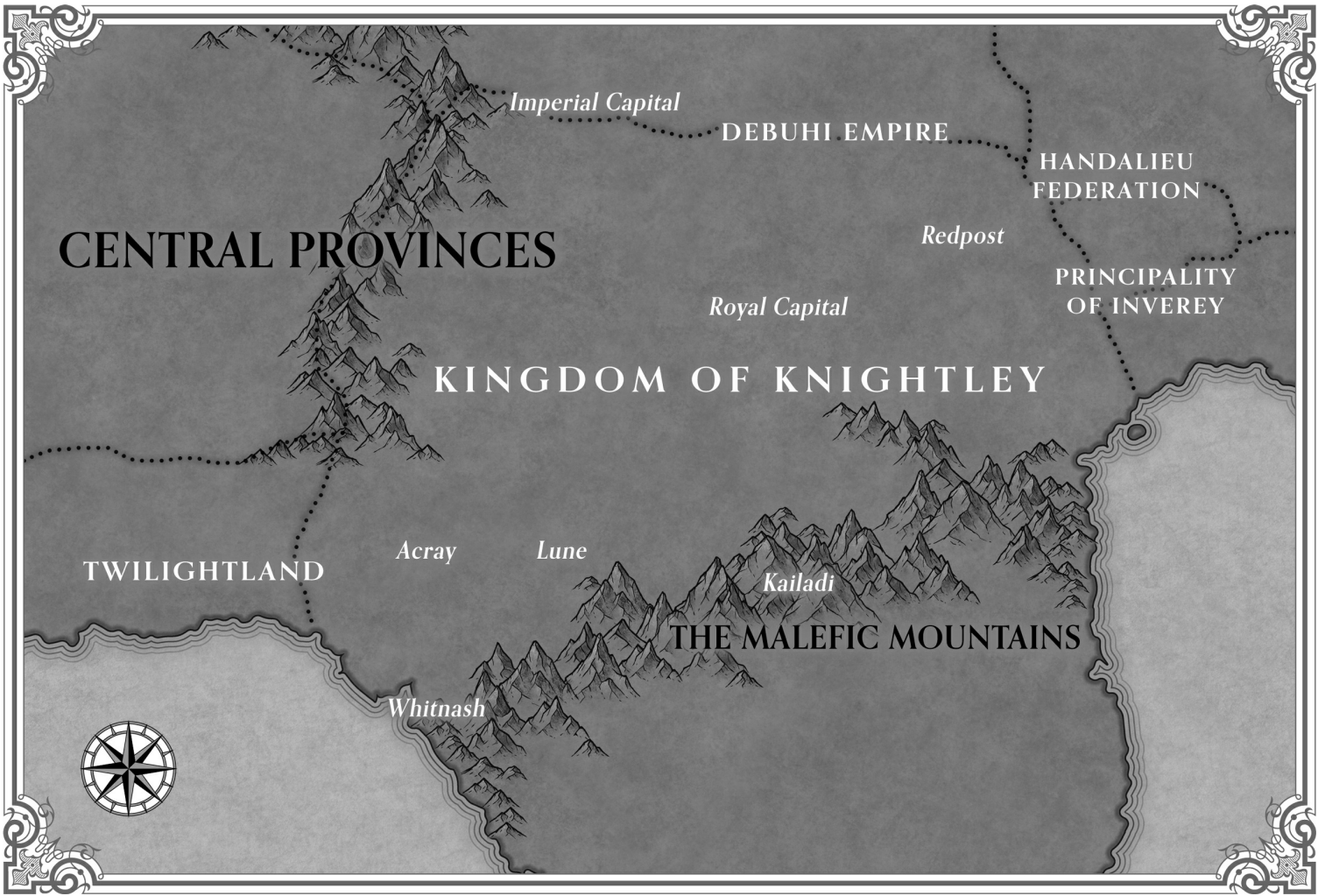


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Prologue

“Ryo, I need you to stay calm and listen.”

The phone call was about his parents’ deaths.

He had only just started his second year in university, but Ryo withdrew from school and returned home to take over the family business. Since he didn’t know his left from right when it came to the business, Shige, who’d been director in the company, became president while Ryo became vice president. He knew all the employees too. They used to play with him when he was a child.

Despite his lofty title, his salary was the lowest—but he didn’t mind. He learned the work little by little without annoying those around him.

Eleven months passed and it was now March.

“Ryo, how about I help you with that?”

It was late, but Ryo was still working away at his computer. Shige offered his assistance, unable to just sit by and watch him.

“I’m fine. Thank you though. It’s for the youth division, so...”

The youth division of the chamber of commerce, consisting only of young business owners, presented a challenge for Ryo in many ways. The chamber of commerce itself was an entity that existed in some form or another across the country. Many small-and medium-sized businesses belonged to their local organization. Of course, membership wasn’t mandatory, and in the case of Ryo’s company, it wasn’t even necessary since there weren’t many advantages to membership to begin with.

But the previous head of the company, his father, belonged to their local chamber of commerce because he’d been asked to join so the business remained a member even under Shige’s leadership. It wasn’t the work within their company itself that Ryo struggled with but the time he spent on

professional relationships outside of it.

“Shige, this work really makes me realize how much more efficient our company is.”

For the chamber’s youth division, Ryo had to create myriad documents, presentation materials, event flyers, and more. It made him appreciate the relative lack of paperwork in their company in comparison.

“All because of the previous president. He never liked wasting time on creating physical reports and such. To him, writing reports didn’t bring in revenue or increase sales. His belief was that the more time people spend drafting documents, the less productive they are. He didn’t think it was normal for a company’s employees to spend a majority of their eight-hour workday on just paperwork, so it was important for him to reclaim as much time as possible from the document drudgery and use it toward meaningful tasks. Like meeting clients or improving your own talents or designing new ideas and whatnot... That’s how he wanted people to use their time. Which is why we rely on actual conversations whenever we have reports to make or things to discuss. If a manager wants to know what’s happening in the field, then they should head there and ask the people in charge directly. This is our company’s fundamental model, you know.”

Naturally, a company culture like this wouldn’t work at a massive corporation or at a company designed around remote work, an environment that made it entirely possible for employees to never exchange a single word in conversation. Ryo’s company was in manufacturing, so telework wasn’t an option. Moreover, it only had ninety-seven employees, including management.

“Because the people on the ground know best what’s happening there, which is why they hold so much authority, right?”

“Yes, although it gets complicated if something happens, since their bosses share the responsibility too... Of course, that includes us on the management side.”

Shige chuckled ruefully before continuing.

“That’s why management needs to be ready for anything. We don’t have a separate HR department because management is in charge of personnel, so

assigning jobs to others means taking responsibility along with them for their failures.”

He said that with a smile.

“Now, Ryo, it’s time for me to tell you the words of my predecessor, since you’re working so darn hard.”

“Don’t work so hard you tire yourself out,” they both said at the same time.

Then they grinned at each other.

The motto wasn’t designed to scare employees or encourage them to be lazy, nor was it to baby them. It was just the truth from a management perspective. Failures, mistakes, revisions...all of these things happened regardless of how carefully someone did their work, but many of them had two things in common: fatigue and urgency.

For example: revisions. Revisions meant a waste of the time, energy, and data someone spent on the work until now. Furthermore, reverting to the correct original state meant spending *more* time and energy on the task. So it helped a company tremendously by reducing waste in all those areas. Of course, it was all case by case, since it was important for employees to learn and grow from their mistakes.

As the company’s owner, Ryo’s father had always been vocal to his employees about not overworking themselves. Once Ryo started learning the ropes of the business himself, he understood how amazing his father had been as a leader. Now, he respected him even more after knowing how smoothly his father had kept the company going without tiring out the employees.

“Haaa...”

After he sighed, Ryo spoke to Shige.

“Thank you for the reminder. Dad would get mad at me for exhausting myself working.”

“Yes, he would, Ryo,” Shige said, beaming approvingly at him.

Working hard was important, but pushing yourself when you were tired wasn’t hard work.

“I’ll go home and sleep.”

With that, Ryo left for the night.

His exhaustion might have made him a bit wobbly on his feet. Even so, the light at the crosswalk was green. He had made sure to double-check before stepping on to the street. He knew he’d done everything right until then.

But...he wasn’t sure if he’d looked both ways first. Because if he had, then maybe he would have noticed the truck barreling toward him, its driver asleep at the wheel.

When it hit him, Ryo flew through the air and slammed down hard on the pavement. A flash of pain and then it was gone. His consciousness faded, bit by bit.

Well, this sucks...

The first thing Ryo felt wasn’t fear of death or even relief—only regret...just a bit. He didn’t know why. And mingled with it was a sliver of grief, because tomorrow would have been his twentieth birthday.



When Ryo opened his eyes, he found himself in a world of white.

“Is this the afterlife?”

“You are Dominus Ryo Mihara, yes?”

A man’s figure started coalescing out of the all-white world. Once he fully materialized, Ryo saw that he looked to be in his late twenties. Possessed of a calm air, he could be described as a handsome European with his long golden hair. He held a tablet-like item in his left hand.

“Yes, I am.”

The man smiled at Ryo’s response.

“Oh, thank goodness. You’re actually the first visitor I’ve had in quite a while.”

Then a measure of sadness clouded his expression before he continued.

“Dominus Ryo Mihara, you died in an accident.”

I figured... Memories started filtering into Ryo's mind—memories of his death.

"Yes, I remember now," he responded, nodding.

The man's expression changed again, a slight smile on his lips now as he began speaking.

"This is one part of the system known as samsara in your world. Your particular Earth is located on World Line 7770777. In rare cases, individuals from your Earth are either reincarnated or transferred across world lines even after death. And you were chosen this time, Dominus Ryo Mihara."

"I... What now?" Ryo asked, unable to make heads or tails of what he'd said.

"Your confusion is perfectly understandable. Let me put it simply. Would you be willing to reincarnate in a world different from Earth with all your memories of your former life? This is what's being offered to you."

The man's hopeful smile seemed to ask if Ryo understood now.

"Oh, you're talking about an isekai reincarnation... Like in novels..."

"Ah, yes. Yes, that's correct. Seems it's a popular theme recently on your Earth as well... This is a much easier way to explain the situation indeed."

Ryo was grateful to receive another chance at life. Nevertheless, a question remained on his mind. What did this person (being?) actually want Ryo to do after he reincarnated?

"I have a few questions."

"Of course. Ask away."

The man continued smiling, waiting for Ryo to ask.

"Are you God?"

"No, I'm not. Based on your frame of reference, I would say I'm closer to what you call an angel."

Oh, okay. An angel. An angel, huh... Like Michael, the archangel. Then I'll just think of him as Fake Michael until I find out his real name. If he even has one.

While Ryo's thoughts churned, he thought he saw one of Fake Michael's

eyebrows raise. He couldn't be sure though, since the movement was so minuscule he could have imagined it...

Wait. Can he read my mind? I guess it doesn't really matter.

Fake Michael's cheerfully polite smile didn't waver as he waited for Ryo's next question.

"What's the purpose of my reincarnation?"

"My apologies, but I can't answer that."

In an instant, his expression went from smiling to apologetic.

"We don't determine who reincarnates. Ryo, do you know when you asked me if I was God? Well, the ones who that term applies to, at least from your perspective, are the ones who make such decisions. And they don't inform us of the reasons why."

"Then what exactly am I supposed to do in whichever world I'm reincarnated in?"

Fake Michael smiled again.

"Please live your new life as you see fit, as I haven't received any special instructions to give you regarding specific tasks or otherwise."

Live however you want. Ryo loved the sound of those words! Hm, in that case, a slow life would be nice.

"I understand. Then I accept the offer to reincarnate."

Ryo's reply made Fake Michael positively beam, like a flower blooming. His smile was so blindingly beautiful Ryo could easily imagine lots of women falling under his spell from it alone.

"Wonderful, I'm so glad to hear that. Then allow me to tell you about your new world."

So saying, Fake Michael started explaining. According to him, Ryo's new world was one of sword and magic. The likes of gunpowder and its kind weren't yet common. The planet's size and molecular composition were the same as Earth's. Physical phenomena were also essentially the same.

“But magic exists in this world, right?” Ryo asked, wondering if its existence wouldn’t make physical phenomena wildly different from Earth’s.

“Yes, it does, and it used to exist on Earth as well. Although it’s no longer practiced at present due to various events and circumstances.”

The knowledge shocked Ryo.

Magic used to exist on Earth? No way. Maybe he’s talking about out-of-place artifacts or something? But I heard those have reasonable explanations and have nothing to do with aliens or ancients or whatever... Then again, there are legends and folktales all over Earth featuring magic and magicians...

“Oh, dear, I must apologize. It seems I’ve thrown your mind into chaos with this unexpected information. If I may say though, I’d like to remind you that your reincarnation has already been decided, so I think it best for your mental health that you don’t dwell on Earth’s past.”

“Ah, yes, right. You’re right.”

He needed to remember not to think about things he couldn’t do anything about. *Compartmentalize*. After all, compartmentalization was an effective method for people to achieve mental equilibrium.

“Excellent. Let me tell you more about your new world of magic, Ryo. For convenience’s sake, we call it ‘Phi.’ One in five people of Phi can use magic. And you have an aptitude for water magic.”

“Water...”

It was standard for characters to use magic in stories where they were reincarnated or teleported to another world.

But if we’re talking stereotypes then...something with a high attack power like fire magic would have been nice... Or easy-to-use earth magic... Yeah, earth magic sounds fun. Make a swamp and stop my enemies in their tracks or build a fort in an instant and turn the tide of battle. I want to try all that... Wait. Why stop there though? If I’m going to be reincarnated anyway, I should have an aptitude for all the elements! Well, it’d be nice anyway.

“Um, would it be possible to change it to fire or earth...?”

Once more for the umpteenth time, Fake Michael looked apologetic.

“I apologize, but I can’t make any changes. Ryo, your magical aptitude falls within the range of Creation, in short under those aforementioned gods’ territory. It’s out of the scope of our responsibilities. Moreover, in Phi, a person’s magical attribute is conferred at birth so therefore cannot be learned after the fact.”

“So basically I’m stuck with water magic for the rest of my life?”

Ryo looked so defeated, so hopeless that Fake Michael rushed to add on to his explanation.

“That is indeed the case, but please rest assured that possessing an aptitude for water is a *very* good thing for humans. For example, no matter where you live, you will need water. And *you* will never have to worry about procuring it. Not to mention eighty percent of Phi’s human population can’t even use magic. So you’re quite blessed in that sense too, Dominus Ryo Mihara.”

Well, he’s not wrong. Humans need water and sodium to survive. In a world of sword and magic, I doubt even the cities will have proper water and sewer systems in place. Which means it might be a big deal if I don’t have to worry about water there.

Ryo Mihara was a fundamentally optimistic person.

“Is there any chance that water magic has any healing or restorative properties...?”

“In Phi, healing falls in light magic’s domain.”

“Oh, okay...”

Fake Michael’s explanation continued. Phi’s magic system consisted of six elemental attributes—fire, water, air, earth, light, and dark, though it also included magics that couldn’t be categorized as any of the six elements.

“It may be possible to learn new magic as long as it’s a non-elemental one. But...it’s just a possibility. I won’t say it’s zero, although it *is* exceedingly slim. Honestly, I wouldn’t hold any expectations on that front. Instead, I recommend you focus on developing your aptitude for water magic.”

Fake Michael gave Ryo more details while staring at the tablet in his hand.

“I see that most of your physical abilities are slightly above average. Since Phi isn’t structured around the so-called level or skill systems, steady effort will be your most important ally.”

I guess I’m not all that surprised to learn I’m still pretty much average. But if I’m only slightly above average like he said, then that means I’ll have to work my butt off just so I don’t die right away...

“How can I improve my magical and physical abilities?”

“Humans are humans wherever they are, whether on Phi or Earth. In short, the methods to better yourself remain the same. On Earth, the more a person uses their body, the more they train it, yes? For example, lifting weights adds muscle while running improves cardiovascular functions. Here’s another one—there’s a specific group of people in Africa on Earth whose vision is leagues better than 20/20 because they have looked at things and people from great distances since childhood. On the other hand, let’s consider those who become blind. Without sight, they have no choice but to rely on their hearing to gather information about the world around them, making their hearing quite acute. So it is on Phi. Dedicate yourself earnestly to improving and you will.”

After that, he explained a few more things before reaching the final stage of the process—asking Ryo what he wished for in this new world.

“A slow life! In a place where I can be left alone and not have to deal with people!”

Fake Michael nodded firmly and moved his fingers on the tablet’s display.

“Then let’s have you reincarnated in the Forest of Rondo. I’ll prepare a house and a two-month supply of food. In that time, please learn to use your water magic well enough to hunt. I’ve made it so that monsters won’t approach your house. You could call it a barrier. Based on Earth’s measurement system, I placed it within a hundred-meter radius. There’s also a sea located five hundred meters southwest of your house. Once you become adept at using water magic, you should be able to extract salt from the seawater. Do your best, Ryo.”

“I understand, thank you. Oh, one last thing. How exactly do I use magic?”

Ryo asked the most important question at the very end. Considering he would be reincarnated in a world of magic, he couldn't *not* ask how to go about using his!

"The crux of magic relies on the user's ability to produce an image in their mind. A clear image. After that, it's just a matter of gaining experience. No matter what it is, one will never be good at it right away. But the harder one tries, the more they'll improve. Magic is the same."

"I'll try my best. Thank you very much for all your help."

And with those words, Ryo's body was enveloped in light before it vanished. Then, only Fake Michael remained in that space.

"A slow life, hm... Sounds wonderful. Perhaps one day I too will gain a corporeal form and live a slow life in some world."

He scanned over the data on the tablet one last time...and realized what he missed.

"Ack... I forgot to tell him how powerful his magic is, even for Phi. Well, I suppose he'll figure it out along the way."

Except there was something else too.

"A hidden trait? But why? I haven't seen a hidden trait since her, the first one I met when I was assigned to reincarnation... That was ten thousand years ago, wasn't it? I wonder what his special trait is."

Hidden Trait: Eternal Youth.

Phi, the New World

“My first ceiling...”

Ryo’s first words were similar to what people usually said in this kind of isekai situation. Sort of. A luxurious canopied bed—not. He wouldn’t even have been able to see the ceiling with a canopy in the first place...

Compared to Japanese standards back in his old life, this bed was definitely on the shabby side. It was just fabric placed over straw strewn across a wooden floor. If he thought of it at the cultural level of pre-Renaissance Europe, however, then it would be considered high quality. At least for his house, which wasn’t an aristocrat’s mansion by any means.

He wore the same clothes he had on when he died on Earth. Shoes too. He wasn’t carrying anything.

Ryo rolled out of bed and the first thing he did was wander around inside the house. Bedroom, living room, kitchen, and bathroom.

“A bathtub?!”

He’d never heard of pre-Renaissance Europeans having bathrooms in their homes.

“But ancient Romans had huge public bathhouses, so I guess it’s possible. I, for one, am grateful as a Japanese person... Ohhh, I wonder if Fake Michael made it specifically for me *because* I’m Japanese. Many thanks, Fake Michael! I bow to your talents!”

He still wasn’t sure if Fake Michael was a man or not.

However, Ryo’s knowledge was greatly lacking since public bathhouses did in fact exist in medieval Europe. Except people back then didn’t really understand the concept of hygiene, so ironically enough, those public bathhouses were breeding grounds for infectious diseases.

Satisfied by what he found in the bathroom, Ryo moved to the living room.

Two books and a knife rested on top of the table. Next to them lay a single piece of paper.

Your food supply is in the silo outside. It also doubles as a freezer, so you can preserve food as well. - Fake Michael

“I knew he was reading my mind...”

He sure didn’t want to make an enemy of a talented man like Fake Michael.

Unlike the thick, heavy books stored in the rare books section of his university’s library, these books looked...pretty normal actually... Yup, just like books made after the development of the printing press.

“Whoa. Are these made of paper? Actual paper and not parchment? This world has paper?”

He silently read the title on each book’s cover. *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition. The Flora Compendium, Beginner Edition.*

“This means...”

He didn’t have something like an appraisal skill, which was a staple of reincarnation stories.

“I know he said this world wasn’t based on levels or skills, but come on...”

Both books contained plenty of easy-to-understand illustrations, which he was incredibly thankful for.

As for the knife on the table, its blade was roughly twenty centimeters long and, overall, looked quite well-made. If you were stranded on a desert island, what’s the one thing you would take with you? The go-to answer for that question was a knife. So Ryo picked it up and put it in his waistband for the time being.

He surveyed the area around the table as well as the rest of the room but found nothing else. Then he finally opened the door leading outside, only to be blinded by the sun’s brilliant rays. When he adapted to the light, he saw a carpet of grass stretching around the house. Beyond that, a dense forest obstructed his view.

Woods surrounded the house on the other side too. Except beyond it...he

could see mountains so tall they pierced the sky. He realized they must be pretty far away from here. He'd initially thought the climate in this world was mild, but changed his mind when he saw the snow covering the mountain peaks.

"I bet dragons and whatnot live there. Which means...I better not get anywhere close."

Ryo said the words out loud on purpose, swearing an oath to himself.

He wasn't hungry yet, which meant there was time to do *it*. He absolutely *had* to know that he was in this world of sword and magic. Yes, it was time to actually use his magic.

"I can't use anything except water magic. And the image is the most important thing with magic."

He thrust his right hand out and raised it, which felt like the right move for some reason. While he imagined water spouting from his palm, Ryo chanted.

"Water, spill forth!"

Splash. A trickle of water enough to fill a cup flowed out of his hand and landed on the ground. His first magical experience! Objectively speaking, it had been an extremely lackluster display, but it was still something. Ryo couldn't stop shaking from the elation of succeeding at his very first magical attempt.



*“Magic really *does* exist in this world...”*

He was so happy, he tried several more times after that...

“Water, spill forth!”

“Water, spill forth!”

“Water, spill forth!”

A beat of silence and then he muttered out loud.

“Fake Michael said the image was important. What if I try this instead...”

In his mind, he visualized the same image of water rushing out of his right palm.

“Water.”

Just like all his previous attempts, a ball of water only enough to fill a cup spilled out and hit the ground.

“Wo-tah.”

This time he tried saying it with an accent, but the result was the same—a cup’s worth that plopped to the ground. On his next attempt, Ryo decided to say it in his mind instead of out loud.

Water.

No change. Still only enough to fill a cup plunging straightaway to the ground.

“Huh. Guess I don’t have to actually say it out loud. Shoot, I’ve always wanted to use a cool-sounding spell though...”

No matter how old they got, men never outgrew Main Character Syndrome.

“Ahhh, I should have done this in the bathtub... What a waste of water...”

He rushed to the bathroom and continued his water magic practice over the tub.

“I still haven’t been able to produce anything more than a cupful each time. I’d love to get a stronger, continuous flow going, enough to fill up the tub.”

The bathtub was an impressive affair made out of stone. It would fit perfectly

in a high-class hot spring inn with private open-air baths in each suite. He knew filling it up with the cupfuls of water he'd been producing posed a real challenge.

"A strong, continuous flow of water, huh? Like water flowing out of a tap. No, wait, wait, wait. This is a *tub*. So I don't just need regular water but *hot* water. All right, let's try producing hot water."

Ryo imagined hot water. In order to solidify his vision, he chanted the words out loud.

"Hot water."

When he did, another cupful of water dropped into the tub. Yes, *water* and not *hot* water.

"What the heck? Maybe I need to make the image clearer?"

This time, he imagined the entire tub filled with hot water while chanting.

"Hot water."

The result was the same—another cupful of lukewarm water splashed into the tub.

"Hmmm...I think I'll give up on hot water for today. This Forest of Rondo is pretty hot, so bathing in regular water sounds nice too."

Ryo didn't mind hard work, but he also knew when to give up. It was only natural, since he couldn't expect to be good at it right off the bat. Decision made, he pulled himself together.

"Faucet."

Water flowed out steadily from his right hand as if it were a faucet.

"Yes, yes, very good. That's the way."

He was mature enough to admit his failure with producing hot water. When considering how much regular water he created on his first day, he *had* to count this as some sort of success. At the very least, he could now make enough water for drinking and bathing.

Of the problems people faced every day in their lives, a big one remained for him...

“I need fire, don’t I...”

For cooking, for staying warm, and for the day he eventually leveled up from lukewarm baths to hot baths. One way or another, he needed to get his hands on fire.

This problem wouldn’t exist if he could use fire magic but...that was pretty much asking for the moon in this world. After all, Ryo could only use water for the rest of his life.

“The question is, how do I go about getting fire...”

Didn’t humanity first “discover” fire when lightning struck a tree and set it ablaze? He wasn’t sure if that was actually true though... Or maybe it was Prometheus who gave fire to mankind...? Except he didn’t like either of those options right now.

“A piece of flint would be easiest.”

He did another cursory inspection of the house and found no flint. Striking his knife’s steel against a flint should create sparks. Ryo was sure he would eventually find what he wanted if he searched the nearby cliffs or riverbanks but that was for after he adapted more to his life here.

Fake Michael had told him monsters wouldn’t come within a hundred-meter radius of his house, which meant there were probably monsters outside that range. He would step outside the barrier once he made the necessary preparations. “Barrier” was what he decided to call it until he knew the real term. He couldn’t cross it anyway until his water magic was strong enough to fight with. Otherwise, he didn’t stand a chance.

At any rate, Ryo needed to find another way to obtain fire. Without flint, the only other way he could create fire was by rubbing a hard stick against a soft stick to use the friction to make heat.

“I really can’t picture myself succeeding...”

When the bathtub was full, Ryo headed outside the house for a brief period.

He gathered kindling and firewood while keeping a wary eye on the area outside the barrier. He also picked up anything else that would make the tinder he'd need to get the fire started. Dried grass would work as long as he crushed it up some... Probably, anyway.

Just then, he was lucky enough to come across a tree that wasn't quite a hemp palm tree, but it at least fell in the palm tree category. Its black bark would come in handy.

"Yup, I think I remember seeing this in a video."

That was what Ryo's survival knowledge amounted to.

Fake Michael included a traditional wood-burning stove in the house. Even taking into account all the firewood it required, he would still have plenty left over to use. For the sticks he'd need to create friction, a branch from a pine tree and a branch from an evergreen oak would be best.

"Let's do this!"

Not even a puff of smoke. Ryo kept trying. One hour passed...then two...before he finally gave up.

"I guess I should check what kind of food I have."

Sometimes, you just need to be practical and prioritize. He shouldn't expect things to go well right off the bat.

Having thrown in the towel on lighting a fire, Ryo headed toward the silo outside the house. It looked like a normal hut. When he opened the door, he found it nice and cold inside.

"Is this water magic? Are the walls made of ice? Is this what they call an ice house?"

This must be Fake Michael's handiwork too. In the future, Ryo could use this kind of magic too...maybe.

On his second day in Phi, Ryo woke up with the sunrise. He'd already thought of an idea on how to acquire fire, but in order to make it a reality he needed to better understand how to use his water magic.

Fake Michael had told him the laws of physics on Earth and Phi, as well as

their molecular compositions, were almost identical. It was also true that while magic existed on Phi, it didn't on Earth—although, apparently, Earth *used* to be a world of magic too.

On Earth, water's molecular structure was H₂O. So, in all likelihood, it was the same on Phi.

Ryo brought the bucket from the bathroom.

"Faucet."

He filled it up with about ten centimeters of water, which he planned to freeze. In his mind, he focused on creating a distinct image of ice.

"Freeze!"

But it didn't go well.

"Hmmm, this is really hard. I have to keep going though because I *need* to be able to make ice... Pretty sure I can use it as a weapon. I'd love to use my magic to create an ice spear or something."

Maybe it wasn't enough to just condense the water. It might help if he visualized the heat leaving the liquid at the same time as it became a solid. So, he went through a trial-and-error process as he tested out various techniques.

After countless challenging attempts, a thin film of ice finally appeared on the water's surface. Unfortunately, it wouldn't freeze any further than that. Then, he decided to concentrate on the H₂O molecules themselves.

Two mechanics exist by which ice stores heat: the first involves particle vibrations while in the second, enthalpy, heat is stored by changing the strength of the bonds between water molecules.

The foundation of magic is imagination and a person's imagination is limitless. One can imagine everything from the tiniest, microscopic grain in the known world to the vast, infinite reaches of space. Human imagination is all-powerful in the truest sense of the word.

People can't see atoms and molecules with the naked eye, but...as long as they possess the necessary knowledge, they can imagine it!

All Ryo needed to do was bond H₂O molecules together. Take the O from this

molecule and connect it to the H on its neighbor. He focused on visualizing the phenomenon known as hydrogen bonding.

Ice comes in many forms. Aside from the common hexagonal crystal structure, it also existed as a cubic crystal in the natural world. Moreover, fifteen other types of ice have been discovered in high-pressure environments—from beautiful lattices of hydrogen bonds filled with gaps to ice that appears crushed.

Many aspects of ice and water still remain a mystery to scientists on Earth. These substances are deeply intertwined in human life because mankind can't live without them—yet even these ubiquitous phenomena are full of unsolved puzzles.

Ryo couldn't help but think these thoughts now that he was a water magician. Even while he considered this, however, he needed to work on creating ice, so he focused on creating a neat lattice of water molecules joined together by hydrogen bonding. Simultaneously, he visualized stopping the molecular vibrations.

A substance's temperature is proportional to the amplitude of the vibrations in its molecular structure. In other words, temperature is an index of the intensity of molecular vibration. The more intense the vibrations, the higher the temperature rises in the substance. Conversely, the less intense the vibrations, the more the temperature decreases. So when the atomic and molecular vibrations reach almost zero, the temperature reaches what is known as absolute zero at -273.15 degrees Celsius. That is why, in principle, there's no such thing as a temperature lower than absolute zero.

In his mind, the vibrations of water molecules continued to lessen. The water in the bucket obeyed the image and...became wholly ice.

"All right, success! Success, yes, but...I can't get it *out* of the bucket."

Then he realized he needed to change the ice's shape just a little bit. Holding both hands over the ice, he began shaving ice off the block's perimeter a little at a time. When he flipped the bucket upside down, a block of ice 25 centimeters in diameter and 10 centimeters thick dropped out.

He picked it up and held it in both hands as he continued visualizing. He

thickened the center and thinned the outside to form a convex lens. After thirty minutes, he finally achieved a shape that satisfied him.

“Heh heh heh. Victory is mine, and all thanks to the hydrogen bonding!”

No one knew exactly *what* Ryo had been victorious against.

While hydrogen bonding joins water molecules together, it’s also responsible for other links, such as DNA’s double helix. In science class, students learn that pairings between adenine and thymine, guanine and cytosine, are joined together by hydrogen bonds, resulting in the double helix structure. Isn’t hydrogen bonding amazing?!

Now he could use the ice lens he’d created to focus the sunlight to burn the black bark of the hemp palm. Making fire with ice felt deliciously wrong.

He’d worried that the ice might melt, but as long as he kept pouring his magic into the lens, the ice remained solid. That might be the difference between natural ice and ice created by magic.

The sun’s rays cascaded down brilliantly on the fairly large ice lens. Then, in less than two minutes, the hemp palm bark caught fire. At long last, Ryo had a way to make fire.

“I know this is stating the obvious, but magic really is amazingly handy.”

Of the three things necessary for survival—fire, water, food—he had acquired the first two through magic, even if he had to resort to relatively primitive techniques in conjunction with his magic to make a fire...

“I wonder where the water comes from. It must be from the molecules in the air...I think.”

It was so hot in the Forest of Rondo that it would be more apt to call its climate subtropical rather than temperate. Humidity was high too, which could be attributed to the moisture level in the air. Ryo thought these factors might explain why he’d been able to produce water so quickly despite being a beginner at water magic.

On Earth, humidity existed in some small percentages in desert environments

as well, meaning the presence of moisture even in the dry air there. If magic could be drawn out of the water in such locales, then it truly was a remarkably convenient tool.

But...what if that wasn't *all* magic was capable of? Could it create something from nothing? He knew something couldn't be born from nothing. Precisely speaking, although he called it "nothing," he actually meant a state with an absence of matter but presence of energy.

Fake Michael had told him physical phenomena were practically the same between Earth and Phi. Ryo pondered if formulas that worked on Earth would also work here on Phi. For example, Einstein's most famous theorem: $E=mc^2$, where E is energy, m is mass, and c is the speed of light.

"Multiply mass by the square of the speed of light and you get energy."

In simpler terms, it means that energy can be generated from matter. Prime examples included nuclear power and atomic bombs. The thing to note here though is the equal sign. As one learns in middle school, if bound by an equal sign, the left and right sides of an equation are identical. This is called equivalence.

In short, if energy can be derived from matter, then the reverse must also be true: matter can be derived from energy. Of course, even on 21st-century Earth, the technology still hasn't been created to accomplish matter derivation from energy. At best, scientists can generate electrons through pair production.

To begin with, even a single gram of matter generates enormous amounts of energy. This means that even if one can control enormous amounts of energy, ultimately, the final product is just one gram of matter. You might wonder how enormous. Well, consider the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Evidently, only 0.7 grams of mass were converted into energy. So if all that energy was converted back into matter, the result would be...only 0.7 grams of mass.

Be that as it may, the convenience of magic exists on Phi, which suggests the possibility of techniques to generate matter from energy in the abyss known as magic. Needless to say, this suggests a connection to the same mysterious phenomena that created the universe, where "something came from nothing" and matter was generated from energy.

One's dreams could really be limitless in this world then!

Having secured another “victory” via hydrogen bonding, Ryo set his sights on greater heights—hot water. Given what he knew now, he was confident this would be an easy battle. If he'd made ice by stopping the vibrations of the water molecules, all he had to do to heat the water up was reverse the process. In short, increase the oscillations.

During his school years, he had conducted this exact experiment for his summer research project. Of course, he hadn't used magic back then... In any case, he had poured water into a thermos, closed the lid, then shook it vigorously! After around two thousand shakes, the temperature of the water had increased by almost one degree.

Since he knew water temperature could increase by forcibly increasing molecular vibration, success was basically guaranteed at this point. He would attempt it now using the same bucket.

Faucet. He said the spell in his mind this time—he'd need practice both chanting the spells out loud or using them silently!

Just like when he'd made ice, Ryo filled up the bucket with ten centimeters of water. Then he held both hands over it and visualized the H₂O molecules. Except this time, he made them vibrate!

...

“Huh?”

There was no real change in the water. No steam rose to indicate its temperature had risen. He cupped some into his palm and noted that it was still lukewarm.

“Why didn't it work?”

Was his mental image of the water molecules not strong enough? He made his visualization more distinct and...*vibrate!* As for the results...

“Still not hot, huh?”

The process should be exactly the opposite of turning water into ice.

“What else did I do when I made the ice...”

Ryo thought back to the steps he’d taken.

“Ohhh... I bonded the molecules together before stopping the vibrations. I guess I have to reverse that part too?”

Once more, he raised his hands over the water in the bucket and created a mental picture. This time, he first imagined undoing the hydrogen bond between molecules, allowing them to move freely. Then, he made sure to force each molecule to vibrate.

Pshhht. A geyser of hot water suddenly erupted from the bucket.

“Ah! Hot, hot, too hot!”

He somehow managed to dodge the gushing geyser. He knew he’d be in trouble if he sustained any burns since water magic didn’t have any healing properties...

Nevertheless, he succeeded in making hot water. However, a real, practical problem remained in that Ryo was afraid to jump right in to testing out his unstable Water Heating Technique (as defined by Ryo) in the bathtub. It would be a disaster if he destroyed the stone tub in the process.

So, what was someone supposed to do in a situation like this? There was only one answer.

“Practice, practice, practice!”

He needed to become much more proficient with this skill. He’d have to experience success and failure in equal measure first, then gradually increase the number of his successes. The only way he’d become confident was by being successful again and again.

Lunch was the same as dinner last night: dried meat from the silo... For some strange reason, it was the only nonfrozen food there... While he munched on a piece, Ryo dedicated himself to producing water and repeating his heating technique.

Approximately three Earth hours later, with the sun sinking down to the horizon, he suddenly felt dizzy and struggled to remain standing.

“I think I’m going to pass out...”

It was the first time his store of magical energy ran out. He drank some of the water he had just poured into the bucket before stumbling into his bedroom, where he collapsed unconscious on his bed.

“To make up for yesterday, I’ll use up all my magic after my bath,” Ryo said to himself on his third day in Phi. He spoke the words out loud to really drive the promise he was making to himself. As expected of a former Japanese person, he felt dirty and disgusting after having fallen asleep without bathing the night before.

Then he realized something.

“I only have the clothes I’m wearing right now...”

Fake Michael hadn’t included any extra attire for him in this house. Perhaps Fake Michael was the sort of person (being?) who wasn’t all that concerned with clothing.

“That reminds me...what *was* he wearing?”

Had it been something like a toga wealthy people in ancient Rome wore...? If that were the case, Ryo would only need a very large, long piece of fabric to wrap around himself. But...there was nothing of the sort in the house. Well, actually, that wasn’t entirely true. An appropriate piece of fabric *did* exist—except Ryo was using it as a sheet. He definitely couldn’t use that because he needed it for sleep!

“It’s not like anyone’s around to look at me, so the worst-case scenario is I go naked.”

Never mind that even Adam and Eve had their private areas covered by leaves in the paintings depicting them...

“Maybe I can hunt an animal and use its pelt as a loincloth or something?”

Ryo had always been the sort of guy who never cared about what he wore, so he wasn’t all that bothered by his prospects (or lack thereof) of finding a second set of clothes. He had fire, water, and food too, which meant it was finally time

to...devise a means of attack using water magic!

He had two months of food in the silo, giving him some time to become strong enough to step outside the barrier and find a permanent source of food. The only weapon he possessed was the knife Fake Michael had left for him.

On Earth, Ryo had been renowned for his knife skills—not. He had absolutely no confidence in his ability to hunt animals or defend himself from monsters with only a knife. Heck, even on Earth, it would probably be impossible to take down a normal wild boar with just a single knife... It was sheer insanity to think he could wander through this forest on Phi armed with his knife. Water magic was his sole viable alternative.

“It would have been nice if I had technology of some kind to make my own bow and arrow, but I guess there’s no way now, huh?”

Yesterday, he had fantasized about creating an ice spear someday while making the ice lens. Currently, however, that was still impossible for him. After all, it took him several minutes just to freeze a bucketful of water. Creating a spear of ice in the moment, then actually hitting his target...didn’t seem realistic at all.

More importantly...*would* he even be able to use his magic to propel the spear? Every time he’d used his Water or Faucet spells, the liquid flowed out of his hands like it was free-falling... That made him wonder if he could learn to use something like a water ball first.

Recalling the magic he’d seen in anime and videos, Ryo stretched his right hand out and painted a mental picture of a ball of water the size of his head. He pictured it shooting out of his right hand.

“Water Ball.”

Whoosh. Just like he’d imagined, a water ball the size of his head shot out of his right hand. It moved as fast as a basketball would when being passed from one player to another. After flying forward ten meters, it plopped onto the ground.

“Whoooa!”

Ryo jumped for joy at his first successful use of...attack magic? He directed his

next attack at a tree seven meters ahead! *Whoosh...splash*. The ball of water struck the tree and...got the trunk wet. The end.

“Hm, there’s not much force behind this attack...”

Ryo slumped to the ground on his hands and knees in despair.

“Wait! I have a trump card!”

He stood and made a ringing declaration:

“If Water Ball doesn’t work, then I should try Water Jet instead.”

People on Earth said there was nothing a waterjet tool couldn’t cut through. In theory, though, it didn’t *cut* as much as it did *shave*. Ryo had researched the waterjet in connection to his company’s operations, which was why he was convinced this new jet-based attack would work.

He thrust out his right hand and visualized a thin, high-speed jet of water rushing out of the tips of his fingers. He added pressure to it from its surroundings, making it as thin as possible.

“Water Jet.”

Water trickled from his fingers, its current only slightly more energetic than the one he’d produced using Faucet. Using this, he could cut...absolutely nothing.

He collapsed to his hands and knees again.

“I lost...” he said, defeated—though he was not sure by what.

“Okay, I need to calm down.”

Just like yesterday, he chewed on dried meat from the silo for his lunch.

I need to be patient. There’s no rush. It took me practicing for half a day to master the water heating technique. So despite this weak little stream now, it should become a powerful weapon in my arsenal the more I practice, right? Besides, I learned how to create ice too, which I should be able to use in combat against any monsters that show up in the future... Even though I’m not sure yet how to use it.

Determined, Ryo lifted his head and made a promise to himself:

“Right, the only thing I can do is practice. Hard work never betrays you!”

He devoted himself single-mindedly to Water Jet practice. Each day a little after two o’clock Earth time, he practiced, slowly making his jet more energetic than the one produced by Faucet—albeit only slightly. Even so, the current iteration was only about as strong as water gushing from a hose at a car wash. He still hadn’t figured out how to improve it beyond that.

It was only at this point that Ryo realized something.

“I definitely need to take a bath today.”

Heading into the bathroom, Ryo realized the moment had come to put yesterday’s training session to good use.

“Water, overflow.”

In about ten seconds, the bathtub brimmed with water. He had learned how to control the amount of water he produced—the fruits of the intense training that had depleted his magical energy to the point of collapse.

Next, he would heat the water up. Ryo didn’t worry because all his work yesterday had instilled confidence in him.

He let his right hand hover over the tub and visualized. Each individual molecule whizzed around freely, vibrating. He imagined this happening to about half the water in the tub since he didn’t want the water getting hot enough to burn. Ryo did this a few times, immersing his hand in the water after every attempt to fine-tune the temperature as it steadily rose. Ten adjustments later and...the hot water was perfect.

“Woo-hooooo!”

He cheered, exuberant. His practice had been rewarded.

“Exhaustion is the root of failure. Don’t work so hard you tire yourself out.”

His dad’s motto. It was absolutely true, but...so difficult to put into practice.

Ryo slowly lowered himself into the tub, then reflected on his current situation. He still couldn’t use Water Jet as an attack. It took him minutes to

freeze water. He also needed to determine whether or not he could make ice using only the moisture in the air.

Like any man, Ryo couldn't stop thinking about how cool an ice spear would be. *I'd hurl it through the air while shouting something like "Icicle Lance!" I really want to try that. First, I need to learn more about ice made from water magic. Then, once I can create ice quickly, I might be able to use it in confrontations against monsters.*

Once Ryo finished bathing, he immediately went outside to the yard to test his ideas.

"Ice formed directly from the air! *Ice Lens!*"

An ice lens gradually took shape between his hands, same as the one he'd constructed during his fire-building attempts. It took five minutes to finish forming.

"So, it *is* possible to make ice straight from air. But it takes a long time, huh?"

Unlike yesterday, he didn't need the bucket to accomplish his goal. Although Ryo wasn't aware, this alone was quite the feat.

The ice lens wouldn't melt as long as the user ran magic through it. Once the current of magic stopped, it would start melting like normal ice.

"I wonder if I can make it fly," he muttered while staring at it.

Then he threw it.

Fwish, thud.

He flung the lens using only his physical strength. It flew up into the air in a parabola, then fell to the ground.

"Okay, so it doesn't fly. I mean, it's an *ice lens*, so of course it won't fly!"

He didn't speak his disappointment out loud, opting to instead keep it hidden in his heart.

Right, then. Next up was the long-awaited...ice spear. Icicle Lance.

"The ultimate ice attack magic!"

As always, the mental image was the most important. First, he visualized an

icicle thirty centimeters long.

“Icicle Lance!”

An icicle started manifesting in his hand, but it took much, much longer than his second ice lens. Ten minutes passed. Then, after fifteen, it finally took shape.

“Excellent, just like I imagined. Now, fly!”

Fwish, thud.

“Ugh!”

The ice spear, just like the lens, flew forward in a short parabola before crashing to the ground.

“I pictured it flying much faster than that, but maybe...the image wasn’t strong enough.”

The Water Ball that shot out of his hand flew ten meters before falling, so why wasn’t the Icicle Lance taking to the air?

“Is it too heavy? No, that can’t be it given the Water Ball was as big as my head. I’d say they both weighed the same then. Ugh, I don’t get it. Maybe I will if I keep trying.”

After that, he repeated the spells more times than he could count.

“Water Ball.”

The time between chanting the spell and firing the magic also became much faster, probably thanks to repeated practice. It had taken about five seconds between spellcasting and activation the first time he tried, but he had gotten it down to one second over the dozens of attempts so far. His water balls went a lot farther now than the initial ten meters too.

As for its stopping power...it remained the same as the first one.

“Haaa. I’ve gotten pretty good at it, though I guess I wasn’t bad at Water Ball to start with. Now it’s time to try Icicle Lance to build on that progress. Just like I did with Water Ball, I’ll visualize the spear shooting out of my right hand.”

Ryo took a deep breath, let it out, then chanted.

"Icicle Lance."

Fwish, thud. The moment it launched out of his hand, it dropped to the ground.

"Icicle Lance."

Fwish, thud. He did it again and again with the same result.

"I shortened the amount of time it takes to generate the spear, so that's progress... But why won't it fly?"

He must have fired dozens out. Now, it only took him a minute between creation and launch.

And then it finally happened: his magical energy ran out, just like yesterday.

"Crud, I think I'm going to pass out."

Ryo staggered to bed and once more succumbed to his exhaustion.

When Ryo woke up on his fourth day in Phi, he still couldn't solve the mystery of the Icicle Lance. That morning, however, there was a more pressing problem: his empty stomach...

Thinking back on his time in his second life so far, he realized the only thing he'd eaten was dried meat. In fact, he was almost positive he'd only really eaten lunch these past few days. Though he wasn't a glutton by any means, he was still a healthy nineteen-year-old, so it was only natural he felt hungry since he'd been eating less.

It would be ironic if he starved to death despite the two-month supply of food Fake Michael had arranged for him... He wondered how he'd face Fake Michael if he ended up reincarnated again.

First things first.

After opening the silo door, Ryo stepped inside to a space as cold as the interior of a freezer. It made sense since the walls were made of ice. He suspected water magic had been used, but...the ice Ryo had made started melting the moment he stopped pushing his magic through it. The ice walls of the silo, though, showed no signs of melting.

Did that mean Fake Michael's magic worked all the way out here in this world? Or were these walls the embodiment of the unknown potential water magic had? Either way, he was fascinated. Eventually, he wanted to unravel the enigma of this structure as well. Be that as it may...he needed to satisfy his empty stomach first!

Dried meat was quick and easy to eat, but this was his fourth day here and he'd grown tired of it, so he had a hankering for something else. What about properly grilled meat?!

He scanned the contents of the silo and saw various frozen animal and monster meats neatly arranged. Whole carcasses of rabbit, wild boar, what seemed like poultry, and more... There was even butchered meat from each species.

"I bet Fake Michael set it up like this for me, both ways, so I know which parts of the whole carcasses are edible when I cut them up. He really is an amazing man."

Deeply grateful for the extent of Fake Michael's foresight, Ryo picked up two pieces of meat that looked like rabbit thighs.

"These are frozen rock hard. I hope I can thaw them. Let's see what happens when I take them outside... Fingers crossed they start defrosting."

He exited the silo holding meat in each hand, then he placed the pieces in the bucket—the all-purpose, super handy bucket! The sun, beginning its ascent into the sky, illuminated the meat, but the rabbit thighs remained frozen.

"Does this mean I have to thaw them myself since I'm a water magician...?"

He lifted his right hand over one of the pieces and crafted a mental image in which he removed the bonds between the water molecules in the ice covering the meat.

"Huh? It's not working. I feel like I'm being repelled."

The bonds between water molecules weren't dissipating, and the fact that they weren't created a feedback loop in Ryo's mind.

"Maybe it's because I wasn't the one who created this ice? Is it rejecting me

because Fake Michael made it?”

He couldn't give up though. He needed to eat to survive.

Since Fake Michael was the one who'd prepared it for him, it was highly unlikely he meant for Ryo to eat it frozen. After all, Fake Michael was an extremely talented and capable man, which meant the meat *could* be melted! Ryo's trust in Fake Michael was enormous.

“Let me try this calmly. No need to rush.”

Instead of defrosting the whole thigh, he decided to focus on a single section. He visualized directing his magic to that area and undoing the molecular bonds, then he dissolved the bonds in the neighboring section of meat. As he moved slowly from one section to another, removing the molecular bonds, the ice melted.

After fifteen long minutes, one whole rabbit thigh was fully thawed. The other one still showed no signs whatsoever of doing the same despite the time that had passed.

“Michael, your magic is incredible! I'll leave the frozen thigh as is so I can experiment on it. I want to see what will happen if I grill it with Michael's ice still covering it.”

Ryo prepared the firewood and black hemp palm bark in the yard, then he went to the kitchen for some seasoning. Incidentally, the only seasoning Fake Michael had arranged was a massive quantity of salt. Ryo went back outside and skewered the defrosted rabbit thigh on a branch and sprinkled salt on it.

He went to work on his usual ice lens. Countless practice attempts meant his skills had improved tremendously. While it had first taken him fifteen minutes or more just to freeze water, now he could make an ice lens right from the air in less than two minutes.

“I'm getting pretty good at this.”

It made him happy to see how much he had improved.

Using the ice lens, Ryo focused the sun's rays on the black hemp palm bark, setting it on fire. He breathed on the ember to stoke it and transferred the

flame to the firewood to get a proper blaze going. Once it was ready, he stabbed the skewer of rabbit thigh into the ground by the fire, then he picked up the frozen one and held it over the flames. There wasn't a trace of melting ice on any part of the meat.

"This feels really surreal..."

Conclusion: the meat Fake Michael froze wouldn't thaw even when exposed to fire.

While he conducted his experiment, the defrosted rabbit thigh cooked nicely.

"Time to dig in!"

His first real meal in four days tasted so delicious it almost brought tears to his eyes. Then, it did, and Ryo actually ate while crying for the first time in his life.

Ryo thawed the other piece of frozen thigh meat the same way, then grilled and ate it. Relaxing, he thought about what he needed to do today. First thing on the list was to understand why he couldn't use his magic to propel his Icicle Lance.

He still felt that he hadn't arrived at a solution because of incomplete information. No matter how long or hard he considered the problem, an answer still didn't present itself. In this case, he'd have to continue trying new things and hope to fill in the gaps of his knowledge. He had an endless amount of time, after all.

As far as generating ice went, he'd become quite adept at it. However, if someone asked him if he could use his skill in a battle against monsters, he would say that still posed a difficult challenge. It took him an entire minute to create an Icicle Lance and then throw it, and even then it still refused to fly from his hand as Ryo hoped. Meanwhile, it took him two minutes to craft an Ice Lens. Still, in both cases, he had shortened the time for creation considerably since his first attempts.

But it wasn't enough. Because his life would be at stake in a battle against a monster, there was no room for delay. He *had* to master his skills to the point it took only a second to form the ice into what he needed.

When he realized this, Ryo immediately decided to try his hand at creating other shapes with his ice: an ice spear two meters long, maybe a plank, a pillar, or even a wall...

As he thought, he realized something else: the ice needed to be *hard*. He remembered that rock-solid ice, which wouldn't melt, existed even on Earth. Ice is less likely to melt if all the air contained in the water is removed. One way to accomplish this, for example, was to boil the water before freezing it.

Now, if Ryo wanted to generate relatively hard ice, how would he go about doing it? To ensure no air got into the ice as it froze, he decided to try freezing ice from the center outward.

Normally, water freezes from the outside in, which is how air becomes trapped in pockets within the ice. However, Ryo could use his magic to start at the center! That was all there was to it. With this method, he could make ice harder than the ice he had been making previously.

Ryo believed in his theory. While munching on his usual dried meat for lunch, he concentrated intently on making ice. From his right hand, left, his feet... He imagined all possible scenarios.

He was so completely absorbed in his work that he jolted when he suddenly realized it was already evening.

"Shoot, I need to take a bath."

He ate dinner, took a bath, then returned to his magical training. What a cultured life he led. Ryo couldn't be happier.

On his fifth day in Phi, Ryo wanted to review everything he'd learned so far. For breakfast, he repeated what he'd done yesterday: fetch a rabbit thigh from the silo, defrost it, light the fire, grill, eat... A very smooth process.

Just like yesterday, he worked on his ice generation skill. Thanks to his efforts so far, it now took him twenty seconds to produce both an Icicle Lance and an Ice Lens—but this was still nowhere near useful for combat. Moreover, he still couldn't make the Icicle Lance fly, making it useless in battle. He also had no knowledge of any real self-defense techniques or where to acquire them.

Ryo did know, at least, that he would need his ice generation skill for the rest of his life, which was exactly why he needed to improve it to the point where it became as natural as breathing.

Thoughts of ice spears, ice planks and pillars, walls, and more churned inside Ryo's mind as he ate his dried meat. Create and melt, melt and create. He repeated the cycle again and again. When he was finished eating, he spent the rest of the afternoon generating ice. Ryo remained absorbed in his training until something landed on his cheek, making him look up at the sky.

"Rain...?"

It was the first time it rained since he had been reborn in this world.

"Ha, this is a good place to stop. Might as well take a bath then."

Ryo had definitely been talking to himself a lot more since his reincarnation...

Since there were no glass panes in the holes that functioned as windows in the house Fake Michael prepared for him, Ryo covered them with wooden boards to prevent the rain from leaking in. There were no lamps, lanterns, or fires in any of the rooms, making it pitch-black inside.

Until yesterday, he hadn't really thought of it as a problem because after his bath, he simply went outside to practice his magic until his magical energy ran out. Then, he would go back to his bed and pass out. The open windows allowed moonlight to illuminate the rooms at night, but he never had the headspace to notice.

Today was different though. Because of the rain and the shuttered windows, no moonlight made it into the home.

"This doesn't change anything for my magical practice."

Once he finished his bath, he stretched out in his bed and returned to his training. After he produced ice, instead of letting it melt, he sublimated the water into gas, which was absorbed into the air around him. That way, he could avoid soaking the bed. Based on his combined efforts yesterday and today, it now took him less than five seconds to make ice, depending on the shape.

Right around the time he realized his progress, Ryo's magical reserves ran out

tonight too. He dispelled the Icicle Lance he'd just made and allowed sleep to take him. Then, for a week after, he continued to immerse himself single-mindedly in ice generation.

Outside the Barrier

On his twelfth day in Phi, Ryo finally managed to achieve his goal of creating an Icicle Lance in one second.

The only issue was that it still wouldn't fly.

At least he had brighter prospects now. Of what, you might ask? Well, stepping outside the barrier, of course. His preparations weren't yet complete, though. Before that, he'd need to secure a way to heal himself.

According to every cliché of isekai reincarnation, potions would be the best method. *The Flora Compendium, Beginner Edition* contained information on all the plants that served as potion ingredients, but Ryo still lacked the confidence to gather any ingredients besides those he read about in the compendium.

However, leaving the safety of the barrier without a means to heal himself went so far beyond reckless that it was downright foolish. Even without making actual potions, he could at least find plants he could use on scratches and less serious wounds to help him recover. So, the first thing he had to do was gather those plants growing inside the barrier. Once he did, he could head outside the barrier tomorrow.

According to *The Flora Compendium, Beginner Edition*, the best plant to use for healing injuries was aptly named "wound herb." Common folk utilized it often because it was difficult to acquire potions. Luckily for him, there was a profusion of wound herb growing right behind his house.

"Fantastic. Sometimes, it's really nice to live life on easy mode like this! I just wish the problem of Icicle Lance would solve itself so easily too..."

If the eighty percent of Phi's population that couldn't use magic heard Ryo, they would be infuriated by his words.

He wanted to get his hands on one other plant known as "detoxifying herb." When decocted and consumed, it would nullify the effects of poison in the imbiber's body. Unfortunately for him, "detoxifying herb" didn't grow inside the

barrier. He made a mental note to himself to gather some during his trip outside the barrier.

While the detoxifying herb and flint represented his primary goal, his foray beyond the barrier would also allow him to determine whether or not he could actually hunt and obtain his own food supply.

However, the only physical means of attack he currently possessed was the knife Fake Michael left for him. The blade measured twenty centimeters in length, making the knife a fairly large one. Regardless, it could still only be used as a close-range weapon. He would need to be right on top of an opponent to attack and, frankly, that just might not be possible for Ryo as he was now. The more distance between him and his opponent, the better.

“A spear’s length gives soldiers a sense of security,” a certain Demon King Oda of the Sixth Heaven once said...probably.

Ryo decided to turn his knife into a spear—not through water magic, but physically. He first found a piece of something that resembled bamboo. Actually, on closer inspection...it *was* bamboo. Once he cut it to the right length, it would have served just fine as a bamboo spear in its own right. Given that he had a knife, however, he might as well pack it into the tip of the bamboo rod. He used some vine as rope to tie the knife into place.

Before stepping outside the barrier, he’d reinforce the connection between the bamboo and the knife with ice. That should work well enough. Though his final product wasn’t anything like the six-meter spears favored by soldiers in the Owari province, the two-and-a-half-meter weapon he’d created was easy to handle. Those spears, known as the Three Great Spears of Japan, measured 3.2 meters (The Nihongo), 3.8 (The Otegine), and 6 (The Tonbokiri)...there was no way an amateur like Ryo could use spears that long.

He *could* use an ice spear as a physical weapon, but no one could ever predict what would happen in a battle. In a situation with his life on the line, he wasn’t confident in his ability to remain calm enough to create one.

“I’ll just take it easy for today by prepping for tomorrow’s trip outside the barrier.”

Almost every day since his arrival, Ryo had fallen asleep after exhausting his

store of magical energy. One of his reasons for having done so lay in Fake Michael's comment about improving the more he used his magic. Of course, his other reason was to make it so using his magic felt second nature to him.

Truthfully, however, Ryo didn't really know how much of his magical energy he had recovered by the time he woke up each morning. This was largely because it simply wasn't possible to quantifiably track his remaining magical power.

So, Ryo decided he would relax a bit today. He wanted to have as full a tank of magical fuel within his body as he could get by the time he exited the barrier tomorrow. Until the sun set, he read more of the contents in *The Flora Compendium, Beginner Edition*, ate the meat he grilled, took a bath, then slept.

Then, finally, the morning of the decisive battle arrived.

His thirteenth day in Phi.

The day of the long-awaited battle.

With practiced motions, Ryo lit a fire, grilled some meat, and ate it. Slowly, very slowly, he thought through every single stage of preparation he'd accomplished...

After he finished eating, it was time to check on the supplies he'd bring. He'd ground the wound herbs and froze the medicinal salve into a puck using water magic. Once thawed, he could apply the ointment to any wounds. He'd also need the bamboo spear with the knife attached to its tip, which he had just reinforced with ice.

Item check complete. The reality was that he didn't have much to take outside the barrier. He'd only be looking for some flint and detoxifying herbs, and fighting weaker monsters... He hoped for slimes!

Ryo didn't plan on going very far. He wanted to be close enough to the barrier that if something happened, he could run right back inside it. He closed his eyes for a few seconds and steadied his breathing.

"All right, time to go."

He headed in a southwesterly direction, where he would find a coastline if he walked five hundred meters or so, according to Fake Michael.

There were many rocks that Ryo thought he might be able to use as flint, but he didn't know much about them. Despite his lack of knowledge, though, even he knew quartz's storied history as one commonly used as flint. The colorless and transparent type of quartz were often referred to as crystals or crystal quartz.

But that wasn't what he wanted. No, he was looking for opaque, white quartz that would break off easily from deposits.

A good place to find such stones was a riverbed. If he started walking toward the sea from his house, he might just stumble across an estuary on the way...

"Well, even if I don't find one, I can just go in the opposite direction next time. An adventure, in a sense. After all, not knowing what'll happen next is an adventure in itself."

When Ryo walked through the barrier, he felt the slightest bit of resistance.

"That must have been it..."

Visibility wasn't very good since he was in the heart of the forest. He strained his ears, relying on his sense of hearing to give him the information he needed as he walked slowly. From far away came the sounds of birds flapping their wings.

Not even a hundred meters from the barrier, the forest suddenly came to an end. In front of him stretched a river measuring several hundred meters wide from one side to its opposite bank.

"Bingo!"

The only problem was that Ryo found himself on top of a cliff, which made it difficult to get down to the riverbank to search for flint. *I'll keep walking upstream and see where it takes me*, he thought, turning to walk along the cliff's edge from east to west.

"Who'd have thought there'd be such a huge river only a hundred meters

from the house... God, this view is incredible..."

Be that as it may, Ryo didn't have much time to enjoy the scenery. After a bit of walking, he managed to find a way down to the riverbank. Right away, he found the quartz he was looking for. Picking up a piece, he decided to test it by striking the back of the knife on his bamboo spear against it.

Klk, klk.

"Oooh, sparks flew. I should be able to start a fire now even when the sun isn't out."

Once he learned this, he realized there was no need to linger for long here. The river was probably a drinking hole for beasts and he had no idea what might show up. He scrambled back up to the cliff, then started in a northeasterly direction.

If I keep going north, I should end up at the southern edge of the barrier around my house... Then heading northeast would put the house at my left. This way, Ryo would be able to run back inside the barrier in case something happened.

Though it had been mentioned before, it bore repeating that it was vitally important for him right now to maintain an easy escape route—especially because he didn't know how strong the monsters of Phi were. He was pretty sure he could handle slow-moving slimes... Except slimes weren't the only things that could jump out at him. Even his assumption that he could beat a slime was just that, an assumption.

He had found flint fast enough, but he still hadn't spotted any patches of detoxifying herbs. He continued moving while remaining aware of the house's location, so he hadn't walked that far from the barrier.

"This is...pretty tough... Now what?"

In his mind, Ryo pictured *The Flora Compendium's* entry on the detoxifying herb in his mind as he tried to recall some sort of hint as to its location... For a brief moment, his attention strayed from his surroundings. When he jerked back to reality, he found an animal resembling a wild boar staring at him.

"Uh-oh. That's a lesser boar."

More pressingly, it was heading straight toward Ryo.

A lesser boar.

A lesser boar charging.

Charging at him.

He needed to counter its attack. He knew that. Even though he knew what he needed to do, his body refused to move.

It was his first time experiencing a monster's killing drive head-on. He saw and felt it so distinctly, like a frog unable to move when faced down by a glowering snake.

"Oh, crap! Move, move, mooove!!!"

His body finally jumped to the left. Well, "collapse" might be a more accurate word for what happened to him. *Slash.*

"Ngh..."

One of the lesser boar's tusks grazed Ryo's right foot as he dodged its charge. Having shot straight past him, the lesser boar slowed down, stopped, and turned around to stare at him again. Was that still bloodlust in its eyes? Or was it rage now directed at him for evading its attack?

"Whoa! Calm down!"

Easier said than done though for most people, wasn't it? And Ryo was certainly no exception to the rule.

His heart thundered in his chest. His mind was blank...or, maybe not. He managed to hold on to reason, but his body refused to obey his instructions to move, even though he knew he couldn't just remain there on the ground.

The lesser boar charged at him again. He remained frozen.

Yes...frozen—Ryo still had his magic, even if his body wouldn't move. The water magic he had practiced again and again and again.

Hard work never betrays you.

"Ice Bahn."

A two-meter-wide road of ice formed on the ground between Ryo and the boar, causing the animal to slip. It stumbled and slipped, its momentum carrying it toward Ryo whether it wanted to or not.

“Icicle Lance 16.”

He still couldn’t make his Icicle Lance fly, but he could make it grow up from his Ice Bahn—or, in this case, sixteen of them. The ice spears sprouted out from the icy floor at a thirty-degree angle, forming a sort of cheval-de-frise. The lesser boar, unable to stop, slammed right into the wall of spears.

“Graaaaaaar!”

The lesser boar roared in excruciating agony as the Icicle Lances pierced its flesh. It wasn’t dead yet, but the fear of death binding Ryo dissolved. He could finally move again.

He gripped his knife-tipped bamboo spear. Though he had practiced kendo in his old life, it didn’t mean he knew how to use a spear. Still, he wouldn’t overthink this. All he had to do was stab.

He stabbed the animal over and over, countless times, in the face, the neck, and even the legs. Despite being able to control his body now, he was far from calm and composed. With a single-minded focus, he wielded the bamboo spear against the lesser boar. Again. And again. And again...

He must have stabbed it dozens of times, maybe even hundreds, by the time he finally realized the lesser boar had stopped moving.

“I won...”

He had defeated his first monster.

“I need to get out here fast.”

Because the smell of blood might attract other beasts, Ryo mustered every ounce of strength he could and stood. One problem remained: the lesser boar’s carcass. It looked heavy.

“Now how am I supposed to carry it...”

Leaving it behind wasn’t an option, considering it was his first successful kill.

He decided to eat its meat tonight.

It shouldn't be that far to the barrier. No more than a hundred meters. Then the Ice Bahn—still frosted over the ground—suddenly caught his eye.

“If I create a slab of ice under the boar...will I be able to pull it?”

Extending the Ice Bahn to the barrier all at once would make it much more difficult for him to drag the carcass, so he fine-tuned the ice in a way that it only grew underneath the lesser boar.

“Oh, hey, this is a piece of cake.”

He pulled the animal, probably weighing close to two hundred kilograms, easily with one hand. And then...he passed through the barrier to reach his house.

“Ahhh... I made it...”

The young man stood there, drained of both his energy and willpower. Though he hadn't managed to acquire any of the detoxifying herb, he *had* picked up some flint, achieved his first victory in combat, and obtained a lesser boar carcass. His first battle had yielded plenty of spoils.

Day fourteen.

Last night, Ryo had thoroughly enjoyed some thigh meat he harvested from the lesser boar, then he froze the rest of it to store in the silo.

After some rest, he could more calmly think about yesterday's battle and it made him sweat to realize how hectic it had been. As its name indicated, a *lesser* boar belonged to the category of boar-like monsters, with it being the weakest. Naturally, compared to slimes and lesser rabbits, a lesser boar still posed a serious threat. With its heinous charges, it was impossible for normal farmers and hunters to defeat it solo.

Nevertheless, *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition* still ranked it as the weakest in its class.

“I'm still glad a lesser boar was my first enemy. I could have easily been pitted against a much stronger monster, so I got lucky there.”

Ryo, ever the optimist.

Despite his inability to make his Icicle Lances fly, he could at least create an entire pack of them. Though this line of defense was feasible, it required making a decoy of himself to lure the enemy to the right location before unleashing it. If the tactic failed, he would take immeasurable damage.

What if an enemy was much faster than Ryo predicted? Or one that wouldn't just outright slip on the ice? He doubted it would work against monsters attacking from the sky...

It brought him back to his original plan of wanting to establish a way to use his magical abilities to hunt from long range. Besides, he was sure it wouldn't be good for his mental health if he was always scraping through battles by the skin of his teeth.

Water Ball flew, but Icicle Lance didn't. He'd tried all sorts of things and the only conclusion he had so far was that water flew but ice didn't. Both, however, were created using water magic. Water Ball (probably) collected water molecules from the air and released them. Icicle Lance (probably) collected water molecules from the air, froze them, and then released them.

"Hm? Icicle Lance has one more step in the process? Wait a sec. Does this mean I can only use two steps with my current abilities? No way..."

In that case, Ryo decided to prepare water first, freeze it, and then try just the part involving making it fly in two steps. He'd be in a real bind if anything happened to his beloved bucket, so he made a bowl of ice and filled it with water. Holding his right hand over the ice bowl, he visualized the water freezing and flying away with the bowl.

"Icicle Lance."

Fwish. It wasn't spear-shaped, but the frozen water flew ten meters forward in its bowl.

"Woo-hoo! Success!"

His attempts hadn't been going well these past few days, but he finally managed to throw water in one shot.

“That’s how it’s done, huh? As long as you have the necessary information, the answer will come to you.”

That said...it was possible the real reason behind his success was his newfound confidence after having acquired flint and fought his first real battle beyond the barrier... Whatever it was, the fact remained that he’d solved the problem and that was good enough for him.

“Anyway, I figured it out. I can’t execute three-step procedures yet, but maybe it’ll happen once I become more proficient at water magic? I sure do hope so.”

Looks like he still had a while before he could truly make ice fly...which meant water was his only option for now as far as long-ranged offensive attacks went.

“Oh, yeah. I haven’t tested out Water Jet in a while.”

He had worked so diligently to create his Water Jet on his third day in Phi, but decided it wouldn’t work as an attack because he had only managed to make it as strong as water spouting from a hose to wash a car. He hadn’t practiced it at all since then.

“Weeell, since I’ve pretty much figured out how to create ice through water magic, I wonder how it would go now...”

Ryo thrust his right hand out and imagined the Water Jet.

“*Water Jet.*”

Fsssh. A much thinner and powerful stream of water fired out compared to what he’d been able to make on his third day.

“Progress!”

Next, he shot it at a tree located just inside the barrier. *Fsssh... Splash.* The tree still stood tall and strong, but there was now a slight gouge in the bark where the jet had struck.

“I think I could make it work as long as I practice...”

So, Ryo once more dedicated himself to Water Jet training.

For four days after, he immersed himself in Water Jet practice. Of course, he ate a proper breakfast of grilled meat and bathed every day. You heard it right—meat first thing in the morning, but it was totally fine because breakfast is the most important meal of the day! He ate jerky for lunch, then took his baths at night.

As for dinner... Well, he always wanted to get in just a little more Water Jet practice before starting dinner prep...but then he'd end up practicing for so long that he'd deplete his magical energy reserves and need to go straight to bed...so, in short, Ryo skipped dinner for those four days. Maybe that was the reason he ate such a hearty breakfast the next day.

Four days of Water Jet training resulted in...increased power. Ryo's Water Jet was stronger, for sure, but it was still nowhere near the intensity of the waterjet cutters back on Earth...nowhere near close...

While his Water Jet could now create deeper gouges in the tree bark with its thinner, more concentrated stream, it still didn't *cut* like it was supposed to. He had, however, mastered the technique of pinpointing his target. As long as it was a stationary target, he could shoot ten meters away without an error of a single millimeter.

"I don't know what will help me, so I need to be able to shoot multiple streams at a time instead of just one."

So, Ryo continued practicing. Positivity saves you.

Ultimately, his goal was to be able to hunt safely. Putting his life on the line to obtain food for himself was...not the definition of a slow life! Exiting the barrier was important for him, and he wanted to expand his food options. Currently, all he ate was grilled monster meat sprinkled with salt and dried jerky. He wanted to try other flavors and seasonings... Plus, he was sure he'd want fruit someday too.

According to *The Flora Compendium, Beginner Edition*, black pepper was the exact same here on Phi as on Earth, in name and form. Ryo guessed his current location, insofar as it corresponded to one on Earth, was somewhere between the Tropic of Cancer and the equator—probably in the northern hemisphere based on the sun's position in the sky, the direction the water flowed when he

produced it, and the humidity and temperature. Given his proximity to the equator, he knew there must be spices nearby that he could harvest!

Though hundreds of spices existed, Ryo only knew a few: black pepper, chili peppers, Japanese peppers, and ginger. His lack of knowledge was to be expected given he'd never been much of a cook in the first place. Of these, he'd actually seen black pepper grow. They grew in clusters, just like grapes.

I could totally recognize them—even here in this forest!

That said, he still had a ways to go before he could get his hands on them. Because he still needed to become strong enough to be comfortable outside the barrier.

On his twenty-first day in Phi, Ryo went on his now daily hunt. His prey? The lesser rabbit. It jumped erratically around the forest, drawing closer to its target before sinking its fangs into its quarry's throat.

Ryo waited for it to jump. When it did, he blasted its hind legs with simultaneous bursts of Water Jet. The spell still wasn't powerful enough to penetrate the monster's flesh, but it was strong enough to throw it off-balance and force it to fall to the ground. Then, Ryo emerged to blast his Water Jet into its eyes.

Once it was blind and immobilized, all he had to do was stab it with his spear.

"Ha, yes!"

Ryo had finally discovered a safe way to hunt—one that would at least work on lesser rabbits. This method didn't work on lesser boars though. He had faced off against a number of them since his first encounter with one, but this technique hadn't been effective. The reason was simple. When a lesser rabbit jumped, it exposed its hind legs, leaving it vulnerable to attack. This was not the case with lesser boars, who always charged head-on.

To adapt, he had tried switching his Water Jet attack to the lesser boar's forelegs, except its hind legs were powerful enough to continue its charge. He had immediately dodged by lunging to the side, but the encounter brought back the nightmare of his first meeting with a lesser boar. The bitter memory of

stabbing it over and over until it stopped moving remained starkly in his mind.

Ever since then, he stuck to the same hunting method for lesser boars he'd used against the very first one—Ice Bahn + Icicle Lance to stop it and the bamboo knife-spear to finish it off. Since the monsters always rushed headlong toward him when they spotted him, it was the best method to trap them.

At any rate, Ryo had become relatively competent at hunting lesser rabbits and boars safely since they appeared often in the area surrounding his house. His schedule lately consisted of hunting in the mornings outside the barrier and practicing magic within it in the afternoons. Icicle Lance still didn't fly while Water Jet still lacked the force to pierce through its target.

Even so, the success of his daily hunts brought a certain kind of peace to Ryo's heart.

“Peace is the stepping stone to the next step—Ryo Mihara.”

It's widely said that food, clothing, and shelter make up the basic foundation of life. Of the three Ryo possessed now, his shelter was rock-solid because of the house and barrier Fake Michael set up.

As for clothing...well, he was no longer wearing the clothes he'd come to Phi in. What he wore now was...*leather* he had tanned from a lesser boar hide. After tearing off the dermis, he had smoke-tanned the hide from a fire of leaves and grass. Once he did that, he'd stretched it out into a thin, uniform piece of leather using his ice roller.

Then, finally, he cut up the finished material into different articles of clothing—well, just two: a loincloth and a pair of sandals. These were Ryo's new clothes. He didn't wear anything else. If he were still in Japan, he would have been immediately reported to the police.

“I feel like I should make a breastplate or something too. But...this leather doesn't look all that durable since a professional didn't prepare it.”

Ryo muttered to himself while patting the lesser-boar leather with his hands.

“Oh! What if I used my water magic to apply ice to the leather's surface to increase durability? No, no way. In that case, I might as well just make an entire

set of armor out of ice and cloak myself in it. Hm, wouldn't the freezing temperatures make my heart stop? Feels dangerous. Someday, I'll be able to create ice shields to defend myself... Heh heh heh. You fools! Did you truly think an attack like that would reach me?! I really want to say something like that..."

Everyone had their fantasies...

With the shelter and clothing parts of the "food, shelter, and clothing" trio of necessities squared away, food naturally was the last aspect Ryo wanted to enhance. His goal was to now acquire fruits and new flavors. The problem? Which direction to go.

He remembered Fake Michael telling him about the sea five hundred meters to the house's southwest. A river measuring a few hundred meters from bank to bank ran through the south—the same one where he'd found flint. The east was where he had his first fight against a lesser boar and it was also the area he currently used as his hunting grounds for lesser rabbits. None of these locations were far from the barrier.

Considering this, he realized he had yet to explore the region to the north of the house.

"Maybe I'll find what I'm looking for not too far in the north... Let me take a stab at it."

Aside from his loincloth and sandals, he carried his usual bamboo knife-spear and jute sack. He didn't know if it was actually made out of jute, but it was one of two sacks in the silo containing dried meat. He'd been forced to take one, after emptying it of its jerky contents in the silo, because he didn't have another bag to carry the fruits and other new foods he hoped to find.

The jute sack looked like the sort used to transport coffee beans.

"If this place is located between the Tropic of Cancer and the equator, maybe there are coffee trees?" Ryo wondered out loud.

But he didn't remember seeing coffee trees listed in *The Flora Compendium, Beginner Edition*. Even if he managed to harvest coffee beans, the question of how to brew them still remained... Regardless, it wasn't a bad idea at all to think about elevating his selection of beverage choices as part of his food plan.

He had everything ready.

“All right, time to go!”

The vegetation in the north didn't differ all that much from what he'd seen in the east and south. It definitely would have been a problem for him if the north turned out to be the archetypal fantasy region of bitter cold and fierce, raging, and freezing winds.

However, the moment he stepped into the area north of the house he found what he thought were fig trees.

“I believe *The Flora Compendium* listed this as ‘phig’ and noted it's edible.”

Ryo plucked one off the tree and sampled his first taste of fruit since coming to this other world.

“What a wonderful balance of sweet and sour!”

He picked around ten of the phigs and put them into the jute sack.

“I hope I get lucky with discovering even more things like this.”

After that, he wandered around the area for an hour, but didn't find any other fruit.

“I guess I'll try walking a little farther north then.”

He estimated his current location as roughly two hundred meters from the barrier, which was the farthest he'd gone from it in any direction until now. He'd always known that someday he would have to travel much farther from the barrier, but the day was coming sooner than he had expected.

Except he couldn't go beyond those two hundred meters. It wasn't conscious thought that stopped him but instinct—an instinct that made him crouch immediately on the ground as he sensed something passing overhead. He couldn't see it, but he heard the sound of wings flapping overhead.

“A bird?”

If it was in fact a bird, it flapped its wings so fiercely that Ryo could detect a slight distortion in the air coming his way. He instantly leaped sideways.

“Is this air magic? A monster who can control air magic...and a bird-type one at that.”

In other words, an invisible long-range attack which could be called an air slash or sonic whatever.

“Yeah, there’s no way I can win.”

He acted decisively then.

“Ice Wall, U-shaped.”

Ryo had devised this ice wall for defensive purposes. Measuring a meter wide and two meters tall, it enclosed him on the front and sides while allowing him the opportunity to escape from the rear.

Once he started running toward the house, the Ice Wall followed close behind him. He was actually moving it by pouring his magic into it to match his movement speed. From an onlooker’s perspective, however, it looked like the Ice Wall was simply following him.

Two hundred meters to the barrier. I need to make it or I’m done for.

Crack. After running a hundred meters though, the Ice Wall shattered.

“What?!”

It had managed to withstand three hits of the invisible long-range air magic attack before it broke completely.



He knew it would be impossible to dash the last hundred meters while leaving himself vulnerable from behind, so Ryo had no choice but to turn around and confront the monster. When he did, he saw the bird much more clearly now.

“An assassin hawk... It uses air magic to create an invisible long-range attack called an ‘air slash,’ all while rushing its target at supersonic speed with its beak and claws,” Ryo said, unthinkingly reciting the bird’s entry in *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition* from memory. Unfortunately for him, he couldn’t remember what it said about how to deal with one.

He couldn’t use the Ice Bahn + Icicle Lance combo he executed against lesser boars. However...he could use Water Jet, like he did against lesser rabbits... Probably. If he aimed for the wing joints, he might be able to at least hinder its movements even if he couldn’t pierce through it?

Decision made, and now he needed to strike while the iron was hot. Because his opponent was an intelligent monster capable of controlling magic, it’d be better not to say the spell out loud.

Water Jet.

The Water Jet he launched found its mark unerringly, piercing through. Yes, *piercing*—piercing right through...the air. It didn’t hit the assassin hawk at all. The monster’s supersonic speed didn’t just allow it to charge its target quickly—it also made it incredibly evasive.

“Then I’ll rely on numbers to take it down!”

Water Jet 32.

Thirty-two streams of Water Jet blasted simultaneously from Ryo’s left hand, heading directly toward the assassin hawk. By the time his spell reached the monster, it was no longer there. The assassin hawk had dodged far to the side and was now flying diagonally toward him from his right.

“Oh, damn!”

Acting purely out of instinct, he jumped and rolled to the left. The ground where he’d been standing exploded in the next instant as a result of the assassin hawk’s rushing attack.

His evasive roll meant Ryo was right next to the monster when it landed. Almost unconsciously, he stabbed at it with the bamboo knife-spear still in his right hand. *Squelch.*

“Giiii!”

He felt the sensation of his weapon puncturing something. At the same time, the assassin hawk’s vicious scream tore at his ears. Then, in that moment, Ryo met the monster’s gaze, and he saw the blood flowing from its closed right eye. Now he knew what his bamboo knife-spear had struck.

By nature, a bird’s eyes were so glossy it was hard to read any sort of emotion in them—but on this occasion, Ryo had no doubt that it was hatred brimming in the assassin hawk’s remaining eye.

“Ice Wall Package.”

An Ice Wall began forming around the assassin hawk before him, like a box capturing it from above, but he wasn’t all that surprised when it moved away from him faster than his spell could trap it. Even wounded, the monster had lost none of its lightning-fast agility.

Then, with a final glimpse at Ryo, it flew away. *Next time, I’ll kill you,* he thought he heard a voice say.

He couldn’t move long after the assassin hawk had flown away.

“That was way too close.”

While carefully checking himself for injuries, he walked toward the barrier.

“Ugh...how the heck do I deal with that...”

Problems were cropping up one after another... His Slow Life in the Forest of Rondo was definitely off to a rough start.

Magic evidently had a range of effectiveness. For Ryo, his effectiveness encompassed the fifteen meters immediately surrounding him. His magic didn’t work on anything beyond that distance.

His Water Ball, for example, lost its buoyancy after fifteen meters and

dropped to the ground. As long as it remained within the fifteen-meter boundary though, he could control it freely, as if a magical thread were connecting it to him. Thinking back to the ten-meter range of his first attempts, he knew his progress was certain. Of course, his Water Ball still wasn't particularly fast or strong, which meant Ryo didn't use it as an offensive magic technique...

He also couldn't extend his Ice Bahn spell more than fifteen meters beyond him. It could still only be generated with himself as the origin point, meaning he couldn't produce it under the feet of a lesser boar standing fifteen meters away. No spontaneous creation of Water Ball either outside the fifteen-meter range.

But...what if he *could*...? Suppose he managed to create an Ice Bahn with a three-meter radius underneath a lesser boar ten meters away... It would slip and slide on the ice, unable to move properly.

The Water Jet spell was Ryo's current strongest means of offense, but this too only worked with Ryo as its origin point. In a sense, that made it easy for the enemy to evade since the attack's trajectory was a straight line from Ryo to his target. Although it was quite difficult to avoid Water Jet given its speed...the assassin hawk had nevertheless done so—and not just the normal version, but his trump card, Water Jet 32, which consisted of thirty-two simultaneous streams at slightly different angles to give him the edge in a head-on confrontation... But the assassin hawk had still managed to move out of its effective range.

Clearly, there was a lot of room for improvement. He couldn't deny the appeal of enhancing his food supply, but...this latest outing had taught him there were still monsters outside the barrier Ryo had no chance of defeating. Moreover, they weren't even that far from the barrier.

He needed to grow stronger, otherwise he'd find himself at the end of this new life.



Every two days, Ryo set out in the morning to hunt for a lesser rabbit or lesser boar in the eastern part of the forest. On the days he didn't go hunting or it

rained, he pored through *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition* since he didn't know when or where what types of monsters he might run into. It would be pathetic if he mishandled some new enemy simply because he'd been slacking on his reading.

Aside from these activities, he focused on practicing his magic, specifically generating water and ice using other locations as the epicenter of the spell. As he expected, it was initially impossible for him to suddenly produce either in a spot ten meters away, so he instead tried thrusting out his right hand and visualizing one of his spells—Water Ball, for example—generating in the air ten centimeters away. Ultimately, he wanted to be able to do this from a distance of fifteen meters away and, eventually, beyond that, but...it would be quite some time before he could achieve that goal. However, just because his goal was out of reach for the moment didn't mean he shouldn't continue to train.

Whenever Ryo was able to practice outside, he made sure his regimen included firing Water Jet from a point that wasn't himself. This allowed him to practice both generating the spell in another location and strengthening its power.

He noticed incremental improvements. Regardless, progress was progress. While it made him happy to see the results of his efforts, the fact remained that he *must* do whatever it took if it meant the difference between life or death, whether or not the task brought him joy. Though they knew this fundamental truth, humans weren't that resolute. They needed to be able to see the tangible results of their work in order to feel motivated to continue. So, it wasn't a problem of logic but one of emotion.

Emotions made up half of each person. In order to reach success, it was vital for one to be able to inspire their emotional half too.

Ryo knew this intuitively. He wasn't a genius. He wasn't even exceptionally bright. He knew, however, how important it was to strive. It wasn't his mind that gave him this knowledge but his heart. So, for a human like him, it wasn't hard to make an effort.

Change arrived suddenly during one of the hunts he went on every other day for lesser rabbits or boars in the eastern part of the forest. Of course, Ryo had known there was a chance that he would encounter other kinds of monsters. Despite this, he still hadn't seen anything else besides the assassin hawk in the north. Since the northern and eastern parts of the forest were connected and not much distance separated the two sections, he had already accounted for an assassin hawk or something else showing up here in the eastern region.

But the monster he ran into today was entirely different.

"A greater boar..."

It ranked even higher than the normal boar, which itself outranked the lesser boar. The greater boar used earth magic to launch throwing stones as ranged attacks and the pace at which with which it charged its target was close to the speed of sound. Overall, its characteristics were similar to the assassin hawk's, with the major difference being their domains of specialization: air and earth, sky and ground.

Then there was its massive size... The greater boar spanned a length of roughly seven meters, its head resting at a position three meters above the ground. *This* was the thing that rushed its opponents at subsonic speed. What an absolute nightmare.

"If it hits me, I'm dead. I died on Earth after being hit by a truck, but this thing is way faster, isn't it..."

Since kinetic energy is determined by mass and velocity, a greater boar the size of a dump truck rushing in at subsonic speeds would create a destructive force more powerful than that of the vehicle that had hit him back on Earth. Though it stood twenty meters away from Ryo, it was so large it messed with his sense of perspective. Maybe its boar-like appearance also contributed.

Icicle Lance 16.

He started off by creating sixteen Icicle Lances as a preemptive measure against the monster's full-bodied subsonic charging attack. They burst forth from the ground at thirty-degree angles. As the greater boar moved leisurely toward him, it launched two stones at him.

Ice Shield 2.

An ice shield the size of a tennis racket rose in front of Ryo, intercepting the flying stones, then disappeared along with the projectiles.

“Graaaaawr!”

Rage or intimidation? He wasn't sure which of the two the greater boar was expressing through its roar. Right after, around twenty throwing stones materialized around it.

“Whoa, that's way too many. *Ice Wall.*”

This time, instead of a shield, Ryo decided a wall would be his best bet to defend against a frontal attack. Not a moment later, the greater boar launched the rocks at him. Just before the stones flying toward Ryo hit the Ice Wall, his Icicle Lances shattered and the Ice Wall cracked. He immediately leaped to the left because the greater boar rushed at him at almost the exact same time as the stones made impact.

“Executing a charge in tandem with a special move... Just like a certain master swordsman!”

This exact strategy appeared in his favorite comic.

“If I were an air magician, I could shoot sonic blades from my three clones and attack by following those offensive trails!”

No, definitely impossible for humans.

The greater boar destroyed Ryo's Icicle Lances with its throwing stones and his Ice Wall with its own rushing assault. Its momentum made it sail right past Ryo, then it skidded to a halt about fifteen meters away, where it turned around and repositioned itself.

And that meant...

“It's your own fault for stopping there. *Ice Bahn.*”

He created a floor of ice *directly* underneath the greater boar. It surrounded the monster in all directions at a radius of three meters, then continued to spread until the space between them was completely carpeted in ice. Unable to stand on top of the ice, the greater boar slipped and fell countless times. This

must have been the first time in its life it had experienced walking on ice since the Forest of Rondo was warm.

“Icicle Lance 16.”

Despite all his practice so far, Ryo still couldn’t make his Icicle Lance fly. This time, it didn’t matter as much because he’d learned a different way to use it now: by creating it in a place away from him. Sixteen Icicle Lances appeared eighteen meters above the greater boar, their center of gravity concentrated near the tip.

They hung in the air for a moment, then dropped.

“Gyyyaaaaaa!”

One after another, Icicle Lances pierced the monster from neck to rump, everywhere except its head. Because of its unique charging attack, the greater boar’s entire head, including its nose, was extremely sturdy. A normal blade wouldn’t be able to pierce it, which explained why this boar had been able to break through Ryo’s Ice Wall.

The rest of its body, from neck to tail, was no tougher than a lesser boar’s and only slightly more robust than a normal wild boar’s, so that was where Ryo had aimed.

*“I’m glad I read through *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition* so thoroughly. Though I’m pretty sure I can’t use its hide anymore, not with all these holes...”*



“Oookay, time for the Northern Forest Expedition Team Number 2 to set out!”

It was anyone’s guess who Ryo made this declaration to, but he was nevertheless determined.

“This time I’ll upgrade my food supplies for sure!”

Last time he’d ventured out into the northern part of the forest to do just that, an assassin hawk had blocked his path. As its name indicated, the assassin hawk was a monster well-known for taking its target’s life before they even

realized what happened. Like an assassin, it struck suddenly, unleashing an invisible, air-magic-based attack—called an “air slash”—on its victims from the sky, which was a blind spot for many creatures on the ground. Since Ryo attributed his evasion of the assassin hawk’s attack last time to pure luck, he questioned if he was fully prepared now to face off against it.

“I still can’t defeat it, so immediate retreat is the plan if I run into one.”

He felt like his skills hadn’t improved at all since his last encounter, but that wasn’t even close to the truth. Now, he should be able to buy himself enough time to retreat with more room for error than last time... That was his hope at least. His inability to defeat one essentially came down to affinity.

Because a greater boar’s strength was in no way inferior to an assassin hawk’s, Ryo thought the reason he could win against the former but not the latter had to do with his ability, or lack thereof, to stop the enemy’s movements. As long as a greater boar entered his magic’s effective range, he could stop it in its tracks using his Ice Bahn spell. The same couldn’t be said of an assassin hawk, though. His attempt to trap the last one he had encountered using his Ice Wall Package spell failed.

His fundamental hunting technique involved obstructing the enemy’s movements and then attacking once the creature had been immobilized, which currently made the assassin hawk, whose movements he couldn’t hinder, extremely resistant to his current offensive strategy. This was why he decided immediate retreat was his best option if he encountered one again.

“Ignoring the assassin hawk problem, I *did* manage to get my hands on some phigs last time. I hope there are more ripe ones in the same place I picked them. I’ll take those and maybe I can find something else to use as seasoning... It’d be amazing to find some black pepper or something like it.”

His gear, comprised of his usual assortment for such expeditions now, consisted of the loincloth and sandals made from lesser boar leather, the bamboo knife-spear, and the jute sack.

After exiting the barrier, Ryo headed to the same place he went to last time in the northern part of the forest. There, he found newly ripened phigs.

“Nice. An excellent haul.”

He plucked ten phigs, put them into the sack, and headed north until he finally arrived at the location of the assassin hawk’s ambush. Two hundred meters from the barrier.

“This is where it tried to take me out last time. I don’t see any right now though.”

A close inspection of the area showed him it was a slightly open clearing where the dense forest thinned out a bit. In short, the perfect place to attack from the sky.

“I didn’t notice it at all back then. Maybe it’s proof of how much I had going on in my head at the time.”

He continued north while keeping a wary eye on his surroundings. When he found himself about five hundred meters from the barrier, he at long last got what he wanted.

“Oh, wow... Those green bunches... That’s definitely black pepper, isn’t it...”

The green bunches were about the size of Delaware grapes after they’d been soaked in the liquid that made them seedless... If he said this in front of grape and black pepper farmers, they would scold him soundly by saying, “Grapes and black pepper don’t look the same at all!”

Unfortunately, that was the extent of Ryo’s knowledge, or more accurately, lack thereof.

He plucked an orb and bit into it. A fragrant aroma filled his mouth and nostrils while a spiciness prickled across his tongue. Generally speaking, black pepper is famous because it’s harvested in this green state and dried over a period of time until it turns black, but in places like Southeast Asia on Earth it’s often stir-fried just like this with foods like chicken.

Be that as it may, it was the first time Ryo tasted black pepper in its unripened state.

“All right, I’m picking them!”

The pepper bunches he collected combined with the phigs to fill up about half

the jute sack. He knew just this small amount would have been a fortune during the Age of Discovery.

“I pretty much accomplished my original goal, but let me explore a little more.”

After walking what he estimated to be around three hundred meters, Ryo found himself staring at a stretch of wetlands in front of him.

“Wetlands means lizardfolk...”

Sadly for him, there were none here.

“Ah, well, it’s fine. I would have run away at full speed if there had been any. I feel like they’d be way better at water magic too.”

A special characteristic of lizardfolk was their extremely high aptitude for water magic. On Phi, lizardfolk weren’t considered an intelligent species of monster because they couldn’t communicate with humans, so humans encroaching on the wetlands inhabited by the creatures were usually attacked on the spot without question.

“Might be kind of difficult to go even farther north while avoiding these wetlands.”

In his right hand, he carried his bamboo spear. In his left, the jute sack, which contained his precious supply of pepper. He didn’t know what he’d do if it fell into the marsh or got muddy...

“That’s all, folks! I’m calling it here for today.”

Ryo uttered those words like a certain famous comedic character and decided to head home. At that moment, however, he suddenly spied a plant growing in the marshes. He blinked, turned away, and looked again to make sure his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him. He stared at it with an astonished expression. Yup, the double take had been necessary.

“It looks awfully similar...”

Of course, it was taller than the plant Ryo remembered. Plus, it spread out a lot horizontally. When he brushed his fingers across the seeds, they fell easily,

scattering on the ground. The color was a bit dark too. Despite it all, he was almost positive it was...

“Rice...isn’t it...”

Wild rice, in fact, growing naturally, not cultivated by someone. He’d heard about wild rice during his time on Earth. There are many places even now in Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent where it still grows.

Still, he had to wonder if he could really be this lucky. Most people who wound up reincarnated found rice only well after becoming used to their new lives, and usually only after a ton of effort, relentless searching, and journeys halfway around the world. That was the trope, at least. First, they encountered hard black bread. Then, soft white bread. Finally, *finally*, came their fateful meeting with rice.

Yet here he was...

“No, I’ll think about it later. Right now, I’m taking this back with me.”

Surveying the wetlands, he saw what he considered wild rice to be growing profusely throughout the area. Ryo unbound the knife from his spear and started cutting off the ears of the rice plants, which he stuffed into the jute sack. He harvested until the sack was almost full. When he was done, he ran all the way home for good measure, afraid of being attacked by something and losing the tremendous spoils of the victory he’d achieved today.

Back at his house, the first thing Ryo did was make a box out of ice. By this point in time, he’d become so good at using water magic to make ice that his magical energy ran through his creations even when he was unconscious. This meant his ice no longer melted like normal ice. If he consciously severed what he liked to call the magical connection, only then would it begin to melt like normal ice. He now had a large collection of iceboxes all around the inside of his house, which only required a seemingly negligible amount of magical energy to maintain. Thus far, he hadn’t run into any problems.

The icebox he made now was the size of a large suitcase. Once complete, he stored the harvested pepper inside. After, he took out the phigs in the jute sack and placed them on top of the kitchen table.

Only the wild rice plants remained in the bag.

“First things first... I need to figure out if I can actually eat this as rice...”

Typically, rice is threshed from the ears of the plant to leave only the unhulled rice, which is then thoroughly dried. After that, it's run through a rice huller to peel its skin and prepare it for consumption. This process is how the Japanese get their hands on the staple known as rice.

Except Ryo currently didn't possess any of the necessary tools in the process. Not a single one. In the depths of his heart, he'd secretly been elated by the thought of living life on easy mode with his acquisition of rice. Unfortunately for him, he found out the hard part came *after* acquiring it.

If this were the standard reincarnation story, there would already have been a culture of growing and eating rice in some region or country on this world, so he wouldn't be facing any difficulties on this front. No such culture existed here in Phi's Forest of Rondo. If anything, based on what he'd been able to read between the lines of Fake Michael's explanation, Ryo was the only human living here.

At any rate, he needed to determine a course of action first.

“I think I'll go back to the marsh tomorrow and gather more of these wild rice plants. I'll get a bunch of whole plants, roots and all, and plant them around the house after I build a paddy field.”

He felt no hesitation whatsoever about his decision to make a rice paddy.

“As for the plants I gathered today, I'll figure out how to get rice out of them so I can cook it!”

Step one: thresh the plants.

He could get the unhulled rice by simply stroking his fingers through the ears of the plants... From the Edo period to the Taisho era, rice farmers accomplished this task by using traditional winnowing forks called *senba koki*, except...he didn't need one because the unhulled rice had fallen from the ears on its own within the jute sack.

This trait was unique to wild rice plants. The seeds dropped easily from just a

light touch. This could cause difficulties during the harvest, but he didn't need to worry about that right now.

“Oooh, I didn't even have to do anything for the seeds to come off. Luuucky.”

That was the extent of Ryo's knowledge on the subject. Looking at the unhulled rice, he knew normally they should be thoroughly dried. In modern Japan, the rice was run through huge hullers for ten hours to remove any hint of moisture.

“I don't think I'll dry what I'm planning on eating today.”

The next step was to hull the rice...in other words, remove the skin covering the rice's surface. He picked up a grain. As far as size went, it wasn't much different from Japanese rice.

“This is close to the japonica, right? I thought it might be the indica variety, but if it's actually similar to japonica, then I can cook it like Japanese rice.”

He was jumping the gun considering he hadn't even hulled the rice yet.

The established theory on Earth regarding the origins of rice cultivation states that it began over ten thousand years ago in the Yangtze River valley of China. Naturally, this referred to the japonica variety of rice. It traveled west from there, transforming into the indica strain, but japonica had come first.

However, the history of rice on Earth was irrelevant to Ryo, who had begun pouring his heart and soul into obtaining white rice... Using his nails, he tried peeling the skin off the unhulled rice grains.

“Hey, this is surprisingly easy. I suppose the most annoying thing is peeling them one at a time.”

How many hours did he plan on dedicating to hulling rice though... Or maybe it was just a sign of the Japanese people's obsession with rice?

He mulled over ways to make the hulling process go faster. The only tool at his disposal was his water magic and, within it, ice would have to be the best option. That was when Ryo remembered the ice roller he'd created to tan the lesser boar hide. He had pressed the tanned leather with the implement to soften it. This time, instead of pressing, he would use it to peel.

By sandwiching the unhulled rice between two ice rollers, would it be possible to force the skins off if he increased the rotation speed and made the rice pop out from between? His water magic would generate both the ice rollers and the energy to rotate them in the air. It should go well, as long as he maintained tight control of the magic!

He finished making the rollers and set up an ice box to catch the flying hulled rice. First, he tested out his idea using five grains of unhulled rice. *Krrsh*. The skins came off. The grains made it through...except they were broken.

“W-Well, they should still taste fine, right?”

After that, he continued running unhulled rice through the ice rollers. There seemed to be considerable variation in terms of size in the grains. When small and large ones went through together, the large ones tended to break while the smaller ones fell through without being ground between the rollers. Through a combination of compromise and turning a blind eye to the problem, Ryo managed to finish hulling about two cups of rice.

“Ha, this battle was way harder than the one I had against the assassin hawk...”

Now all he needed to do was cook the rice. Fortunately, he already had a rice cooker of sorts. Fake Michael had made sure to include a traditional cook stove called a *kamado* in this house as well as two pots with wooden lids to use on said stove. Ryo planned on using one to cook the rice.

He started by washing a pot until it was spick-and-span. Next, he washed the rice in the ice bowl. Rice bran and husks floated to the top as he swished the rice around. Then, he poured the clean rice into the washed pot. He placed his hand over the bed of rice and added water until it covered the back of his hand. Honestly, Ryo had no idea how much water this wild rice needed to cook properly, so he relied on his Earth knowledge to get him through.

Once he did that, he covered the pot with an ice lid. He made it a little heavy so that it wouldn't fly off even when steam pressure rose underneath. So far so good, but the biggest hurdle still remained: he didn't know how much heat to use.

Fortunately, all around the world people had common knowledge of how to

cook delicious rice!

“First a little, then strong in the middle. Even when the baby wails, keep the lid on.”

Translation—start off on low heat, turn it up high halfway through, and don’t take off the lid until all the steam is gone. That said, Ryo had no idea how long he was supposed to spend on each step...

“Why don’t I start with it on low for five minutes then crank up the heat?”

He was a pro by now at handling fire. It was funny: a water magician who was also a wiz with fire.

A jack of all trades, master of none...

In total, it took him twenty minutes to cook the rice. He turned off the heat and waited for the steam to dissipate. After fifteen minutes...he finally took off the lid.

“Rice, sweet, glorious rice! Welcome to my life!”

What came after the huge billows of steam was white rice... Actually, not quite. More like a slightly yellow rice.

“W-Well...I can’t expect it to be exactly the same as the rice I know.”

Ryo held a rice bowl made of ice in his left hand and an ice rice paddle in his right. Calming his racing heart, he slowly scooped some rice into the bowl. He dematerialized the paddle, replacing it with a pair of ice chopsticks.

“Time to chow down then.”

.....

“The texture is a little different from Japanese. The flavor spreads in the mouth differently too... But this is, without a doubt, rice!”

Trembling with delight, Ryo intently savored another bite of the rice in his bowl. The water magician cried while eating.

“Now that I have rice, it makes me want miso soup... I’m pretty sure that wish won’t come true, though.”

His early guess of this house’s location being somewhere between the

equator and Tropic of Cancer had been based on various conditions, and his recent acquisition of pepper and wild rice proved his theory.

There was one stringent requirement for miso soup, which was, naturally, miso. He'd need soybeans to make miso, but the soybean's natural habitat was East Asia, including Japan. This Forest of Rondo was too hot and humid for soybeans, which grew best in well-drained soil. It was also important to build high ridges in the field when planting soybeans to provide proper drainage. Based on all these conditions, Ryo thought that soybeans didn't grow naturally here in the Forest of Rondo.

"I guess it is what it is. It's a godsend that I was able to get my hands on rice in the first place."

The area between the house and the barrier was more than enough for a normal life, but...it was far too cramped to accommodate a rice paddy.

"This means I'll *have* to make it outside the barrier, huh? That *also* means chopping down trees to clear the land and then cultivate it...right...?"

High-speed cultivation with magic and swords...

"Hm, the Water Jet spell still can't cut trees though."

On Earth, a chainsaw would fell the trees. He recalled the existence of massive rotating saws used at lumber mills to do the job.

"What if I used a rotating saw made out of water to slice through a tree from a distance instead of Water Jet?"

Ryo visualized it in his mind: an image of a circular saw with a radius of about ten centimeters forming on his right palm, starting to rotate.

"Water Saw."

Just like he imagined, a rotating saw made out of water was born.

"Now fly!"

Splash. The moment it left his hand, it fell to the ground.

"Ahhh..."

He collapsed to his knees, hanging his head dispiritedly. Ryo remained frozen in that position for ten seconds.

Then he said, “Let me walk through the process step by step.”

Create water. Rotate the water. Make it fly.

“Damn, three steps. So, I still can’t go beyond two, huh?”

He paused to digest the information, then he sprang to his feet.

“No. It’s too soon to give up. It’s not over till it’s over.”

Spouting lines a certain Crimson Comet would say, Ryo approached a tree situated outside the barrier. Then, he chanted again.

“Water Saw.”

Except this time he didn’t let it fly. Instead, he pressed the saw against the tree trunk while holding it in his palm. *Krrrsh*. The high-pitched sound matched the one a chainsaw made when cutting. Though the speed of his saw was quite slow compared to a chainsaw’s, he nevertheless succeeded in cutting into the bark.

“I can use anything I cut down for woodworking.”

However, he lacked the necessary tools, like glue and nails, to make anything meaningful even *if* he managed to chop down trees...

“Maybe parquetry...? On second thought, no.”

The work seemed difficult.

“Gyration, huh...”

Ryo froze.

“Huh? Something doesn’t feel right.”

An image of the ice roller he’d used when tanning the lesser boar hide came to mind.

“The process for making the ice roller is...”

*Gather the water molecules from the air. Freeze those water molecules.
Rotate the frozen roller.*

“That’s...three steps...isn’t it... So, why...?”

Something was very wrong.

“Icicle Lance.”

An Icicle Lance appeared in his right hand.

“Rotate.”

It spun around like a flying bullet.

“Release.”

Fwish, splat. As usual, it fell to the ground, but it wasn’t going to bring Ryo to his knees this time.

He took a close look at his open palms, then he visualized an image of a long ice container materializing in his left hand filling with water. Then, he chanted.

“Icicle Lance.”

He generated an ice spear from it, still attached to the ice container.

“Release.”

The ice combo flew forward at considerable speed. He inhaled deeply, calming his breathing.

“I can do this. I can make it fly. Right now, I’m different from the old me.”

It was almost a self-suggestion...but vital nevertheless to help him to smash through the biases that had solidified in his mind.

He took his time crafting a mental image. One, generating an Icicle Lance. Two, it flying from his right hand. He visualized those two things again and again in his mind. Then, he opened his eyes and imagined it so clearly in front of him that he could mistake it for an illusion.

“Icicle Lance.”

An Icicle Lance appeared at the tip of his right hand.

“Release.”

The ice spear launched forward at a fantastic speed.

“This means... Well, I don’t know *when* it happened, but I’m almost positive I had the ability to make it fly at least before I tanned leather. Right?”

For better or worse, the mental image was the most important thing for doing magic. This told Ryo that he’d spent too long stuck on the idea that he simply couldn’t use his magic to propel the Icicle Lances.

He wouldn’t deny it had been impossible in the first few days after his reincarnation here, but over the course of his training he had unknowingly mastered the technique. Despite this fact, he’d somehow gotten in his own way by believing that he couldn’t make it fly...

Is this what people called a mental block?

“Gah, all my hard work so far... But wait—this means I gained a lot of power, doesn’t it? In the end, I still win!”

Then, the very next day, Ryo found himself in a desperate situation with no way out.



The day after he successfully made Icicle Lance fly, Ryo went on his usual hunt in the eastern part of the forest. Still giddy about his new power to make Icicle Lance fly, he honestly felt like he could easily achieve a complete victory over a greater boar.

Such thoughts filled his head, making him overflow with a level of confidence he hadn’t experienced until now. The world was his oyster as far as he was concerned.

But when he was attacked, it wasn’t by a greater boar.

Air slashes buffeted him from the front and rear—that familiar invisible, long-range attack created using air magic.

“Oh, jeez! Even facing one of those guys is a *very* bad idea! *Omni-Directional Ice Wall.*”

A wall of ice one meter wide and two meters high on all four sides enclosed Ryo, protecting him from the air slashes. In his right hand, he held the upper

half of his bamboo knife-spear, its butt end having long since been blasted away.

His Ice Wall was transparent, allowing him to see an assassin hawk flying in front of him—an assassin hawk with one good eye, the same one that forced Ryo to reckon with his mortality in this world.

Behind it flew another. Both of the monsters hurled air slashes at him while keeping their distance. The worst part about the whole thing was that the new assassin hawk almost always attacked him from his blind spot while his one-eyed foe assaulted him from the front.

After taking its third hit, his Ice Wall cracked in the front. At that moment, countless streams of water rushed from Ryo's left hand toward the one-eyed assassin hawk.

Water Jet 32.

Using some special aerodynamic feature, it instantly rolled to the side and slipped out of his attack's range. Then...the part of the Ice Wall protecting his rear shattered, it too having taken its third air-slash assault.

Ryo panted hard. Dodging the air slashes coming from the front and rear while simultaneously running around attempting to counterattack was taking its toll on him. Moreover, his enemies were easily dodging his own attacks.

His bamboo knife-spear ended up being a sacrifice to protect him from an earlier air slash that he just barely managed to avoid. His turtle-shell-like Ice Wall had given him enough time to catch his breath, but it unfortunately cracked after sustaining three hits from the air slashes. Every time the Ice Wall broke, he took the chance to counter and then immediately set about regenerating the Wall.

"I want to escape... But they're cutting me off from the front and back, so I don't have an escape route..."

The newcomer continued circling right behind Ryo, staying in his blind spot, blocking off any path to retreat. He didn't know how much longer his magical energy would last. At the rate he was producing Ice Wall and Water Jet, he calculated it would last at least twenty-four hours. But...fatigue was building up

in him.

Fatigue led to mistakes. He needed to fight it off, because even a single mistake could result in his death. Unfortunately, even trying to keep his focus sharp was only exhausting him further.

“All right, then what am I supposed to do?”

He recreated Ice Wall and analyzed the situation. So far, Ryo had revealed only two of his spells to his enemies—Ice Wall and Water Jet. He already knew that the assassin hawk was capable of dodging the 32-stream version of Water Jet. He also knew that his only way to win would not be by defeating his enemies, but by escaping to the barrier’s protection. His best option, then, was to buy himself time by trying to wound the assassin hawks. It didn’t even have to be a fatal injury.

“Should I trick them?”

As soon as he murmured those words, Ice Wall shattered at the front and back simultaneously. He immediately launched Water Jet 16 at the one-eyed assassin hawk.

Then he ran.

Of course, the one-eyed monster deflected his attack. While running, Ryo thrust out his left hand in an attempt to unleash another magical spell, but he tripped. The new assassin hawk rushed right at him. It must have grown impatient after having all its air slashes deflected by his Ice Wall, so Ryo imagined it screaming “I have you now!” as it raced toward him.

But that was precisely what he wanted it to do. He used the momentum of his fall to roll toward the left and successfully evaded the newcomer’s charge. He twisted, then stabbed the remaining part of his bamboo-knife-spear into the hawk as it sped past him.

Well, he *intended* to stab it, but then he had to stop himself and roll even farther to the left to avoid the one-eyed assassin hawk, which had launched its own rushing attack at the spot he’d been in, as if it had seen right through Ryo’s trap. Moreover, it didn’t stop even after realizing its attack had missed. It just continued flying past him. Perhaps it had learned from their previous

encounter.

In those few moments, the new assassin hawk flew back into the air. The one-eyed enemy screeched at its compatriot like it was rebuking the newcomer. Ryo wondered if it was telling the other one not to drop its guard.

Then they both took up their original positions again: the one-eyed assassin hawk in front of Ryo, the newcomer behind him. They each maintained a distance of twenty meters from him. He stood up slowly, never breaking eye contact with the one-eyed assassin hawk.

Then he chanted a spell.

"Ice Wall Package."

As he did, he almost got the feeling the new assassin hawk smirked. Of course he couldn't see it doing so because it remained behind him, but he felt like it was saying, "You almost caught me off guard the first time, but you won't do it again."

Newbie, I really want to tell you that you're already dead. Your one-eyed friend has pretty good instincts, so I'll just keep my mouth shut. I know how you move when you're focused on me, so it's only a matter of time.

The moment he had the thought, a barrage of Icicle Lances bored down on the newcomer from above. Two hundred and fifty-six of them. The circle of ice, thirty meters from end to end, glittered in the sunlight as it fell, the assassin hawk caught right in the center.

It shrieked in agony as it tried to evade, but it failed considering the wide range of Ryo's attack. A number of icicles plunged straight through its wings, knocking the newcomer right to the ground. The Icicle Lances continued to free-fall. Though Ryo could make his icicles fly now, he could only focus on one, so he created another outside of Ice Wall.

"Release."

His aim unerring, the Icicle Lance pierced right through the new assassin hawk's neck as it lay on the ground.

This time, its one-eyed friend screeched in rage. Ryo saw the same hatred in

its one good eye that he had seen in their first encounter. No, the hate on this occasion was even stronger. They locked eyes for only a fraction of a moment before the one-eyed monster turned around and flew away.

“Haaa... I managed to make it out alive. What I did with the Icicle Lances was pretty cool though. Like glittering spears raining down from the sky. I’ll use it as one of my finishing moves from now on.”

It had been a vicious battle, one which he had been prepared to lose. Fortunately, all’s well that ends well. He had survived another round against the assassin hawk to whom his fate seemed to be tied and now understood exactly what he needed to do: grow physically stronger.

At the battle’s outset, he had almost run out of breath while dodging the monsters’ attacks and it had taken him quite a while to regain control of his breathing. This time, the one-eyed assassin hawk had focused on using ranged attacks, which had allowed Ryo to buy time with his Ice Wall, but he knew the same might not happen the next time.

“Stamina is important,” he said, determination ringing in his voice.

Starting the next day, Ryo’s daily routine changed slightly. The first thing he did after waking up was calisthenics for thirty minutes, without fail. Limber muscles were the key to preventing injury. He wasn’t at all what anyone would call flexible, but he also knew that training every day would help.

After that, he ate breakfast. Breakfast was important. The foundation of each day. Once he finished, he either read or practiced his magic until the food settled in his stomach. Thirty minutes later, he ran around the edge of the barrier. Then he walked, generating ice and water in his hands as he did... Then he ran again while practicing his magic, slowing to a walk whenever he grew too tired. He moved a lot and often.

In the afternoons, he left the safety of the barrier and went hunting in the eastern part of the forest every two days. He hadn’t run into the one-eyed assassin hawk since their last meeting, but he knew that someday they would have to settle their battle once and for all. There was no logic in his certainty. He just knew.

After hunting and increasing his food supply, he went back home and practiced magic. He conducted magical training even on the days he didn't hunt. Then, before taking his nightly bath, he practiced a thousand swings.

Since he didn't have a baseball bat, he cut a piece of bamboo into a sword, modified the weight with ice, and used it to practice his swings. From first grade in elementary school to the winter of his third year in junior high, Ryo used to train at a kendo dojo. Kendo practice had almost felt like a fun game to him. He'd never participated in tournaments or anything. It was just something he did after school. Unlike his friends in junior high who were in school clubs, he hadn't joined any, so training at the dojo on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays had been his extracurricular activity. That had been his life back then.

When he became a high schooler, his teacher had suggested he continue his training at the prefectural police headquarters, but Ryo turned down the offer. While he hadn't hated kendo by any means, he lacked any desire to dedicate himself to it on a serious level.

He wasn't unathletic either. Baseball, soccer, basketball—he'd enjoyed watching those sports as much as playing them, but he hadn't really fallen in love with any of them to the point of obsession.

In fact, Ryo had never really developed a passion for anything in his life. He didn't mind hard work and understood its value, so he had always tried everything he wanted to. He tackled each pursuit head-on, giving it his best effort. It wasn't so much that he'd eventually lose interest as it was that he'd never follow through to see how far he could take each of his hobbies.

While he definitely wasn't a prodigy, most things came easily enough to him as long as he tried—yet even this part of him had begun to change since his arrival in Phi.

Magic was to thank for this change. He actually felt a bit glad about not having a proper magic teacher, or even a magical textbook. Because for the first time in his life, Ryo found himself obsessed with magic just by using it. Magic wasn't easy at all. There was so much he still didn't understand, but that was just fine.

Then there were all the other skills he needed to improve to really take

advantage of his magic. He almost found himself on the verge of death a few times due to his lack of stamina. He felt the painful lack of his engineering skills after his bamboo spear snapped in half.

Running would build up his stamina. This method worked for anyone who had the same goal and was already a well-established one on Earth.

He needed to watch out for one thing, though: stress fractures. It was possible that the bones in his legs could form cracks from overuse, so it was vital that he intake as much calcium as possible... Unfortunately, he didn't have access to milk, which was the best for calcium absorption. That meant the only other viable option was eating small fish, bones and all... He had no doubt this would become his norm eventually.

After thinking that there must be something besides food that could prevent stress fractures, Ryo suddenly remembered that yes, in fact, there was.

Calisthenics, otherwise known as stretching. Ahhh, such versatility in flexibility!

So, currently, he ran...then walked when he grew tired. He didn't stop. No, he just kept walking, putting himself in constant motion to strengthen his cardiovascular system.

Stretch, run, walk. Anyone could build up their stamina as long as they followed this regimen.

As for his other problems, he decided to give up on the engineering challenges of his bamboo spear. The only reason he even carried around his bamboo knife-spear was to deliver his finishing blow from a distance. He'd also only ever seen spears used in movies and not in real life.

This begged the question of what he would do next for a weapon. He had years of experience with kendo. Although it had been five years since he held a bamboo practice sword, his body would still remember its nine years of training. Swordsmanship and kendo were two different things, of course, but Ryo knew that. Then again, it wasn't like kendo magically appeared out of a vacuum. "Swordsmanship" was definitely a source of the martial art.

All of this meant the answer was easy for Ryo: all he had to do was reverse

the process that transformed swordsmanship to kendo. He knew this process itself wouldn't be easy, but he was confident in his ability to manage it nonetheless.

He wasn't particularly bothered about failure either because the whole point of taking up the sword was to make the best use of magic. As a water magician, his main focus would always be his water magic.

Today, Ryo once again took a run. Since the sun rose early every day around 5 o'clock Earth time, he had plenty of time in the mornings to exercise. Rather than run at a fixed pace like a marathon runner would, he switched things up by running and walking in intervals.

The outer edge of the barrier measured approximately six hundred meters in circumference, so he liked to do two fast running laps, followed by one lap of jogging, which in turn was followed by two laps of walking.

He followed this training regimen for at least five hours every day without breaks. While he moved his body, he practiced his magic. In addition to his daily bout of calisthenics, walking, and running, he started including practice swings in his schedule. Ryo used a bamboo sword about a meter long. He had fine-tuned its weight for his specific comfort and also coated it in a layer of ice.

Japan's kendo, or even its various other swordsmanship styles, involved distinct moves. Whether a bamboo sword or katana, it was all about how you held it.

Grip the hilt near its end with the left hand. Place the right hand around the guard. Ensure the hands don't touch by leaving a fist-sized space between them. The 24-cm hilt exists for this reason.

Hold and support the sword with the left hand. Direct the blade's trajectory with the right.

And then swing, swing, and swing.

One strike at a time, Ryo began to slowly reawaken his muscle memory. Each strike steadily increased the speed with which Ryo wielded his sword. He worked strike by strike, until his swings came naturally to him again.

By the time his morning training ended, exhaustion weighed down his body, but that didn't mean he could just collapse from fatigue. First, he needed to ice himself so he could cool off his muscles. This presented him with the perfect moment to shine as a water magician.

Ryo applied membranes of icy water over his body to cool his warm muscles. He left the water against his skin for fifteen minutes—enough time for his blood vessels to contract. Once he finished icing himself, the blood vessels would dilate once more to flush away the metabolic waste that causes fatigue.

Finally, for the cooldown portion of his exercise routine, he finished with more calisthenics. With all of this, he *should* be able to avoid injuries. Hopefully.

For lunch, he ate his leftovers from breakfast. He always made sure to cook two meals' worth of food in the morning. Whether one serving or two, the labor remained the same.

And then, it was time to hunt.

Hunting... Lately the activity had become almost mundane to him. Ryo knew facing off against lesser rabbits and lesser boars no longer posed life-threatening challenges to him. He'd even become an old hand at fighting normal rabbits and normal boars.

Of course, none of this meant he acted carelessly. There was always the chance that he could run into an assassin hawk or something worse. In that sense, assassin hawks truly were dangerous enemies for humans.

At the moment, he was still struggling to adapt to his morning training regimen, which affected his afternoons. Once he became more accustomed to the exercise, Ryo wanted to expand his range of activities.

For now, he restricted himself to the eastern and northern parts of the forest. Someday though, he would venture to the southwest where...the sea lay! Yes, indeed, he would someday have to make the trek there for a simple but important reason—to procure salt.

Water and salt, the two things humans absolutely needed for survival. He could produce an endless supply of the former, but not so much the latter. God

had turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt in the Book of Genesis and Ryo definitely could...*not* perform such a feat. Shoot, it would be terrifying if he *could*.

In any case, his safest option to acquire salt would be to look for salt flats near the coast. The supply of salt Fake Michael had prepared for him was plentiful enough to last him more than a year, even at the pace he currently used it, but Ryo had never panned for salt in his life, so he wanted to know how difficult or laborious it would be to get his hands on the mineral. He hated the idea of waiting until his supply ran out to look for a new source.

Plus, he had a hankering for seafood. It had been a long time since his last taste of the sea's bounties...which may or may not have factored into his decision to trek to the sea. As much as he loved meat, he certainly didn't dislike seafood either.



About two months later, his stamina-building training regimen finally began paying off when his morning exercises no longer affected his energy levels in the afternoon.

"Awesome. I think I'll go a little farther today. But first, I need a landmark."

So saying, Ryo started building an ice spire inside the barrier, although it quickly looked less like a spire and more like a very thick flagpole. It measured one hundred meters in height. From a distance, it struck a lovely sight as it reflected the sunlight.

"I should be able to spot this from pretty much everywhere."

Though a canopy of trees grew densely in the Forest of Rondo, clearings existed here and there throughout the region. With a spire this tall, he *should* be able to see it from even a distance of two kilometers...*should* being the key word. As long as he had this as a landmark, he shouldn't have any issues finding his way back home.

Despite its prodigious hundred-meter height, Ryo had created it in a rush, so it wasn't exactly a well-built or long-lasting fixture. The spire's diameter measured three meters and it was roughly cylindrical in shape. It probably

wouldn't topple...as long as his magic worked to keep it upright, at least. He didn't know how he knew this, but he did.

"I'm pretty sure this violates the laws of physics I know."

His growing skill with his magical techniques might have been the reason he could more easily distinguish the difference between phenomena on Phi and on Earth. Maybe it would be more accurate to say he'd reached the point where he could generate phenomena here that would be impossible on Earth. However, Ryo's self-awareness on this front was still rather weak.

He had the usual assortment of expedition items with him: his loincloth and sandals, the bamboo knife-spear and jute sack.

Though he practiced his swings every day with the makeshift item that resembled the bamboo swords used in kendo, he didn't have any weapon he could use as a sword. So, for a while longer, he would be using his newly made bamboo knife-spear as a physical weapon. It didn't matter how many times the thing broke. As long as the knife remained fine, he could replace the shaft as many times as he needed! Very eco-friendly!

"All right, how about I head northeast today?"

A vast stretch of wetlands existed in the north. He didn't know where its eastern edge lay, so he'd decided to search for it by heading northeast. Even if it turned out to be just more of the wetlands as he progressed, he figured that knowledge itself would at least help him get his bearings.

He traveled about a kilometer from the barrier, but nothing much had changed. The only thing he ran into was one lesser boar. On the way, he collected ten phigs and even came across a red fruit called an abble, which strongly resembled an apple on Earth.

"It doesn't just *look* like an apple! It tastes like one too! I can make apple pies with this... Even though I don't know how to!"

He was his very own one-man comedy duo... Ryo had been talking to himself *quite* a lot since his reincarnation in this world.

After picking ten abbles, he continued to walk northeast.

Then, perhaps two kilometers from the house: *crack*.

The front of his Ice Wall shattered in one hit.

He had enclosed himself in a thinner version of his Ice Wall to protect himself as he traveled. He thought it would be prudent because he didn't know what he would find this deep into the Forest of Rondo on his current expedition. Though it was thin compared to his usual one, it was still strong enough to endure two hits from an assassin hawk's signature long-range air slash.

Except a single blow had destroyed the front section just now.

He instinctively leaped diagonally to the right and dropped to the ground shoulder-first. Tucking himself into a defensive posture, he rolled once, then he sprang to his feet and chanted while looking behind him.

"Ice Armor."

A chestplate, tassels, arm guards, and leg guards—all made of ice—materialized over his body. If he was hit, he would die on the spot, so in order to avoid that fate, he thought it would be a good idea to wear armor. Even a simple set would do—it didn't have to be a set of full plate.

"It looks like a massive cobra... Must be a kite snake. It uses its tail like a whip to inflict direct damage. That tail can also create an air slash. Then there's its signature ability, the venom it spits out of its mouth. Ugh, what a pain."

With its head raised about three meters above the ground, the monster looked like a cobra. Ryo had to crane his neck just to look up at it. It was unusually large, but he had no idea how long it actually was because its body was coiled.

He guessed that a direct attack from its tail was what broke his Ice Wall. The assassin hawks had used air slash often in their battles against him, so he was familiar with the attack. It was dangerous enough on its own because of its invisible nature, but it definitely shouldn't have been able to destroy Ice Wall in one hit... The fact that the kite snake's tail attack had reached him meant he was well within the monster's offensive range. He needed to change up his tactics and turn the tide in his favor.

Ice Wall, U-shaped.

This version of the Ice Wall fenced in the kite snake to its front and sides. Though he primarily used the spell to retreat, he could use it this way too. He jumped backward at the same time he chanted the spell in his mind. At the very least, Ice Wall should stave off one attack from the monster's tail. He would take the opportunity to backpedal out of its attack range.

But the kite snake proved to be anything but predictable. Instead of breaking through his Ice Wall, it circumvented it completely and charged right at him as he tried to escape.

"I shouldn't have expected anything less from a snake. Jeez, I can't believe how fast it moves through grass!"

Ice Bahn.

He created an ice road that froze the grass along with the earth it grew out of. The kite snake could no longer stop its forward momentum.

Icicle Lance 16.

Ryo's specialty, the Ice Bahn + Icicle Lance combo. Sixteen Icicle Lances thrust savagely up from the ground at thirty-degree angles, piercingly ready to greet the sliding kite snake.

Crack.

"What?!"

Any type of the boar monster would have been stabbed right through, but the kite snake broke his Icicle Lances.

You guessed it: it smashed through them with its tail attack just like it had his Ice Wall.

"Ice Wall."

The monster continued sliding toward him on the ice road... In short, the gap between it and Ryo was closing moment by moment. First, he needed to stop it by using Ice Wall. But...

Crack. It shattered again under the kite snake's tail attack.

"Darn, I figured as much. *5-layer Ice Wall.*"

This iteration of Ice Wall was nothing like his usual, thin one. It measured three meters in both width and height, with a thickness double the normal one. A five-layer creation. He had woven this spell as a complete line of defense.

Crash, thud. The kite snake attempted to break this too in one shot with its tail, but it failed. The only thing it managed to do was create some cracks in the first layer. Soon after, the monster slammed into the Ice Wall.

Unfortunately for Ryo, he didn't even have a second to catch his breath. As soon as the kite snake realized it couldn't capture him with its mobility impaired by the ice road, it wrapped its beloved tail around the Ice Wall and pulled itself closer. It simultaneously unleashed an air slash too.

Ice Shield.

A shield of ice, roughly the size of a tennis racket, appeared midair to block the air slash. Unfortunately, that moment allowed the kite snake's tail to get near him.

A fatal oversight on his part.

"5-layer Ice Wall."

While durable, this version of the Ice Wall spell took him a full second to create while his normal version only took a tenth of a second. Normally, one second would be considered plenty fast enough, but an entire second in such a melee could mean the difference between life and death. One second could leave him completely exposed to the enemy.

Despite chanting the spell, he didn't have enough time to generate it fully. What he did manage to produce diminished the momentum of the kite snake's tail, but it still hit him, just barely.

"Ngh—"

The tail smashed through Ryo's chestplate. Luckily, he jumped backward in the nick of time to mitigate the damage, saving himself from incurring a gaping hole in his chest. Nevertheless, it had been a brutal hit. He couldn't discount the possibility of a crack or two in his ribs.

Adrenaline flooded his brain, turning him into a battle junkie that couldn't yet

feel the pain of the blow. Without a moment's delay, he raised his left hand high and chanted.

"Icicle Lance 2."

The Icicle Lances launched from his left hand and whooshed toward the kite snake's head. It hurriedly drew back its tail to counter Ryo's attack and return one of its own.

Then he finally succeeded in turning the tide in his favor.

"Ice Armor."

He regenerated the chestplate, which he would have undoubtedly died without.

As the situation stood, roughly fifteen meters separated him and the monster. The 5-layer Ice Wall, three meters in width and height, stood in front of it. Ice Bahn remained underneath the kite snake. However, the ice road measured only two meters wide. The kite snake's head, its hood flared angrily, still rested three meters from the ground, just about even with the top of the Ice Wall.

"Things might be going my way again, but I *really* don't wanna keep fighting at such close range."

The kite snake's tail was positively vicious. It could fling an air slash at him from a distance or destroy his Ice Wall with a single hit at close quarters.

Unfortunately for Ryo, his opponent once more took the initiative. Head still raised, it sprung.

"What the heck?! Is that even legal?!"

It jumped over his 5-layer Ice Wall and headed straight toward him.

"Ice Bahn."

The kite snake swerved to the side before the ice road could even reach it, almost like it had predicted his attack. The monster changed its path of attack from a straight line to a curved one. While it slithered relentlessly toward him, it whipped a continuous stream of air slashes at him.

"Ice Shield 4."

Even as Ryo created four Ice Shields to intercept its attacks, the kite snake wove to the left and right, as if to fake him out. Then, finally, it spit venom out of its mouth.

The venom attack had a much longer range than he'd anticipated. Certainly not a range he could escape from. Normally, this would have been checkmate.

Except this wasn't a normal situation, and Ryo wasn't normal.

He was a water magician.

"Squall."

The moment he chanted the spell, a torrential downpour of rain, like the ones that often besieged Southeast Asia, began to fall. The downpour struck the venom midair, forcing it to the ground, washing it away.

It seemed like this was the first time the monster's attack had been repelled in such a way. Despite belonging to a different species, the snake's surprise was clear as day to Ryo.

"Boiling Water."

He chanted this spell at the kite snake, who'd been drenched by the squall he created, to boil the water covering it and forming puddles beneath it. Before, it had taken him several minutes to execute this spell for his baths. Now, just like his other magical techniques, it didn't even take him a second.

In other words, it only took a second for the kite snake to find itself bathing in boiling water.

It howled in agony and through its open mouth...

"Icicle Lance."

...Ryo launched an extremely thick lance of ice.

The kite snake breathed its last breath shortly after.

He unthinkingly fell on his backside, then sat there on the ground just like that.

"Haaa... I'm so grateful for the bathtub... I totally wouldn't have mastered the

technique to boil water without one. Super thankful to Fake Michael for preparing it for me.”

Throb. Though he was relieved, Ryo finally felt the pain in his ribs from the kite snake’s tail attack.

Somehow, he dragged himself home. He froze the kite snake’s carcass and tossed it into the silo upon his return, though it wasn’t because he wanted to eat the snake. Nope, even his friends’ stories about the “light, delicious flavor” of the reptile when they had returned to university after studying in Southeast Asia did not convince him.

He kept it because there was a good chance he could use its parts for something... After all, he himself had seen snakeskin wallets and bags back on Earth... So, now that Ryo knew how to tan leather, he might be able to get some use out of the kite snake’s carcass.

“A bag... I mean, the jute sack works pretty well... But it doesn’t have any straps, which is why I’ve been using ivy as a substitute instead. No way ivy will work on clothes.”

The “clothing” part of the necessities trio still posed a significant challenge in his slow life in the Forest of Rondo.

As far as “food” went, this expedition had been a resounding success. He’d gotten his hands on phigs *and* abbles, those apple-like fruits. This meant he could check fruit off the things he’d been dearly wishing for. Eating well was vital for living a slow life!

“But, wow, running into a kite snake... Absolutely insane.”

It was Ryo’s first encounter with a monster that used poison. *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition*’s entry on the kite snake noted only that it spit venom. It didn’t mention the range of said attack, which had practically been a poison mist.

“I’d created the Squall spell as a means of sprinkling water, but it was effective in battle... I really have no clue about what will be effective in which situation, huh?”

He had originally conceived of Squall, the water magic he'd used to wash away the kite snake's venom, as nothing more than a sort of watering can for his garden. Of course, its power and volume of water went a *bit* beyond a watering can's—not to mention its relatively wide range.

More specifically, he'd created the spell to water a phig tree he'd transplanted onto his property. He'd known he could gather them in the forest, but then he had the thought that it might be nice to have one in his own garden on those nights he craved a phig...so he transplanted a phig tree on this whim.

It went without saying that he didn't use pesticides or fertilizer, chemical or organic. All natural cultivation! The phigs would be more delicious this way.

All natural was the way to go—yes, that was the reason, and *definitely* not because he couldn't acquire any of those items! Nope, not at all!

If you wanted to increase production, utilizing large amounts of fertilizer might be a good method, but...he didn't need to go that far for his slow life.

However, there was one part of the “food” category that was slow to progress: the rice. He still had quite a large store of unhulled rice for sowing and eating that he'd picked from the wetlands in the northern part of the forest.

What Ryo wanted was to improve the rice. In order to accomplish that goal, he needed to create a rice paddy. Though he understood what he needed to do, the logistics were a little complicated... For example, if he could use earth magic, tilling the land might be easier. If that wasn't possible, he could at least use earth magic to make his own hoe and till the land himself.

The only problem was that he could only use water magic.

“No earth magic, no farming tools, no plow horse either. How am I supposed to cultivate the land like this?”

He just couldn't envision a way to succeed.

In the meantime, he decided to stake a few Icicle Lances in the area he wanted to designate for a rice paddy.

“Icicle Lance 2.”

Thud.

Hm.

He wasn't sure about this.

"What if I drop them from the sky instead? *Icicle Lance 128.*"

One hundred twenty-eight Icicle Lances appeared twenty meters above, then fell to the ground to mark the rice paddy's proposed location and dimensions.

Thud, thud, thud.

They pierced the earth.

"Oh, huh... Well...they're piercing the ground, which is good...but that's about it, huh? Wonder if I can make them break afterward..."

In his mind, Ryo visualized one of the lances exploding...

"I should protect myself first."

He was in the garden inside the barrier, so there was no real reason to clad himself in his Ice Armor.

"5-layer Ice Wall."

His sturdiest form of defense would protect him from the (planned) blast. It wouldn't hinder his work either since the wall was transparent.

With that done, he visualized one of the Icicle Lances exploding.

Crack.

The result wasn't much of an explosion. The ice shattered, gently casting shards of ice here and there.

"This isn't going to work for tilling..."

On his second attempt, he imagined the Icicle Lance separating into smaller crystals before exploding. *Pheew.* The ice broke again and scattered all over the place, but each of the shards were even smaller than before.

"Yeah, this definitely isn't going to work..."

Ryo really wanted the ice to explode, but he couldn't make it break with enough force. He wondered where he'd gone wrong.

“When it comes to making water explode, there’s that experiment where you can put sodium in the water to make it happen. That’s not realistic in this case, which leaves a phreatic eruption...?”

A phreatic explosion is a phenomenon that occurs when a high-temperature substance such as magma comes into contact with a low-temperature substance such as groundwater. The resulting contact instantly turns water into steam. When water becomes steam, its volume expands by approximately 1,700 times, causing an *explosive* phenomenon.

“I don’t have any high-temperature substances, but if I turned Icicle Lance itself instantly into steam, it would cause a phenomenon similar to a phreatic eruption...”

The idea was to increase the vibrational frequency of the H₂O water molecules, just like he had when he first learned to boil water. The greater the vibrations, the hotter it would become. Water would turn to steam once the temperature crossed one hundred degrees Celsius...

When water vapor exceeds one hundred degrees Celsius, it becomes superheated. On Earth, superheated steam ovens are commercially available.

In a sense, then, this was already a very common phenomenon.

Ryo tried the method with all remaining one hundred and twenty-six Icicle Lances, but not a single one exploded how he wanted. At first glance, the phreatic eruption idea seemed like it would work. Unfortunately, his basic understanding was wrong, so it would never happen. This was the sad extent of Ryo’s knowledge of chemistry.

In the first place, the phenomenon of an explosion itself is one that occurs as a result of a sudden increase in pressure or a sudden release of pressure. In the case of ice...yeah, it wasn’t going to happen.

“Failure is the root of success.”

He wouldn’t allow something like this to discourage him.

“I’ll just postpone the rice paddy plans for now.”

That's right! There was nothing wrong in putting off a problem for later! It didn't mean he was giving up!

He'd been no match for the kite snake in close-range combat. More precisely, its tail.

In other words, as he was now, it was difficult for Ryo to prevent or dodge his opponent's attacks. He hadn't liked this weakness in himself, which was why he'd come up with his strategy of hunting safely from a distance. It was only natural he'd be reluctant to engage in melee battles.

He would continue to hone his long-range attacks as usual. When it came to the time it took to activate his magic and the accuracy of his magic control, he still had a lot of work to do.

"It only takes a second to generate a 5-layer Ice Wall, but that in itself was the major reason I took damage in the first place. I really need to speed up my time!"

Then there was his Ice Armor. He had come up with the defensive magic after idly thinking he could use some sort of armor, but it turned out to be pretty useful. Heck, he may have died without it.

"It looks like some holy knight's armor. Very light though and easy to wear. I should practice it more so I can put it on quickly *before* a battle instead of during. Just in case. Ah, I wonder if I can run around wearing a heavier version. That might be good training too."

Ryo didn't realize how much of a meathead he was becoming. Not just in body, but in mind too. Nevertheless, there was no denying his stamina gains, meaning he'd never run out of it in combat. No matter how beautiful your techniques are, you can't use them fully if you run out of stamina.



"Sometimes I get a craving for fish," Ryo murmured to himself after finishing up his morning training regimen. "Yeah, like grilled, salt-seasoned fish. Honestly, my ideal way to eat it would be with a bit of soy sauce. Unfortunately, I don't have soy sauce, so I'll gracefully give up on that front. Okay, tonight's dinner is grilled fish with salt!"

He wasted no time once he made the decision. Since images of grilled sweetfish and rainbow trout immediately sprang to mind, he decided a freshwater fish would satisfy his craving better than one from the sea.

He chose his usual bamboo knife-spear as his fishing tool.

“It’d be really nice to have a harpoon instead, for the barbed point...but it is what it is.”

Ryo didn’t even consider using a normal fishing rod.

“I don’t think I’ll need the jute sack this time.”

With the bamboo knife-spear in one hand, he headed to the river south of his house.

He wasn’t excited. No way. He absolutely, positively wasn’t...probably.

But there just so happened to be a crocodile on the riverbank. He didn’t remember seeing an entry in *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition*, so he concluded it was an animal instead of a monster.

Of course, millions of normal, nonmonster animal species existed on Phi too. The one major difference between monsters and animals was the small stone located near a monster’s heart, called a “magic stone.” Some monsters could use magic depending on their species, and most of them were much stronger and more savage than normal animals.

This explained why so much of the animal population in the Forest of Rondo was being exterminated or driven out by the powerful monsters inhabiting it. This was also the reason Ryo had never encountered animals here. Until now, at least. Still, an animal was an animal, even if it was a massive crocodile-like reptile measuring over five meters long.

Back on Earth, an elementary school friend of Ryo’s had shown him a reference book published in Japan detailing how to capture a crocodile. According to this book, the best way to catch a crocodile was to approach it from the rear. *When am I ever even gonna use that?* he had thought, so he hadn’t actually read it.

Right now, he regretted that decision immensely. Clearly, you really never know when and how something will come in handy!

“But wait. I don’t actually have a reason to catch it.”

Of course. He hadn’t come here for that reason. Since the crocodile still hadn’t noticed him, Ryo stealthily continued upstream. After walking fifty meters past the crocodile, Ryo heard a series of beastly roars.

“Giiiiiaaaaaa!”

“Guuuraaar!”

It sounded like something was fighting with the crocodile. Despite having put a decent amount of distance between himself and the reptile, he couldn’t help but feel curious about its opponent. Turning around, he decided to sneak a peek.

He crept close enough to observe while keeping himself concealed. What he saw was something resembling a cow charging around with the crocodile stabbed through one of its horns. It tossed its head angrily, lifting the reptile, which was no longer breathing, with every movement.

“A horned bison... ‘As its name indicates, you should watch out for its horn. It appears often in rivers and marshlands. Be aware that the monster wraps itself in a gust of wind using air magic during its charging attack.’ Ah, this is a good chance for me to try out a new technique.”

Ryo raised his left hand above his head and chanted.

“*Guillotine.*”

Whoosh. A long plane of ice, its edge as sharp as the pointed tip of an Icicle Lance, shot up into the air like a guillotine’s blade, gained a good deal of speed, then plummeted to decapitate the horned bison from directly above.

“Nice. Success.”

He grinned. The horned bison’s head plopped into the water, blood gushing from the stump of its slashed neck.

“I could use the carcass to practice tanning cowhide.”

While mumbling to himself, he strode leisurely toward the dead crocodile and horned bison. There, he found... *Splash, splash, splash*. The horned bison's head and crocodile carcass were slowly disintegrating.

"Huh? Huuuh? What the heck is happening..."

He hurriedly grabbed the horned bison's body and flung it toward land. A few fish clung to it, their teeth sunk into its flesh.

"They look like piranhas... Though there wasn't an entry in *The Monster Compendium*... Carnivores... These are definitely in the same family as piranhas."

Pseudo-piranhas over forty centimeters long possessing ferocious teeth.

His first order of business was to get rid of the ones clinging to the horned bison by stabbing them with his bamboo knife-spear. Along with the horned bison, he froze them for storage. While he worked at clearing the piranhas, the ones in the water continued feasting on the horned bison's head and the crocodile's corpse...until not a trace of either remained.

This swarm of piranhas had been drawn by the blood, but it scattered after getting its fill, returning the river to its original quiet state.

"There's definitely no way I can play in the water here," Ryo said, a cold sweat trickling down his spine. The hunting itself hadn't taken more than an hour, but the sight of the piranhas had shocked him. This proof that the smell of blood drew all kinds of things was a good reminder to always remain cautious.

When he got back to his house, the frozen horned bison and piranhas went right into the silo.

Fish successfully acquired.

His catch was perhaps a *bit* different from the sweetfish and rainbow trout he'd initially imagined, but piranhas were still freshwater fish.

The fact that he could eat salt-grilled piranha for dinner opened up a new possibility. He had fish. He had salt too. With these two things in hand, there was a distinct possibility of obtaining that black liquid..."soy sauce," sometimes

referred to as the heart of the Japanese people.

Unfortunately, he had no soybeans, which were used to craft the soybean-based koji, the starter required to make it. Yup, he had no soybeans. Still, there'd been a method on Earth to make something like soy sauce without the crucial soybeans. It was called "fish sauce." As the term suggests, it's a sauce made from fish.

Compared to soy sauce which all Japanese are familiar with, fish sauce has a much stronger smell and much deeper flavor. Nevertheless, Ryo remembered it being used in regional cuisines all across Japan, which meant that it definitely complemented Japanese food!

Of course, he wouldn't be able to make it in time for tonight's salt-grilled piranha dinner. Someday, however, he might be able to look forward to sprinkling a dash of his very own soy sauce on his meals.

"Yup, I definitely have to try it!"

It was extremely easy to make fish sauce. He just had to pickle fish and salt together. The end. Of course, he'd have to wait a few months for it to ferment naturally.

"The only problem left is the barrel I'll need for fermentation."

He could create one instantly using his water magic. The size and shape were limited only by his imagination, but a barrel made of ice would be too cold... For most storage purposes, the coldness didn't pose a problem; in fact, it was a big advantage. To ferment the fish sauce, however, he needed to maintain a certain minimum temperature. He knew the inside of an ice container would be too cold for fermentation to occur... The temperature had to be above room temperature at the very least.

That left him with only one option—to build a wooden barrel. It went without saying that Ryo had never made such a thing in his life. Even if he tried his very best to fabricate one, it was very possible his construct would be shoddy. The bottom might fall out or the contents might leak, for example.

Regardless, a wooden barrel would be his best bet.

"And I already have a prospect in mind!"

After all, this was the *Forest* of Rondo. Trees so thick no one on Earth could even imagine them growing here. Right by the barrier, no less.

He found a ten-meter-tall tree with a trunk that had a diameter of two meters. It was a conifer, like Japanese cedar or Japanese cypress.

If only he also had the heavy machinery like they did on Earth... On second thought, no, because he had the feeling it would be difficult to cut a tree its size down even with industrial equipment. Regardless, he didn't have any on hand.

But he *did* have magic in place of heavy machinery. Water Jet would...not cut it down in this case. He'd been obsessed with practicing that particular spell since his first day on Phi, but it still wasn't powerful enough to cut a tree down.

Luckily for him, he had another method: his Guillotine spell, which cut off the horned bison's head in one stroke.

"Guillotine."

Whoosh. The Guillotine sliced about a meter into the tree trunk before stopping.

"W-Well, I didn't really think it would take only one slash anyway!"

After assuring himself out loud, he chanted again.

"Guillotine."

Then, a continuous release of Guillotines. Eventually, the conifer toppled to the ground with an earthshaking crash. It took a few other trees down with it, creating a small clearing in the immediate area. Ryo wasn't bothered.

Then, he began cutting a meter-long section of the tree's trunk he'd use for the barrel.

"Guillotine."

"Guillotine."

With two successive rounds of Guillotines, he cut a rather large cylinder with a diameter of two meters and a height of one meter. Once he hollowed out the inside, it would become a barrel. His Water Saw would come into play at this point—the same Water Saw that he had failed to use as offensive magic

because he couldn't make it fly. He could probably use it now just like Icicle Lance as a long-range magic attack, but there was no need for such a use at the moment.

"Water Saw."

Ryo generated a rotating water saw on top of his right palm, then he used it to carve up the fallen conifer. It was a bit slow compared to a chainsaw on Earth, but it still moved at a practical speed, with almost no resistance or tension.

An hour later, he finally finished carving the shape to his satisfaction. The barrel looked like those bathing tubs made from Japanese cypress found in high-class hot spring inns. He maintained an Ice Bahn underneath the fermentation cask to transport it to the house. What a truly convenient use of magic. Even though the inside was hollowed out, it was still a respectable size... Meaning it should be just as heavy.

Only when he finally reached his house did Ryo realize something.

"Um...where do I put it?"

It was much too large to pass through the door.

Planning...a wonderful and simultaneously terrifying word.

For now, he placed the fish sauce barrel underneath a large tree.

"On Earth, it's pretty common to set up pots outdoors and ferment things in them... So, yeah, this should work. It'll be fine," he said, trying to convince himself.

First, he spread a thick layer of salt over the bottom of the barrel. Next, he placed four frozen, chopped-up piranha carcasses over the salt. Then, he spread another layer of salt that completely covered the fish. He covered the piranhas with wide fronds resembling banana leaves to prevent drying. Finally, he used the remaining part of the tree he'd cut down as a makeshift lid to close the barrel.

Done. The fish sauce barrel was now complete. This should result in a supply of fish sauce...hopefully.



For the first time in a while, he ate salt-grilled fish with white rice. He originally imagined dining on sweetfish or rainbow trout, but due to various circumstances, the fish ended up being a piranha. It was surprisingly delicious too.

Despite being primarily a meat guy, Ryo sometimes got the urge to eat fish. Now that he knew how to attract piranha, he decided he would go back to the river in the south the next time he felt like it. He'd just need to toss some chum into the water.

Though the afternoon had been a shocking one, he had managed to finish the day on a strong, satisfied note. All's well that ends well.

At night, the forest outside his window looked very different than it did during the day.

"It really does feel scary out there when it's dark."

Regardless of the era or world, the forest at night wasn't a place where humans lived. This truth remained constant, whether on Earth or Phi.

People fundamentally relied on their sight and hearing to ascertain information about their surroundings, but the darkness of the night stole sight. No normal person could understand their circumstances based on hearing alone.

Many monsters, animals, and creatures possessed better hearing than people, not to mention things like snakes and bats that acquired information on their surroundings with organs humans didn't have.

So in the dark of the night where such things existed...Ryo thought a human really shouldn't enter a place like the forest. At least right now, anyway.

"That reminds me. There are apparently some people who can detect the presence of other living things... I wonder how that works."

He could understand the role intuition played. It made sense that a person's brain could subconsciously arrive at conclusions based on the information their

previous experiences had imprinted on their brain up until that point. However, actually being able to consciously detect signs of life... Feeling something watching you even though you shouldn't be able to see it... *That* he really didn't understand.

"I bet if I was an air magician, I could create magic that allowed me to sense something unseen's presence—even invisible opponents."

This is the principle of passive sonar. Active sonar involves the user emitting a ping and using the reflected information to determine the location of the other party and the surrounding environment. In contrast, passive sonar is a method of obtaining information from changes in the surroundings that occur when the opponent moves. It doesn't require any active participation or input from the user, which means the opponent can't sense the user. Passive or active, one or the other.

Passive sonar is frequently used in the water by submarines, but it might be possible to obtain information about opponents on land by using air currents instead of seawater. Ryo felt like this was totally possible for an air magician! Too bad that he himself was a water magician!

"I sort of want to be an air magician so I can use a breakdown rush attack."

Breakdown rush... An attack where sonic blades are released from three clones, and an assault attack follows in their wake...

Normally, even an air magician wouldn't be able to do that though.

A few days after his dinner of salt-grilled piranha, Ryo spent another afternoon hunting in the eastern part of the forest where many lesser rabbits and lesser boars could be found. Sometimes, he encountered normal boars here too, though they also didn't pose much of a threat to Ryo as he was now. He still couldn't picture himself winning against an assassin hawk, but he knew at the very least he wouldn't lose in a land war.

"I'm not being conceited at all about it either."

The instant after he said that out loud, a greater boar appeared in front of him. Too bad greater boars weren't real contenders either for the current Ryo...

Then he heard some sort of rustling sound from behind him. When he turned his head to look...he found another greater boar there...

"Ice Armor."

In that moment, he lost sight of both greater boars.

"5-Layer Ice Wall."

In only 0.1 seconds, a 5-Layer Ice Wall generated to his front and back. His speed increased little by little every day. Even then, it was barely enough. The two boars charged at almost the exact same time as he produced the Ice Wall. One rushed low at him in an attempt to aim at his legs. The other targeted Ryo's trunk. It was clear from their behavior that they were working together.

The greater boars' charging attacks destroyed three of the five layers of the Ice Wall in front and rear. What terrifying power.

He lunged to the side while chanting.

"Ice Bahn."

Both of the greater boars were very close to his original position. They both started slipping and sliding on the icy ground, unable to control their movements. Greater boars, however, still had another means of offense...yep, a ranged attack, which made them completely different from lesser boars and others!

Countless small rocks, literally so many he *couldn't* count them, appeared around both of the monsters.

"Holy moly, that's a lot... 5-Layer Ice Wall. 5-Layer Ice Wall. 5-Layer Ice Wall."

Things were becoming a battle of numbers, so Ryo needed to implement a plethora of his special walls as a defensive strategy. After a moment, the greater boars fired the rocks. Upon impact, they created a cloud of either mist or dust. He couldn't tell, but either way, it obstructed his field of view.

At that moment... *Pheeew*. A rock slammed into Ryo's right side.

"Gah!"

Another into his left shoulder.

“Mpf. Omni-Directional Ice Wall.”

Taking advantage of his inability to see in front of him, the greater boars *curved* the trajectories of the rocks they launched at him. The projectiles went around the 5-Layer Ice Walls and hit him directly.

“Whoa. I didn’t know that was possible...”

His lack of combat experience was beginning to show. The Ice Armor covering his hips and left shoulder shattered.

“Ice Armor.”

Ryo recreated those parts of his armor, but he didn’t have much breathing room. Only a normal Ice Wall protected him on all sides, but it wasn’t nearly as durable as the 5-Layer version.

Fortunately for him, an Ice Bahn lay under the greater boars’ feet. They shouldn’t be able to move. Shouldn’t being the key word, but...

“Can they really not move?”

Greater boars possessed legs that could generate rushing attacks approaching the speed of sound. Legs powerful and fast enough to furrow the earth. If they took their time, it was possible they could run on the ice by digging their claws into it...

The last greater boar he’d hunted had tumbled on the Ice Bahn over and over again, but it would be hasty of him to assume that others of its kind would do the same just because it had. Take humans, for example. For every one that face-planted while ice skating, another could execute a flawless jump.

So what should he do? First of all, he knew it would be too dicey to take them both on at the same time, meaning he had to defeat them one at a time. The question was, which one to target first...

The boars attacked him from the front and behind just like the assassin hawks had done when they ambushed him. Since the one-eyed assassin hawk had come at him from the front and it had been the leader of the pair, maybe that signaled the same thing in this case. If the one attacking him from the front had a wealth of experience, then he would start by taking down the one behind

him.

In a situation filled with multiple enemies, it was normal practice to cause confusion among them by defeating the leader first. Starting with the weaker ones to diminish the enemy's might and leaving the strongest for last was also a common strategy, though. This time, Ryo went with the latter strategy.

If the greater boar behind him was less experienced, it might be slower to react while it was still figuring out how to deal with the ice.

Remove Omni-Directional Ice Wall. Increase Ice Wall opacity.

Considering what might happen afterward, he chose to leave behind only the multiple 5-Layer Ice Walls. It grew denser until it looked like frosted glass, making it difficult for anyone on the other side to see through.

And then he ran. He went around the Wall from the left. Once out from behind it, he saw only one greater boar tumbling on his Ice Bahn. The other was no longer there. It must have gone around the other side of his fortified 5-Layer Ice Wall.

"I'm starting with you. Icicle Lance 16."

He generated sixteen Icicle Lances in the air above the greater boar still slipping across the ice.

"As for its friend who went in the opposite direction, it should be coming out from the 5-Layer Ice Wall's other side, right?"

After muttering those words, he chanted quickly.

"5-Layer Ice Wall. Icicle Lance 2."

He created two Icicle Lances on the outside of the new 5-Layer Ice Wall and waited to launch them. In the same moment, he released the sixteen icicles hanging in the air and heard the piercing howl of the greater boar as they plunged into its body.

Just as Ryo flinched in surprise at the sound, the other greater boar appeared exactly where he had predicted.

"Release."

The boar instead smashed the two flying Icicle Lances with its tough snout. The instant that happened, pieces of ice scattered everywhere, clouding Ryo's vision.

"Water Jet 64."

Sixty-four streams of Water Jet appeared, but not in front of his hand. Instead, they formed in the air right in front of the monster's face, the jets aiming for its eyes, ears, and mouth. Basically, the places that should be its soft spots.

Due to the ice obscuring his field of view, he had generated plenty of Water Jets at point-blank range to make up for his lack of accuracy. He wished his opponent good luck in its efforts to avoid so many super thin, extremely concentrated blasts of water at a distance of thirty centimeters. At this range, it couldn't even dodge the streams. The greater boar would run up against them no matter which direction it turned... It shouldn't be able to defend itself against his attack.

While it panicked from having its sight and hearing effectively blocked, he would land the killing blow. This is what Ryo had planned out in his mind...but his plan went awry.

Instead of panicking, the greater boar dropped dead. The Water Jets had pierced right through its eyes, ears, and mouth, penetrating far enough to reach its brain. It was a given that it didn't survive after dozens of jets pierced right through its skull.

"Oh, jeez... Did I beat it...?"

Apparently, it was relatively easy to attack a greater boar's brain through its eyes and ears despite the monster's higher rank. Still, he found it very unexpected that he hadn't needed to deliver a killing blow.

"Maybe Water Jet is actually powerful now?"

As soon as he returned to the safety of the barrier, Ryo wasted no time testing out his hypothesis. He would use the greater boar's carcass as his guinea pig. The toughness of the monster's hide varied across its body. Its entire head,

including its snout, had to be incredibly tough to endure the brunt of its primary rushing attack, but everything below its neck though wasn't nearly so stout, including its feet.

He aimed at its right leg.

"Water Jet."

A glint of light, then the greater boar's right leg fell off.

"Woow!"

A few months had passed since his reincarnation in Phi. Right from the start, his favorite water magic spell had been Water Jet and now it had finally demonstrated its true worth.

"Let's try it on a tree too..."

Bwoom. The tree toppled down. It hadn't been *quite* instantaneous, but close enough. Success.

Until recently, he'd only been able to chip away at some bark or gouge a bit of the trunk with his Water Jet. This made him wonder...did this mean he had overcome a major obstacle on his road to progress?

"Maybe Water Jet had already become strong enough when I was cutting trees with Water Saw..."

Be that as it may, there was no point thinking about it now. The most important thing was that he had achieved the current level of force!

Water Jet needed to shoot out a high-pressure, high-speed stream of water. The intensity of the jet meant, naturally, the water itself had to be physically normal water. This contrast was why water jets had become a fairly popular method for processing various materials on Earth. First, it didn't generate any heat because it used water. Because no thermal denaturation occurred, materials like plastic didn't melt or warp. This also explains why no toxic fumes are generated when water jets are used.

Soft and thin materials could be processed without breaking too. Water jets could treat composite and layered materials as well.

Ryo's company had also acquired a five-axis machining water jet tool, which

was why he knew about the mechanism to some degree. Of course, he'd never actually used it...because the employees wouldn't give him permission. So he'd had no choice but to obey the decisions made in the field despite being the vice president.

Though he hadn't been able to utilize a water jet on Earth, he could freely use the one he'd created here from magic. Moreover, he was finally able to see the tangible results of his efforts! He was even more excited now than the first time he'd been able to make Icicle Lance fly.

Nevertheless, he remained calm too. Ryo knew, after all, that there was another dimension to his Water Jet.

He reviewed his findings. He'd cut off the greater boar's leg. He'd felled a tree. What about something harder—a boulder then?

Generally speaking, water jet cutters are known for being able to cut through most things. This is a fact. "Most things" included boulders and rocks too. He'd watched old videos of water jets cutting through tough rock like granite to create headstones.

Ryo aimed at a boulder in his yard.

"Water Jet."

He watched the stream chip away at the rock bit by bit. If he kept at it for an hour or so, he might even be able to cut through it. That was a far cry from the water jet that could quickly slice right through stone back on Earth.

Unfortunately for him, *his* water jet couldn't cut rock. Though it worked on soft things, it wasn't suited for hard materials like stone, metal, concrete, and glass.

Ryo, however, wasn't upset because he had been prepared for this. His Water Jet was built for soft materials like animals, monsters, trees, and foods, but there was *another* version of Water Jet he could use to cut through harder things. What was this other version of Water Jet?

Well, he liked to call it the "Not Water Alone Water Jet."

Normal people called it an “abrasive jet.” On Earth, small abrasives are mixed with the water to allow the jet to cut through more durable materials. The speed of the blast approaches Mach 3 and cuts the object by *eroding* it.

And what exactly is used as the abrasive element? A fine powder of garnet. You heard it right. Garnet. The mineral used as a gemstone. Because it’s a precious mineral, only a microscopic amount is used, which has the added benefit of keeping costs low. Besides, powdered garnet is commonly mined and very cheap. The abrasive garnet could be reused multiple times too.

The primary reason garnet is used as an abrasive is because of its hardness. Of course, sapphire, ruby, and diamond are all much harder than garnet, but they’re also much more expensive.

Another reason is garnet’s crystal makeup, which is in the shape of a rhombic dodecahedron, also known as an oblate polyhedron. In short, it’s extremely close to a sphere. In order to shave a targeted area to a specific size, it makes the most sense to use a spherical particle for the task.

With all that said, on Earth, garnet’s use as an abrasive is an established one. That’s not the case here on Phi.

First of all, Ryo couldn’t get his hands on any garnet...or at least he didn’t know how to. This meant he needed to use some other abrasive, but he had an idea on that front: ice. He would use microscopic pieces of ice as abrasives.

As an abrasive, ice lacked the hardness necessary. *Normal* ice, that is. As a water magician, however, his ice possessed a special trait. The more magic he poured into it, the harder it became. This explained why his ice spells broke so often in combat, since he just didn’t have the time to focus on hardening his creations properly...

His problem lay in how small ice crystals needed to be. The size had to be just right too, because crystals that were *too* small wouldn’t work well either...

Ryo once had a chance to see the abrasives used for water jets, or rather abrasive jets, that the company had. The garnets had been so small it wouldn’t have been wrong to call them dust or powder. So, he planned on generating a ton of ice of the same size to mix with water.

The formation of microscopic ice crystals came first. He started by creating a hydrogen bond between two water molecules. The final product was...too small. In fact, he couldn't see it at all.

For now, he'd attempt to connect thirty molecules. He *sort of* felt like he could see them, maybe.

No, that was just his imagination. Definitely not big enough.

He went through multiple rounds of trial and error until bedtime. Ryo continued working at it while he lit the fire to make dinner, while he ate, and then later while lounging in the bathtub.

How many molecules joined together would result in the perfect size? He was determined to find the most optimal answer.

Unfortunately, his magic ran out before he could...

"Good night," he said to himself.

The next day, Ryo continued his attempts to find the answer during the running segment of his morning training regimen.

"I thought this too yesterday, but I feel like I'm using a *ton* of magical energy to control magic at the molecular level."

Precise work puts a strain on your nerves. That was true of most things, so it wasn't easy to commit to prolonged work on detail-oriented projects or magical ones.

After running for over five hours, he finally completed his morning exercise routine. Unfortunately, he still hadn't found the optimal size for the microscopic ice crystals he'd use as abrasives. However, he'd narrowed the number of molecules he'd need to somewhere between 60,000 and 160,000.

Ryo's supply of magical energy was nearly depleted just from his morning endeavors. There were no hard numbers to tell him exactly how low he was, but his body told him he would collapse soon.

"I'm going to stop working on magic this afternoon. I'll focus on my swings

and reading.”

He was such a meathead now that he felt physically uneasy whenever he didn't move his body. He practiced his swings slowly, deliberately, using all his might. At its core, this was still a slow life, which meant...there really was no need to rush.



The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition, the book Fake Michael left for him, contained a great number of monsters. Of course, it was only the *beginner* edition, so Ryo knew there must be intermediate and advanced volumes too. Ryo, however, hadn't met any monsters that might fall into those categories yet.

This volume contained two pages at the end, which together made up what could be called an appendix. Titled “Special Compilation,” it listed two monsters. One was a dragon and the other an akuma. The penmanship for these two entries was different from all the rest, which made Ryo wonder if Fake Michael himself had added them after.

Dragon: One of Phi's apex predators.

Locations: Around the world.

Life Span: Thousands to hundreds of thousands of years.

Strength: Runs the gamut from weak to strong. (It's child's play for the strong ones to lay an entire city to ruins).

Notes: Flee if you encounter one, but the probability is high you'll be unsuccessful.

Oh, yeah, it's easy to tell they're super strong. It's the end of the line for me if I meet one, huh? The entry for “dragon” doesn't list any attacks or special moves like the others do. I guess that means they're on a way different level.

Akuma: Not...fallen angels. Their origins are unknown.

Locations: Around the world.

Life Span: Unknown.

Strength: Runs the gamut from weak to strong. (It's child's play for the strong ones to lay an entire

city to ruins).

Notes: Pray you never encounter one.

You know, I'm pretty sure Fake Michael wrote both of these. He did say it's his job to manage this world... Still, what the heck does "origins unknown" even mean? And that last bit about "pray you never encounter one." Ominous...

"I wonder if the people aiming to become the world's strongest fight these monsters. Must be insanely tough," Ryo muttered to himself, shaking his head. "Yup, there's no way I can go up against them. I know it's typical for people reincarnated in another world to have that kind of goal, but it's not for me. Oh, well, tropes are tropes for a reason. None of this has anything to do with me anyway. I'm trying to live a slow life!"

A good night's sleep replenished his supply of magical energy. He was so determined to settle the problem of the abrasive jet once and for all today. He made a resolute vow to himself that he'd accomplish his goal.

An hour after his pledge...

"The optimal number is 90,000 to 100,000 molecules!"

He finally solved the problem.

"Heh heh heh. I won."

Ryo indeed emerged victorious. All he had left to do was generate a large amount of ice crystals made up of these 90,000 water molecules. This would normally be very difficult for anyone. However, though he remained unaware of it, his molecular manipulations had tremendously increased his proficiency with fine magical control.

In a matter of seconds, he generated a mountain of ice abrasives in his left hand. Then he painted a picture in his mind of the abrasives mixing little by little into Water Jet, allowing him to cut into the boulder.

"Abrasive Jet."

Once he finished chanting the spell, a thin stream of water shot forth from his raised right hand toward the boulder a meter away from him. It sliced through

the other side with hardly any resistance. He lowered his arm.

Krsh. The severed boulder split apart.

“Success!”

At long last, Ryo obtained something he could use to cut through rocks. Ice abrasives lacked this level of cutting power on Earth. The reason? Ice’s softness there, making garnet’s hardness the obvious and outstanding choice instead.

When abrasive jets were only just becoming common, there was a Japanese person who researched whether garnet, ice, or walnut shells could be used as abrasive materials. However, the researcher found that all other materials besides garnet lacked practical use.

Since then, several experiments and papers followed that analyzed the size of the abrasives, the phenomena occurring at the area of contact, the optimum hardness of the various parts, and so on. The water jet, or abrasive jet, is a machine that has evolved day by day.

But Ryo had come up with an approach the scientists on Earth could never, ever conduct. Hardening his ice to such an extreme degree with magic was immensely practical, but, naturally, this could only be done on Phi, where magic exists.

What was impossible or only theoretically plausible on Earth became quite possible here because of magic...and he had just demonstrated one such possibility. Of course, Ryo himself remained blissfully unaware of the magnitude of his achievement.

Off to the Sea

Ryo mastered both Water Jet and Abrasive Jet so completely that hunting with his magic was now a piece of cake, which ended up inciting an insatiable ambition in him to assert his dominance over other aspects of his new life—the biggest of them all being the sea!

Approximately five hundred meters southwest of his house was the ocean, or so Fake Michael had informed him. He'd also told him that once Ryo familiarized himself more with his water magic, he'd be able to extract salt from the seawater.

Despite having used a considerable amount of his salt supply to make the fish sauce, he still had enough to last him half a year. Regardless, he needed to confirm how much salt he could even extract from the sea.

There were also the bounties of the sea. As far as fish went, he'd managed to get his hands on some freshwater fish in the river to satisfy his initial craving—the piranha-like ones—but the sea hosted its own delicious collection of marine life.

Shellfish, sea urchin, squid, octopus, and more... Well, he'd need to dive in order to get them. Fortunately, this didn't pose a problem for Ryo. Growing up in the countryside had made him into a strong swimmer!

A white sandy beach stretched along the shoreline four hundred meters southwest of the barrier. It looked like something from Phuket or Bali! Of course, Ryo had never been to either of those places...so he based his impression off of images he'd seen once upon a time. After all, images are very important!

He lost track of time while gazing dreamily at the scene in front of him. After a while, he came back to his senses.

"Let me try to extract salt."

He started off by creating an ice barrel one meter in diameter and an ice bucket to draw the seawater. Using the latter, he scooped up seawater to pour into the former. Scooped and poured again. And again. And then again.

When he filled the barrel to the top, he imagined the water dissipating.

“Evaporate.”

The water disappeared, leaving behind white and slightly colored grains. He experimentally licked a few of the white grains.

“Yup, that’s salty. This is salt.”

Success.

“Now, what could these colored grains be... Ah, sand...”

Since he’d sampled seawater close to the sandy beach, it was no wonder sand had also found its way into the bucket.

“I should be able to extract only salt if I draw water from somewhere farther from the beach.”

He dumped the bucket and barrel made of ice into the sea along with the salt inside the bucket because it was only his first experiment. After doing so, Ryo headed toward a rocky stretch of land situated farther north.

“I would *really* love to get my hands on some seafood.”

Upon arriving at the rocky area, he flung off all his clothes and dived into the sea without hesitation. There, he discovered a beautiful world just like he’d imagined. The water was so clear he could see the ocean floor. He saw colorful fish, coral, and other unknown marine life.

And then he spotted it: a tasty-looking fish!

Ryo swam to the surface to take in more air, then dove toward the bottom of the sea. He held his usual bamboo knife-spear in his right hand. A white fish measuring fifty centimeters long and resembling a sea bream caught his eye.

He used his bamboo knife-spear like a harpoon and stabbed it in one go. A perfectly executed attack.

In that moment...the world changed. That was how it felt to Ryo, at least. It seemed like the heaven that had been the sea abruptly transformed into hell.

Because in his excitement, he'd forgotten something crucial—this wasn't Earth. He was on Phi, and monsters inhabited this sea.

The second he killed the bream-like fish, he became this sea's enemy. The vivid schools of fish around him fled, alerting him to a dramatic change in the atmosphere. As much as he hated to admit it, he knew the world had changed. It wasn't just his imagination.

This is bad. Time to get out of here.

But he was too late.

When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw a massive group of fish-type monsters coalescing into a bait ball formation spanning twenty meters...large enough to swallow a small fishing boat easily. Sardines swarmed themselves into bait balls to resist attacking tuna and other fish. A bait ball full of sardines might have looked cute, but the one forming in front of Ryo seemed to consist of monsters.

Yes, *seemed*. He had no idea what kind of monsters they were since *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition* didn't include any entries whatsoever on sea monsters. It had only one sentence on the topic: "For ocean-dwelling monsters, please refer to *The Monster Compendium, Marine Edition*." The fact that an *entire* volume was dedicated to sea monsters only lent proof to the myriad varieties of monsters he might encounter in the ocean.

At this point, his odds of winning were dropping fast. "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." As Sun Tzu's proverb confirmed, Ryo had always had information on each enemy he previously encountered thanks to his thorough study of *The Monster Compendium*. Heck, he'd been able to go up against that assassin hawk because of the entry in the book, vague though it might have been.

On this particular occasion, however, he had no data at all on the enemy. Zilch.

"If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also

suffer a defeat.”

According to the proverb, then, Ryo’s win rate dropped by half to fifty percent in one fell swoop...

Still, other words also applied to this battlefield of a world: “Timing, place, people.” Putting aside the first, his opponent had the advantage in “place” since the sea was its home turf. For Ryo, who couldn’t even breathe underwater, this was most definitely an ‘away game.’ As far as “people” went, the incredible bait ball forming before his eyes gave testament to...the impeccable communication that must exist between all the creatures within it.

Regardless of how he viewed the situation, Ryo had no chance of winning.

The smartest option would be to make a hasty retreat.

At this point though, he noticed something unusual. *I can’t swim...or even use my magic on it...* His body wasn’t sinking, but he couldn’t push his limbs through the water.

Ryo was a water magician. Regardless of this encounter being an ‘away game’ by dint of occurring in the sea, he just could *not* wrap his head around his inability to manipulate water in these circumstances.

Unfortunately for him, the enemy didn’t wait for him while he fell into a semipanicked state. A monster shot out of the bait ball, racing straight toward him like a missile or torpedo.

Ice Wall.

Despite his difficulty in comprehending this situation in the sea, he knew defense was his only option at the moment because his inability to move meant he couldn’t deflect any attacks either. After repelling only a few of the monster torpedoes, Ryo lost control of his Ice Wall.

Did I really lose control of the spell? he thought, watching the wall of ice dissipate before his very eyes.

The sea monster torpedoes continued to attack him relentlessly. In order to protect himself, Ryo generated one Ice Wall after another, but each one split apart within a second of appearing.

Is the water around me under their control? That would also explain why I can't even move.

He was a water magician, one who had trained quite diligently to control his magic. As a result of his efforts, he excelled in controlling water at the molecular level as well. Unfortunately for him, he was outmatched by his current opponents.

Because they were sea monsters...water magic was literally in their genes, giving them inherent use of myriad techniques. Moreover, they had been controlling that magic for generations as a core part of their lives. Despite his unrivaled training regimen, Ryo had become a water magician only a few short months ago. In other words, a novice like him didn't stand a chance.

Not to mention the enemy numbered in the thousands... Well, he couldn't be absolutely sure of his count due to the bait ball formation, but he doubted there were fewer than a thousand.

Right now, he was barely able to maintain his equilibrium against the sea monster torpedoes with his Ice Wall generation. He executed each new Ice Wall the moment before the next salvo struck, then the Ice Wall disappeared right after.

While he could defend himself well enough at the moment, the problem was his oxygen supply. Thanks to his daily training regimen, he could last four minutes without taking a breath. In this situation though, he had *only* four minutes. How was he supposed to break through this stalemate?

I wonder if I can get the water around my limbs under my control.

The seawater surrounding him had rejected his attempts to manipulate it with magic thus far. The sensation of resistance was the same as when he first tried to defrost the frozen meat Fake Michael had left for him in the icy silo, only the resistance he was encountering now was far stronger.

As he was now, Ryo realized he probably couldn't wrest control of the water from the enemy. Unsurprising, given the nature of his opponent. Maybe his inability to do so lay with his opponent's sheer numbers. In any case, the odds of him winning a battle for magical control were slim to none.

In that case, he'd have to try to investigate *why* the seawater was under the enemy's control.

Let's check out the water around my hands and feet. It's pretty thin, which is probably why I can't use my magic on it. Doesn't matter, though, because I think my method should still be effective. Gotta just go for it at this point! In theory, it's just like Water Jet, so it should work!

By now, he was producing Ice Walls almost unconsciously. While he continued to do so, he conjured a mental image of Water Jet blasting out from the soles of both feet. Instead of the thin streams he had made in the beginning, he visualized thick streams of water—thirty-two of them to be exact.

"Water Jet 64."

Right after chanting the spell, jets of water shot out from his feet and propelled Ryo toward the surface with so much force that the momentum blasted him right out of the sea.

But it wasn't over yet.

As soon as his body hit the water, he breathed deeply, then dived back into the ocean. His plan was to launch a surprise attack on the bait ball directly from above.

As expected, his sudden propulsion out of the water had thrown the monsters into chaos. Regardless of how perfect their cooperation and communication were, monsters in a pack would be unable to deal with a situation they'd never before experienced.

Ryo charged into the fray from above, stabbing again and again with his bamboo knife-spear. He wielded the weapon every which way, unconcerned about his surroundings. He'd anticipated that the water would cause some drag, but the resistance wasn't as bad as he expected.

He inflicted damage on quite a few of the monsters. Although they possessed powerful magical control, they were just as fragile as normal fish. He mowed them down one by one using his bamboo spear.

It only took a minute to destroy the bait ball formation and force the monsters to scatter in retreat.

Ha! I managed to get out of that somehow.

Ryo had dropped his guard. Since he'd wound up turning every creature in the sea against him, his enemy was no longer just the single group of sea monsters he'd been fighting. The best move now would be to escape to the shore the moment he broke through the water's surface, but it was too late for that now. In the shadow of the boulder near him, Ryo saw a one-meter-long prawn lurking.

Only its right pincer is bizarrely huge... What is that? An air bubble?

A moment later, he lost consciousness.

Ryo opened his eyes. That's right, he wasn't dead. He had fainted only a few seconds ago, no more than one or two. He arrived at this guess based on the fact that his bamboo spear was still floating next to him even though he'd let go of it when he fell unconscious.

How was he alive? He didn't know the answer to that question, but he had more important things to think about right now. The prawn he'd seen earlier was squaring off against a crab, so it was clear to him that it no longer had Ryo in its sights.

He stretched his hand out toward his bamboo spear. When his fingers gripped the weapon once more, he propelled himself toward the water's surface using Water Jet just like he'd done during his escape from the bait ball. He flew out of the sea, crash-landing on the shore.

After hurriedly putting on his sandals, he grabbed his loincloth, then raced in the direction of his house at lightning speed. Only once he finally reached the safety of the barrier could he breathe easy.

"Jeez, I barely made it out alive this time..."

"Ugh...I really must be weak...considering how easily I lost control over the water despite being a water magician."

Ryo was depressed. He'd been completely blindsided by his enemy's ability to hijack its opponent's magical creations.

"Which means it—they, whatever—can only exert control over those with the same magical attribute, right... Imagine what a threat I'd be if I could control others' magic regardless of the type..."

Setting aside the issue of other magical affinities, he understood one important thing from the encounter: he clearly needed to acquire the skill to control others' magical creations. Otherwise, he'd end up repeating this latest battle and let the enemy do whatever they wanted with *his* magic—like the sea monsters had done with his Ice Walls.

Of course, his primary goal was to avoid allowing his magic to fall under his opponent's control. Though...frankly speaking, he had no idea *how* to stop that from happening. For starters, Ryo only referred to this as magical control because it was convenient, but if he were honest with himself, he still wasn't sure what magical control even was.

His first experience with the phenomenon was when he'd tried defrosting the frozen meat Fake Michael left for him and felt *something* repel his magic. His undersea battle earlier today, when the bait ball took control of the seawater around his limbs, was only his second encounter with the phenomenon.

His magic had been repelled when he'd tried to use it in both cases. The sensation had been crystal clear in his mind each time. He thought back to how he'd managed to defrost the frozen meat Fake Michael left for him.

"If I remember right, I concentrated exclusively on unbinding the molecules with my magic, moving from one pair to the next to the next and so on. The ice then transformed into water at each point the bond was broken. I think so, at least."

He realized then that he hadn't done anything special in particular. He probably just focused more of his magic than usual and undid Fake Michael's magic molecule by molecule... When it came to the frozen meat, Ryo had been positive he could still thaw the meat. After all, he knew Fake Michael wouldn't have prepared it otherwise. The knowledge had given him the confidence to concentrate on the task.

His undersea battle had been fundamentally different. First, no matter how much he'd focused, he had no idea if his magic would work. Working on a molecular level in the absence of certainty, in the midst of battle no less...was impossible. Nevertheless, he needed to acquire the power to oppose an opponent with the ability to control the enemy's magic, otherwise his safety and life were at risk.

The question then was how to go about gaining such power. He first thought that increasing his mastery over molecular binding and vibrations was the right way to go, but then he began wondering about other methods...

There must be a tried-and-true approach for controlling his magical energy. For earth magic, it was through figurines.

"Damn you, earth magic... If only I could do the same thing with water magic..."

As the saying goes, the grass is always greener on the other side.

"Okay, I'll use ice to make a replica of Tokyo Tower."

He could vaguely remember some slime or other doing it in an anime!

"The other thing I need to sort out is...that prawn, huh..."

Ryo felt like he'd seen it somewhere, but...he couldn't remember where.

"Yeah, it's not coming after me, so I'll hold off on that for now."

The ability to switch gears was important.

"Now I just need to figure out why I didn't die... I wonder, was the prawn satisfied with just knocking me out? No, no way. That explanation is too convenient."

Ryo recalled sensing that the entire sea turned against him in that moment. He didn't think he was wrong about the sensation either. The fact that the prawn attacked him immediately after the bait ball made it most plausible to think that it became common knowledge for those living in the sea that he was their enemy. Of course, he knew he only had himself to blame for that since he'd been the one who thoughtlessly killed the sea bream-like fish.

He remembered that he'd passed out right after seeing the prawn's air

bubble. Passing out didn't just mean he'd lost consciousness...it also meant his presence was effectively gone. So maybe, when he'd fainted, his existence no longer presented a threat. In that case, it was possible to imagine that the marine life had returned to their usual, constant struggle for survival once "Ryo, the enemy of the sea," no longer "existed." It would explain why the prawn and the crab had started fighting right after he lost consciousness.

"Hmmm, I don't really get it, but I guess it makes sense. Although all I can say is that I was really lucky... There definitely won't be a next time, huh?"

There were just too many skills he needed to train more. He might have grown a little conceited after taking down two greater boars and learning to use Water Jet on a practical level, but the sea's monsters had just taught him he still didn't hold a candle to them. That was how Ryo decided to think of it. After all, there was no point in staying depressed forever.

Starting the next day, he practiced magical control while running. Business as usual on that front. While he ran, he created a palm-sized Tokyo Tower with a giant five-storied pagoda.

Aside from that, he also conducted a small experiment on one of his hunts. The subject was a lesser rabbit, which would prove to be tasty afterward.

Roughly sixty percent of a human's body consisted of water and the same was true of monsters as well. Though the exact amount differed based on a monster's species, for the most part, their physical composition of water ranged from fifty to seventy percent. In which case, as a water magician, Ryo wondered if he could directly manipulate the water *inside* a monster's body.

He crafted an image in his mind. Specifically, he visualized the blood coursing throughout the monster freezing as it jumped in front of him.

"Blood Freeze."

...

Magic repelled! The same as when he'd tried to defrost Fake Michael's frozen meat. Just like on that occasion, he felt the pushback in his mind.

"I can use this for my training."

From then on, every time he hunted a rabbit or boar-type monster, he tried to freeze its blood before finishing his prey off. Unfortunately, the Blood Freeze spell had yet to succeed even once. It didn't even work on the blood gushing from their wounds. However, once the monster itself died, it became possible to freeze its entire body successfully.

As a logical extension of his experiment, he wondered what would happen if he froze living monsters. More accurately, could he do so by freezing the water molecules in the air surrounding them?

The results spoke for themselves. Ryo couldn't do it. While he could freeze water molecules ten centimeters or more away from a monster, he found his magic being repelled when he attempted to freeze molecules closer to the monster. In short, this indicated that the area within ten centimeters of the monster's body fell under its control.

Personal space, huh...

He thought back to the battle in which he'd skewered a greater boar through its head by creating countless streams of Water Jet at close range. Now he understood the attack succeeded because he'd produced and launched them from a distance of thirty centimeters. So the more he experimented with his magic, the clearer its inner workings became, along with the extent of his control over said magic.

"I need to learn more. A *lot* more."

Ryo made the promise to himself.

The Headless Knight

By Ryo's estimate, about a year had passed since his encounter with the sea monsters. The Blood Freeze spell still didn't work. He didn't think he would have succeeded in such a short period of time anyway, but he nevertheless continued his diligent training in magical control every day.

Incidentally, he could now thaw Fake Michael's frozen meat almost instantly.

For the past few months, night after night, he'd been visiting the shore of a lake located in the center of the massive wetlands in the northern part of the Forest. Every night, when the moon approached its zenith in the sky, *it* appeared.

The Dullahan. A headless knight astride a headless horse. This particular Dullahan didn't hold a head in its left hand.

Why was a headless knight in the Forest of Rondo? Had a country flourished sometime in the past here? Even if that were the case, he had seen no traces whatsoever of human civilization or man-made objects.

On Earth, the Dullahans are creatures in Irish fairy lore. They certainly aren't the departed souls of dead knights... If he thought about it that way then, Ryo figured it might be fair to think they were fairies or something that came to this Forest of Rondo from somewhere people used to live.

For him, the real value of the one Ryo encountered was in its status as a master of the sword. It went without saying that this Dullahan didn't speak since it lacked a head.

When Ryo raised his sword—well, he *called* it his sword, but it was really just a shaft of wood he'd coated with a layer of ice to increase its durability—the Dullahan responded by doing the same. Each time they went through this routine, Ryo thought he could sense his opponent's exasperation, as if it were thinking, "Again, eh... When will you learn, boy?"

Of course, this was all guesswork on Ryo's part since the Dullahan didn't have

a head.

So began another one of their sword fights.

The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition didn't even have an entry on the Dullahan, which meant either it wasn't a monster or was a level beyond beginner. In terms of whether or not this one could be defeated, it was probably impossible for Ryo at his current skill level.

Since the Dullahan didn't use magic, Ryo didn't either. He only wore his Ice Armor to protect his body. Even without magic, its swordsmanship was incredibly strong, not to mention its condescending attitude.

"I'll train you whether you like it or not."

At least that was what it felt like it was saying... Again, it remained silent since it lacked a head.

After launching three successful attacks on Ryo that would be fatal to anyone else, it always walked away from him. As if saying, "I expect better of you next time."

It wasn't yet clear what effect Ryo's attacks would have on the Dullahan since he hadn't managed to hit the creature even once... Even so, his combat endurance has been increasing lately. In the beginning, his defeats were practically instant, but this time around, the fight went on for an hour.

Of course, a few aspects of the fight left him dissatisfied. Whether budo, bujutsu, or even games, the only way to improve your ability to fight against others is to engage in actual combat many times and acquire experience, knowledge, and techniques, imprinting them on your own flesh and blood. As someone who always practiced his swings alone because he had no choice, this experience was undoubtedly valuable. Unfortunately for him, his opponent was a Dullahan.

As you gain a certain level of understanding of combat against an opponent, you're always told that breathing is important. Not just your own breathing, but your opponent's—except the Dullahan didn't breathe...which made sense given it was headless! This explained why Ryo wasn't able to accumulate any

experience analyzing his opponent's breathing.

Besides that, footwork was also vital in any sort of combat. In a one-on-one battle, predicting your opponent's movements provided valuable information. It's why practitioners of kendo and kenjutsu wore hakamas. Wearing a hakama makes it difficult for an opponent to see your footwork, giving you a considerable advantage. Ryo wanted to learn footwork from the Dullahan since it wasn't wearing a hakama, but...the disparity between their combat skills was so vast that the Dullahan hardly needed to move its feet at all.

Hardly was the keyword. It did move a *little*, but to him, it felt like a kendo teacher easily sidestepping a child's attack...and Ryo couldn't escape the feeling he was definitely the child in this scenario.

"Basically, you're telling me to become stronger and move more agilely, right!"

There were also a few good things about his regular fights with the Dullahan. No matter what kind of budo or bujutsu, if you only practice alone, you'll inevitably end up favoring offensive attacks, and that's no good. This was especially bad here in a world like Phi, where life-or-death conflict was constant; it would be foolish to neglect defense. In that sense, he was obtaining an incredibly practical education in defense by protecting himself against the Dullahan's attacks as well as evading and countering them.

Having said that, he wasn't self-aware enough to understand all this.

Tonight, however, Ryo was different from his usual self. His movements were far more agile and his predictions of the Dullahan's attacks more accurate. As a result, he deflected a flurry of attacks from the Dullahan before parrying its final blow, a cleave that would have cut him in two had it landed. He only had to shift half a step to do so, then he found his opening. With one strike, he cut off his opponent's right arm, sending it flying.

Okay, not exactly. If he'd been fighting another human or a monster, he definitely would have succeeded in lopping off the arm. This was not the case with the Dullahan, though. With its sword almost scraping the ground, the Dullahan turned the tables on Ryo and cut him diagonally upward, essentially executing the opposite of its intended shoulder slash.

He fell face down then. Like every night before now, he received three fatal attacks. Thanks to the Ice Armor, he hadn't incurred a lot of physical damage, but the damage to his psyche was immense as he lay on the ground.

At this point, the Dullahan would usually sheathe its sword, mount its headless horse, and ride off into the night. Today was different. Instead, it approached him and drew out a warped knife of some sort.

The blade measured twenty centimeters long and the guard between the blade and grip—called the *tsuba* in a Japanese sword—was ten centimeters wide and beautifully decorated. The grip itself was...more than twenty centimeters long.

Ryo noticed something about the grip upon closer inspection. It was the same length as his wooden sword. Twenty-four centimeters.

Holding the knife's handle in its left hand, the Dullahan wrapped its right hand around the base of the blade and glided its fist up to the tip of the knife. A blade of water formed around the metal in the wake of its hand's movement.

"A water sword..." Ryo said.

When the Dullahan put more magic into it, the water blade froze and became a sword of ice.

"So that's why the handle is so long?"

The Dullahan dispelled the ice blade and handed the sword to Ryo.

"Are you saying you want me to master this?"

Once he accepted the weapon, the Dullahan mounted its headless mount as usual and departed.

"Like something right out of a fantasy story..."

On the way back to his house, he generated the ice blade countless times. It was frightening how easily his new sword took to magic, almost like it was made just for him. You could even say it was designed specifically for a water magician.

He created the ice blade again the moment he stepped inside the barrier,

then tested the sword's feel by swinging it. While he was at it, Ryo tried to transform it into a warped, single-edged blade, much like a Japanese sword or a wooden sword, because it felt like the thing to do.

The weapon's center of gravity concerned him due to its shape. Whether Japanese or another type, a sword's center of gravity makes a difference in its ease of use. Of course, it isn't a question of where the center of gravity should be because that depends both on the person who uses it and the purpose.

Basically, the most important aspect of a Japanese sword is the maneuverability that its center of gravity, located at the hand, gives it. He worried about what the combination of metal and ice would do to his own sword's center of gravity. The metal part of the weapon was much lighter than he imagined, so he lengthened the ice blade until it measured seventy centimeters, then adjusted its thickness to fine-tune the center of gravity a little until he got it just right.

"All right, with this I cannn...not necessarily beat the Dullahan, but I can at least get a hit in!"

Because Ryo also knew his opponent's strength.

"The fact that it gave this to me at this stage in our relationship means I can hit it with this sword however much I want. I'm sure this is the Dullahan giving me approval to go ahead and strike with confidence. It's not going anywhere no matter how many times I hit it."

Of course, Ryo had yet to fully grasp the disparity in skill between them...

Needless to say, Ryo and the Dullahan went at it again the very next day on the lakeshore.



Ryo steadily grew more confident in his swordsmanship from the sword fights he and the Dullahan waged...even if he was lucky to get even one hit in during their battles. Still, he gained confidence.

Ryo also felt like his control of magic was improving... Although Blood Freeze hadn't yet succeeded. In fact, it wasn't even clear if he *could* succeed at something like that.

Either way, he wanted to make sure he was still making progress. It was a path he couldn't avoid walking down.

He hadn't gone into the sea ever since the day he'd been knocked out. He obtained salt by collecting seawater while standing on land and then evaporating said liquid, but he didn't step foot into the sea. Whenever he craved fish, he made do with river fish.

Even so, his path toward another underwater battle was unavoidable—he needed to win the bait ball's battle for magical control!

While there was no denying that he'd beat the formation back then, the only reason he managed to escape was a surprise attack he'd pulled off despite being stymied by their magic control. As long as he lived here on Phi, he couldn't allow the same thing to happen ever again. Ultimately, the only way to gain confidence was to accumulate successful experiences.

He stood on a rocky stretch of land and glared at the sea. Just like last time, he held his weapon, the bamboo knife-spear, in his right hand. His loincloth and sandals lay on the shore along with the knifelike ice sword the Dullahan had gifted to him. Ryo had christened it "Murasame." He had decided to stick to the same equipment on this occasion too.

"It's go time!"

The second he dived in, he stabbed the closest fish he could find with his bamboo spear. Unlike last time, he had zero desire to enjoy the scenery. Thanks to his training since then, he'd improved both his stamina and lung capacity. Even then, he could only hold out for five minutes.

Perhaps that's just a human's limit... Evidently, some people with amazingly developed spleens can work for longer underwater, but he certainly wasn't wishing for such endurance. This meant he needed to finish the fight as quickly as possible.

Like last time, the world changed the moment he stabbed the fish. A bait ball quickly formed in front of him, then charged—just like he wanted. Ryo quickly confirmed that he couldn't control the water with his hands or feet.

First, I need to take back control of the seawater around my limbs.

He experienced the same repulsion as he did last time just thinking about the slightest mental image. This time, however, his control of magic was unbelievably stronger. Just by increasing the amount of magical energy he used and sharpening the mental picture, he was able to grab onto the water with his hands and feet.

Yes! I'm giving back as good as I get.

It was his turn now. He envisioned taking complete control of the seawater enveloping the bait ball, effectively immobilizing the monsters in the formation.

The World Is Mine.

The instant he chanted the spell in his mind, the bait ball began to warp. The monsters within the group couldn't control their positions or movements anymore.

Maybe I can freeze them now? Ice Casket.

The distorted bait ball froze—not the monsters themselves but the seawater surrounding the configuration. Before, he hadn't been able to touch the water within ten centimeters of a monster's body, and now he could accomplish the feat even against monsters who possessed a powerful degree of control over water magic.

Ryo was incredibly pleased to witness the fruits of his labor. He had completely incapacitated the entirety of the bait ball without using his bamboo spear. *This* was the power of all the training he'd done thus far to improve his control of magic.

Perhaps it was inevitable that his elation resulted in him noticing the gigantic squid approaching him a beat later than he'd have liked. Last time, he'd dropped his guard after defeating the bait ball, allowing the prawn to knock him unconscious. It seemed he was bound to repeat the same pattern this time. Inevitable, indeed.

A massive squid... He wondered if it was the legendary creature people called the kraken on Earth. It spanned forty meters in length.

Luckily, his reaction was much faster once he noticed it.

5-layer Ice Wall.

The moment he threw up the defensive structure, something slammed against it, causing it to shatter.

It broke the 5-layer Ice Wall in one shot?!

He definitely hadn't expected that.

5-layer Ice Wall. 5-layer Ice Wall. 5-layer Ice Wall.

He put up the wall three times, back-to-back, but each wall was destroyed the second he put it up. The Ice Wall he had woven using the magical control he'd painstakingly trained to gain over the past year...had been easily wrested from Ryo by the kraken.

Ice Casket.

Ryo used the same freezing spell on the area around the kraken, just like he'd done earlier to the bait ball. The ice appeared only for a moment before vanishing and melting back into seawater. The kraken had taken control.



I don't have a chance of winning this. Time to get out of here. Water Jet 32.

He made his emergency escape with Water Jets blasting from the soles of his feet. The kraken *definitely* hadn't expected that either.

His escape was a success. In a rush, he put on his sandals, picked up his loincloth and Murasame, then raced off to his house like the hounds of hell were chasing him. It wasn't until he made it inside the barrier that he finally managed to catch his breath.

"Man, the sea sure is scary..."

"Okay, so, I lost to the kraken who showed up out of nowhere, but at least I had a total victory over the bait ball. Yup, I'm definitely making progress. It was just my bad luck to encounter a kraken this soon though. Definitely a boss-type monster I would have been better off meeting after I grew a little stronger."

The massive squid's level of magical control was totally different from the bait ball's. He'd felt it keenly, as much as he hated to admit it. In short, it meant he could improve his magical control more, a *lot* more...probably.

"I really have no choice but to keep training. Time to up the ante from a five-storied pagoda to the Tokyo Skytree."

He felt like he was doing something very, *very* wrong, but that was Ryo for you.



It wasn't like Ryo was *always* engaged in combat. After all, his goal on Phi was to live a slow life.

"A slow life along with a few battles to the death," he said to himself, though if someone overheard his new slogan, they surely wouldn't think it could apply to a slow life in the sticks.

In his biased perspective, "food" was the number one thing that defined a slow life. His thoughts on food revolved around meat dishes and how he could enrich them... First, spices. He finally had black pepper after drying the peppers he'd harvested. Additionally, there exist pickled and freeze-dried varieties of

green pepper, the former of which are often used in stir-fry dishes in Southeast Asia. Ryo stuck to this type because when he'd tried freeze-drying them, they just ended up completely dehydrated—no signs at all of the *freeze* implied in freeze-dry.

In terms of his current diet, Ryo discovered that he found the taste of fruit—such as the phigs that resembled Earth's figs and the abbles that tasted just like apples—much more satisfying now than in his old life. Mangoes, which he had discovered recently, were simply called mangoes here. All of these fruits and vegetables could be found in *The Flora Compendium, Beginner Edition*.

Ryo had also found fruits that weren't contained in the book: papaya, loquat, and, wonder of wonders, watermelon! Though he'd known papayas and loquats grew in the wild, it had surprised him to learn that watermelons did as well. The ones he'd found here were a lot smaller than Japanese watermelons and hardly sweet. They looked more like plain melons on the outside, but once he split one open, the flesh inside the fruit was red just like a watermelon's. He had been moved to tears at the sight of the red flesh, only to shed a different kind of tears once he tasted the fruit's lack of sweetness.

There was still one major problem with Ryo's slow life and that was the fact that he still hadn't been able to find even a single thatch of the detoxifying herb. After all of his efforts to hunt it down had yielded nothing, he began wondering if it grew in another area. Though *The Flora Compendium* hadn't mentioned anything about it growing in cold regions, perhaps it couldn't survive in the Forest of Londo's warm climate, which could be described as an everlasting summer.

The same was true for soybeans, as he had initially feared. He couldn't find them anywhere either. Fortunately, the fish sauce he'd been making served as an adequate replacement for soy sauce. It was different from the soy sauce he used to consume in Japan, but it was not so different that it was completely alien. He was sure that if someone searched across his old country, they would probably find soy sauce with a similar flavor. So, he had no issues at all with his fish sauce.

Miso, unfortunately, was a lost cause at this point. In his heart, Ryo had given up on it since he couldn't get soybeans.

Finally, there was his staple: rice. He was making headway in a personal project of his—a project he called Paddy Construction Plan in the Forest of Rondo. As the name indicated, he planned to construct a paddy in order to cultivate rice. He'd attempted to commence this very same plan once before and failed. This was the plan where he'd made Icicle Lances drop from the sky to force a phreatic eruption in order to clear land because he didn't have earth magic or the proper equipment to set up a paddy. The plan that had, of course, ultimately failed...

Due to his total failure back then, Ryo had put off finding a solution to the problem...but he had always known he'd eventually have to face it head-on since it was a problem he couldn't avoid indefinitely. Today, he decided it was time to confront it.

First, he secured a square piece of land measuring sixty by sixty meters right at the edge of the barrier. Then he placed ice spears in the four corners and used ivy as a substitute for water thread, a type of rope typically used to establish a specific water level. Ryo, of course, intended to turn the area within the ivy boundaries into a paddy field.

The initial step of developing the paddy entailed digging up the soil and crushing it into a fine layer to create a field. After that, Ryo would flood the plot. At this point, there would still be gaps at the bottom of the soil, so no matter how much water you put in, it wouldn't accumulate. As water is poured in, tractors and cattle were used to mix the soil into a soft mud, clogging the pores in the ground underneath.

During his previous attempt to execute the plan, he had reached an immediate impasse when he tried to actually dig the plot.

"I'm different from the old version of me!"

This time around, Ryo was brimming with a fighting spirit.

"Ice Wall."

He enclosed the paddy with a series of Ice Walls, and then the symposium of water and ice began.

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

Lances made of ice appeared one after another roughly forty meters in the sky before free-falling across the rice paddy in a continuous, high-density, high-speed bombardment. If there weren't enough lances, then all he had to do was fire more! That was the brute force solution he'd come up with. Of course, he knew this wouldn't be the be-all and end-all way to solve the problem.

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

He also unleashed extremely thick Water Jets against the lumps in the soil, smashing them into fine pieces. The streams of water slammed into the ground at close range as the ice spears continued to rain down from above. Someone watching from afar might think the sight was quite fantastical, but the result was simply...huge quantities of soil blasting up into the sky. This went on for ten minutes as the soil was crushed into smaller and smaller pieces.

Using his magic to generate hundreds of creations definitely placed a huge strain on Ryo. He dropped to one knee and panted, catching his breath. He had never faced a successive wave of monsters that might require him to use as much magic as he was using now. He suspected the only reason he could even accomplish this feat right now was because the ground was an unmoving target.

Battlefield reports often mentioned impact craters at bombing sites, but nothing remained of the original plot of earth in his paddy. It looked like a tractor had scooped out all the soil, crushed it, and mixed it up and down until

its appearance had been totally transformed.

“Yup, this is how it should look.”

First phase complete.

The next step was to fill the paddy with water and moisten the soil.

In places like Japan, where the land for rice paddies is regulated by law, you can simply turn on a faucet and use as much water as you want. Of course, this means landowners pay land improvement municipality fees for decades and generations, practically forever. In addition, they continue to pay water use fees too. However, not having to worry about water is still a great thing for farmers. Historically, a lack of water often caused famines throughout different eras and countries.

Fortunately for Ryo, he had free and ready access to water any time he wanted it. What a godsend! Farming was undoubtedly the perfect calling for a water magician!

“I’ll get this done in one shot. *Squall.*”

It was the same spell he’d used to wash away the kite snake’s poison mist, one he often used to water the plants and phig trees in his yard. Needless to say, it created quite a violent scene when it poured down on the sixty-by-sixty-meter plot of land. The Squall persisted for two minutes, which was more than enough time to make a muddy mess of the square. He could see water pooling a bit within the confines.

Even this small amount of water would run off quickly underground when left alone, returning Ryo’s paddy to an ordinary field. Normally, a farmer would use a tractor at this point to mix the mud and soil. Unfortunately for Ryo, he didn’t have one. This was no problem, though—he was just fine without it!

“*Double Ice Wall.*”

His normal Ice Wall measured two meters tall, but this iteration was twice the height at four meters. Naturally, it was high enough to stop mud from splashing out of the square.

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

"Icicle Lance 256."

This time around, he generated the Icicle Lances at a lower elevation of thirty meters in the air. He let them free-fall into the plot he intended to cultivate as a rice paddy. His thought process remained the same. Since he didn't have a tractor, all he had to do was launch an arsenal of spears!

He occasionally replenished the water supply by chanting the Squall spell while continuing to fire Icicle Lances to mix the mud into the soil. Ryo maintained the bombardment for thirty minutes at a much slower pace compared to the one he used when clearing the land in the first step. When he was finished, he didn't know exactly how much of the bottom of the plot he had filled, but he could see how much smoother the mud had become.

Finally, the mud surface in the water needed to be leveled. An uneven surface would only create more headaches for him because when he planted the rice seedlings and filled the paddy with water, some of them might end up fully submerged.

"Yup, absolutely vital for the seedlings... Wait...seedlings..."

He was aghast.

"I didn't...prepare any seedlings..."

He had forgotten something crucial. Before constructing a paddy, it's necessary to grow seedlings from the rice husks in a separate location for about a month—a crucial step that Ryo had forgotten.

Head drooping, Ryo slumped to the ground in disappointment. All his effort today in prepping the paddy had been for nothing...

"N-No. I learned that I *can* do the necessary work to construct a rice field, so the day isn't a total loss. Yup, not a waste at all...it shouldn't be anyway... That's what I'd like to think, at least."

He was so dejected it took him a long time to stand up again.

After quite a few days passed...he confronted his destiny for his third and hopefully final time...

It appeared before Ryo on one of his usual hunts in the eastern part of the forest.

"Ice Shield."

He chanted the defensive spell upon sensing an invisible air magic attack rushing toward him from the front. From the looks of things, his opponent had no intention of killing him with that single blow anyway.

Yes, *it* appeared.

The same assassin hawk Ryo had fought twice before in life-or-death battles. He had taken out its right eye in their first encounter, then he had defeated its apprentice in their second.

The same assassin hawk who had first made him aware of his own mortality.

The same assassin hawk that he'd confronted not once but twice.

"Is it really the same one? No way. This one is jet-black and so much bigger than the one I saw last time..."

Both felt the thread of destiny that bound them together as opponents, but the gravity on this occasion felt much heavier than before. The change in his enemy's appearance combined with the assassin hawk's...confidence? Gravititas? He couldn't explain what it was exactly, but he knew that something different cloaked his opponent now.

"Obviously, you've grown a lot stronger. Did you maybe evolve? Regardless, I don't think you'll let me escape and I don't have any intention of running away either! *Ice Armor.*"

Ryo couldn't see the attack itself, but he knew something raced toward him from the one-eyed assassin hawk's location by the way the air warped.

An enhanced air slash? 5-layer Ice Wall.

The attack smashed through his wall in an instant. His opponent continued launching a series of more air slashes at him, but Ryo's awareness of the assassin hawk never wavered even as he skillfully dodged its relentless, long-range attacks. Ryo evaded them all for the next three minutes. Every time the one-eyed assassin hawk attacked him with an air slash, it moved so quickly it appeared to vanish.

10-layer Ice Wall.

This spell was the higher level version of his defensive specialty. His enemy charged him at the same time it blasted him with another air slash.

"A breakdown rush! You damn air magic master! Argh, I'm so jealous you can use that technique!"

It was too bad that the technique was most likely impossible for a human air magician to master...

Ryo counterattacked after stopping the rushing attack with his Ice Wall.

Icicle Lance 16.

Icicle Lances erupted from the ground, then launched toward the one-eyed assassin hawk. It darted so quickly to the side that it almost appeared to ignore the laws of aerodynamics, then it slammed its right wing into his 10-layer Ice Wall like a boxer swinging a right hook.

"Oh, crap."

He immediately crouched. *Krak*. The sharp sound was accompanied by his opponent's wing tearing through his wall of ice as it tried to mow him down from above.

"You can fight at melee range too...?"

After seeing the terrifying sharpness of its wings, Ryo felt drops of cold sweat roll down his back. The one-eyed assassin hawk unleashed a rapid-fire series of air slashes at such a close range. Ryo staved them off by continuously producing Ice Walls, but the monster broke through them all.

Of course, he had no intention of letting this end with him on the ropes.

He had created sixteen Icicle Lances in the air above the assassin hawk that it

had failed to notice. The spell's long, vertical drop from above made the ice spears especially deadly.

Unfortunately for Ryo, the one-eyed assassin hawk evaded that attack too. It leaped backward easily, like it was telling him, "I've already seen that trick of yours." While that same attack *was* exactly how Ryo had killed its disciple, *these* Icicle Lances were much faster than the ones he'd used back then...

He decided to take a moment to regroup. When he did, the assassin hawk's aura changed. Simultaneously, his Ice Wall and the Ice Armor covering his body vanished.

"Ngh! *Ice Armor*."

His Ice Armor wouldn't generate.

"No! Did it take away my control?!"

Panicked, he tried to snatch back control of his magic, but...something was off. He didn't feel the same repulsion he'd felt in similar situations. When he'd faced the bait ball and the kraken, he could maintain his Ice Walls, albeit briefly, even though his magical control had been repelled.

This time, he couldn't make anything. Period. It felt almost like his magic itself had ceased to exist, or like maybe his magic had been disabled.

"Wait a second. Magical nullification...?"

Ryo had no idea if something like that actually existed, but it was the only explanation that fit when he thought about it.

This was really, *really* bad.

Water Jet 16.

Nope, nothing. The spell didn't work.

"Jeez, what kind of crazy abilities did it acquire after evolving? What a pain in the neck..."

He knew for sure that *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition* didn't have a single word about "magical nullification" or the like in its entry for the assassin hawk. Meanwhile, the one-eyed monster was up to something.

*Another new technique...? It must be something crazy related to air magic...
Air magic. Wait, no way...*

Was it a coincidence that he looked up in the sky and immediately let go of the bamboo knife-spear in his right hand? Or was it because of his battle instincts, honed much sharper now after his daily spars with the Dullahan?

Instantly, the heavens lit up and lightning struck. Instead of Ryo, it zapped the bamboo spear that Ryo had only just released from his grip. The force of the impact still blasted him away since he was right next to his weapon. He scrambled to his feet immediately after, knowing the one-eyed assassin hawk would charge him if he gave it even the smallest opening.

Perhaps it saw him stagger as he struggled back to his feet and realized that his magic was inaccessible and he was unarmed. Maybe it had used the lightning in the first place to disarm him. In any case, the monster rushed him.

Ryo rolled to the left and evaded its attack. Simultaneously, he drew Murasame from his waist. While pulling it out, he produced a blade of ice and cleaved the weapon horizontally toward the one-eyed assassin hawk. His opponent reeled in shock from the unexpected counter and retreated farther than it had planned to. Despite its surprise, the fact that it remained within reach indicated its desire to settle the score with close combat. That was what Ryo wanted too.

With his magic gone, a fight at melee range was his only path to survival now. While he didn't know why he was able to create the blade of ice on Murasame even though access to his magic was blocked, he didn't have time to think about it. After all, he was now in a melee fight with an opponent with a hook powerful enough to tear through the 10-layer Ice Wall. Moreover, he didn't know what else the monster was capable of.

He needed to sharpen all of his senses like he did when he fought the Dullahan. The thought centered him, his worries fading. He just had to do what he always did: stare straight ahead and sink into his fighting stance.

After a moment's pause, the one-eyed assassin hawk, hovering in the air in front of Ryo, launched successive right and left hooks. Ryo carefully parried each strike. That's right. He didn't dodge, but parried. As he suspected,

Murasame's ice blade was able to withstand the monster's hook punches that cut through even his 10-layer Ice Wall. What's more, it didn't break *or* chip. Not even a scratch appeared on the blade.

Something hurtled toward his eyes from his enemy's beak, which Ryo evaded by twisting his head away. It must have been a type of air slash. Now he knew it could use both its wings *and* its beak to unleash the attack, but he wouldn't dwell on it. If his mind fell into the trap of overthinking, he wouldn't be able to see what he really needed to see. The melee fight with the one-eyed assassin hawk was already proving to be quite tricky. On top of its left and right hooks and air slashes from its beak, his opponent was hurling feathers at him like shuriken. The feather shuriken weren't very fast, but they definitely were an added burden he didn't need at such close range... What a pain in the neck.

Ryo would have been crushed ages ago if it wasn't for his single-minded devotion to defense. Despite the variety of his enemy's attacks, his defenses held.

The one-eyed assassin hawk attacked and Ryo defended. They repeated this pattern for so long that the assassin hawk, perhaps losing its patience in the face of Ryo's impenetrable defense, swung a wild, clumsy right hook.

Ryo took advantage of his opponent's impatience. He parried the right hook, deflecting his opponent's arm so that it wheeled into an awkward angle. His counter unbalanced the assassin hawk, giving Ryo the chance to slash sideways at its neck. When it evaded by moving backward a good distance away, he pursued it, keeping pace. He took another stab at it. The monster leaped backward again to dodge his assault. Out of desperation, it unleashed an air slash from its beak. He parried it with the tip of Murasame's blade, then slashed at it again, then a third time, but it avoided all of his attacks.

After it had evaded his three strikes, Ryo deliberately slowed down his attacks for just a moment. Immediately, the one-eyed assassin hawk aimed a left hook at his head, as if approving of his decision. He didn't try to stop it. All he did was move his left foot, already braced behind him, a half step back to both dodge and shift his center of gravity.

Then Ryo shifted his center of gravity from his left foot to his right, stepped forward with his right foot, took his right hand away from Murasame, and jabbed his left hand forward, aiming a single, definitive thrust of his weapon at the assassin hawk.

The blade pierced through the area beneath its beak, analogous to a human's throat. A one hundred percent fatal wound.

Even as it fell to the ground and spat blood from its beak, the assassin hawk's gaze never strayed from Ryo. Hatred still burned fiercely in its one eye.

"Yeah, I get it. After all, I'm the one who took your eye and your disciple's life. Just because you gave it everything you had and still lost doesn't make it any easier to accept your fate."

Despite his casual approach, Ryo didn't drop his guard.

"At the very least, our meeting gave me the chance to grow. I'm thankful to you for that. You showed me how much you evolved in order to avenge not only yourself but your disciple too. I'll honor you by delivering the final blow."

On this day, one destiny met its end.

The Dragon King

Ryo returned to the battlefield the day after emerging victorious against the one-eyed assassin hawk in their fight to the death. He didn't really have a reason for his visit. He just wanted to go. His victory finally felt real upon seeing the traces of their battle, but he felt no joy...

As he stood there, something suddenly swooped down in front of him. The moment he saw the being, his mind nearly went blank. Only one word came to him:

Dragon...

Glittering red, the dragon measured roughly fifty meters in height. After recovering, Ryo's brain began firing thoughts at lightning speed.

Why is there a dragon here of all places? Actually, you know what? That doesn't matter right now. My number one priority is getting the heck out of here, but can I even escape? Seems impossible however I look at it. Do I fight? No, no way do I have a chance of winning, not even if the world turns upside down. There's just way too much of a disparity between us. All jokes aside, it can kill me with just the tip of its pinky finger.

Ryo, in his desperation, didn't register that the dragon was speaking to him.

"You there. Human."

The voice called to him directly in his mind.

"Hmmm? Is this how telepathic communication works with humans? It has been so long, I don't rightly recall. Human, can you hear me?"

"Huh? What? I hear something?"

He finally came to his senses.

"Ah ha. So you can in fact hear me. I am the dragon on whom your eyes rest."

"Whoa. This is telepathy...? Oh, I'm sorry. I was just so shocked. Yes, I can hear you."

“Good, good. My apologies for startling you. I wish to ask you something. Might you know of a bird in these parts that evolved from an assassin hawk?”

“Uhhh...”

Ryo knew only too well who the dragon was asking about considering he’d killed the one-eyed assassin hawk only yesterday. He also realized he wouldn’t be able to talk his way out of this. Not to mention he could easily imagine how badly things might end up if he lied.

“Yes, I do.”

With that, he told the dragon the whole truth, including everything from the fate that had bound him together with the assassin hawk to what happened here yesterday.

“Was it one of your followers? If so, I’m deeply sorry for my actions. Please forgive me,” he said, bowing his head in penance.

“Hm, I see. So you were the one who killed it?”

The dragon reflected silently for a bit before speaking again—telepathically, anyway.

“Be at ease. It was not my acolyte. I was merely curious about what happened to the bird, since its strong aura suddenly disappeared yesterday. It would have made sense if one of my dragon kin were responsible, but it seems that’s not the case. I simply came down from the mountain seeking answers.”

It looked up toward the eastern mountains with those words. Ryo had wondered in his early days on Phi if these mountains housed dragons. It turns out they did.

“Oh, I see. Then, yes, I was the one who killed the one-eyed assassin hawk.”

“Well, well... What a surprise indeed... I’m satisfied now that I know the reason it vanished. Its evolution was the first in centuries in this forest, you see, yet you defeated it soundly. Did it void your magic perhaps?”

“Yes, it did! I couldn’t believe it! It felt like a violation of my rights to be unable to use magic as a magician.”

The dragon nodded vigorously in agreement, then its gaze suddenly arrested

on Ryo's waist.

"Ah...I see you bear something unusual as well."

"You mean this?"

Ryo pulled Murasame out to show to the dragon. His initial terror of the dragon had long since dissipated. His nerves were a bit tougher than he himself realized.

"Indeed. And I was right about it being the Fairy King's sword."

"Fairy King? But I received this from the Dullahan who appears every night near the lake in the northern wetlands..."

The Dullahan is a fairy in Irish folktales.

"I know not what a Dullahan is, but the one who gave that to you is most certainly the Fairy King. If I recall, the Water Fairy King currently resides in this forest."

"Oh, well, I'm a water magician, so maybe that's the reason he gifted the sword to me. This sword saved my life yesterday."

"Oh ho. A water magician, you say? It is no wonder then that the Fairy King has taken a liking to you. That means you must be studying water magic under the Fairy King's tutelage, yes?"

"Huh? Um, no... He's teaching me swordsmanship. I've never actually seen him use magic at all..."

"What? You are learning the way of the sword and not water magic from the Water Fairy King? Even though you're a water magician? How strange. Although, I suppose he must think swordplay is relevant to your learning. I can't comment either way... Like me, that Fairy King has lived for hundreds of thousands of years, you know. I'm certain he has his own reasons for doing things the way he does. In any case, 'tis evident to me that he's taken quite a shine to you. Be assured this is a very good thing."

The dragon chuckled like it had learned some interesting morsel of information.

"Um, would it be okay if I asked you a few questions...?"

"Hm? Ask away, ask away. I'm happy to oblige," the dragon replied magnanimously.

"I'd like to know more about this Forest of Rondo. How big is it? What sort of place is it?"

"A broad question, but one I shall answer nonetheless. Hm, so this is the Forest of Rondo, eh... Right, I do remember it being called such in the past. Well, I can't describe its size precisely to you because I do not know the system of measurement you humans use."

"Oh, yes, that makes sense. Why didn't I think of that? My apologies."

"No, no, 'tis but a trifle. I suppose the closest approximation would be the size of a small continent. After all, it used to be known as the subcontinent of Rondo."

"A subcontinent..."

Ryo found this information a bit unexpected to learn. Though he had asked Fake Michael if he could live somewhere secluded, he never could have imagined *this* was what the angel chose.

"The subcontinent is surrounded by the sea to the east, south, and west. To the north, a mountain range runs from the northwest to the southeast. These mountains intersect with another that stretches from east to west. You could say these mountains close the north of the subcontinent off like a lid covering a pot. This also explains why the humans who live in their settlements much farther north never venture out here. As far as I'm aware, you are the only human on the subcontinent of Rondo."

The dragon burst into hearty gales of laughter then.

"I had no idea this place was so isolated..."

"You mean to tell me you've been living your life unaware of all this? That begs the question: where exactly are you from?"

Since his story wasn't something he felt the need to hide, Ryo told the dragon about how he'd reincarnated here from another world.

"And the mysteries deepen... Though I do know that individuals from other

worlds do come here on occasion..."

Then a thunderous roar came from the east.

"My apologies. I am being summoned. I would have enjoyed talking to you more, but I'm certain we will meet again."

So saying, the dragon took off.

"W-Wait! At least tell me your name! Mine is Ryo."

"Ryo, eh? I am Lewin. I shall see you again, Ryo. Ah, before I forget. Do not go near the eastern mountains for you may be attacked on sight by dragons."

With that, Lewin flew off toward the eastern skies.

"Wow... Dragons really pack a punch, huh? No wonder that one can claim a position as the region's gatekeeper of sorts, someone who keeps an eye on everything in the vicinity... What an incredible aura... I can't even imagine who rules that mountain. Yeah, I'll definitely stay away from there."

He reaffirmed his original vow to himself with much more conviction this time around.

Meanwhile, the Dragon King, Lewin, ruminated as he headed toward the eastern mountain.

"That was quite a peculiar human, eh? Was he even human though? Do ones like him actually exist? It was my first time seeing a specimen like him in the hundreds of millennia I've lived. Is he a mutant species of human? An evolution? I've never heard of such a thing... Heh heh heh. A fascinating situation regardless. To think there are still things I don't know despite my long life... I can well understand why the Water Fairy King would take a liking to him, considering its millennia on this subcontinent too. After all, 'tis only natural to feel excitement at encountering such an intriguing specimen for the first time in so long. But that doesn't mean I should interfere. If anything, my intervention would be a waste as it would only muddy the water. I will quite enjoy watching over him as an observer instead. Ga ha ha ha!"

It would be a very long time before Ryo met Lewin again.

As for the Dullahan who was evidently the Water Fairy King, he would train him as usual tonight in the art of swordsmanship. Just as Ryo expected, his master didn't teach him any water magic.

Twenty Years Later and a Castaway

Time passed quickly after his final battle with the one-eyed assassin hawk as well as his chance meeting with Lewin... Ryo's senses told him that it'd been twenty years since then...more or less.

In the beginning, he'd counted the days to gauge the passage of time since his reincarnation, but then summer passed, autumn arrived, winter came, and spring visited once more, and Ryo abandoned the task. He found there was ultimately no point in actually marking the days. That said, he definitely thought he'd experienced the cycle of seasons at least twenty times by now...

At that moment, a full-length mirror made of ice reflected Ryo's appearance quite clearly. He'd had to tweak the ice's reflectance when he made it to give it mirrorlike properties, but...the image it reflected was unchanged from the one he'd seen when he was first reincarnated here.

"I'm...not aging...am I?"

His hair still grew, which he cut every once in a while. His nails also grew, so he clipped them. His height, however, remained the same...as did his baby face.

"Nineteen forever... What a terrifying fantasy..."

Ryo knew this wasn't normal. He also didn't think the phenomenon could be explained only by the fantastical circumstances of his new life, but he didn't analyze the situation too deeply either. The fact that he'd reincarnated in another world was in itself anything but normal.

Soon enough, a new crisis found its way into Ryo's slow life.

Earlier that day, he'd headed to the sea to procure salt and satisfy a craving for salt-grilled saltwater fish, which he hadn't enjoyed in a while. He hadn't encountered a kraken since the time one had almost killed him on his ocean dive. He only went to the sea two or three times a year, so clearly the numerous times he'd almost died in the sea had imprinted themselves onto his memory to

the point that they subconsciously affected his behavior. In short, he wasn't a big fan of the sea despite the fact that he was a water magician.

“No, wait. It's not that I'm not a fan of the sea. I'm just not a fan of krakens! I actually ended up eating that prawn!”

You heard it right. Ryo had eaten the very same prawn that had knocked him out with its air bubble the first time he dived into the sea. He had also thoroughly investigated the composition of its oversized claw. The thing that had surprised him the most about it was the fact that, despite its powerful air bubble attack, it had turned out to be a normal animal instead of a monster. He realized it was a gigantic version of snapping shrimp after he remembered watching videos of them. They inhabited Japan's coastal waters too.

When the giant claw snaps together, it creates an air bubble, which generates shock waves upon bursting. This phenomenon is called bubble collapse or cavitation, and the plasma generated during this process produces a temperature as high as 4,400 degrees Celsius. The snapping shrimp in the seas around Japan are only about five centimeters long, but they can generate plasma of similar sizes.

The three most well-known states of matter are solid, liquid, and gas, but there's a fourth too—plasma. The fact that an animal's claw is capable of generating it demonstrates the true terrifying force of nature... Hunting and eating the shrimp had allowed Ryo to conquer his fear of such a shrimp, but he couldn't say the same of the kraken. Even now, he still hadn't overcome his fear of that particular creature.

Anyway, back to Ryo's outing to the sea. Upon his arrival, the sight that greeted him was...in one word, a disaster. The contrast between the beautiful white sandy beach and the blue horizon beyond it was always otherworldly, but today it looked as if a ship had wrecked and littered its debris all over the shore.

There were people among the wreckage too. Three of them, it seemed. His first actual encounter with humans in the twenty years (by Ryo's estimate, anyway) since his transmigration to Phi from Earth.

He approached each of them warily, placing his hand against their jugular

veins to check if they were alive. Two of them were already dead, but the third still lived. He appeared to be in his midtwenties, with dark red hair and a solidly muscled, but not thick, physique. An impressive sword lay in his hand, its blade long but not too thick. It looked to be what was called a bastard sword, which could be used one-or two-handed. He was clearly a man who lived by the sword.

“I doubt my conscience will let me rest if I abandon him now, huh?”

It was pretty awful that Ryo considered the idea for even a moment.

“Cart.”

He generated a two-meter-long cart from ice. A so-called self-propelled one, its movements were simple, capable only of following him. He originally used Ice Bahn to transport things, but dragging things manually—especially the increasing number of game he was able to take down in a single hunt—had become annoying over time, so he invented the cart as a solution.

He’d actually wanted to create a two-legged golem that could simply walk over any kind of rough terrain, but every single attempt at constructing one had failed thus far. Even now, twenty years later, he still couldn’t produce a working golem.

At any rate, he’d built a cobblestone path from his house to the beach for the few trips he took every year to the sea and his Cart spell was more than good enough to traverse it. He decided to load the still-breathing man who seemed to be a swordsman into his cart as well as any salvageable materials around him. Once he did, he would return home.

“Oh, the salt... I can just get some later.”

As he was about to heave the swordsman into the cart, however, Ryo noticed a copious stream of blood oozing from a fairly deep wound on the man’s left arm.

“The blood is bright red... Does that mean an artery was hit? He’ll bleed to death at this rate. Hmmm...”

He surveyed their surroundings for anything he could use to stanch the flow of blood. The basic principle of stopping bleeding is applying pressure. Using a

cloth or something similar to press down on the wound should work. Unfortunately, everything that had washed up on shore was dirty, making infection a real concern. Moreover, he didn't have any cloth or yarn to help him bind the wound.

"I don't have any other choice."

With those muttered words, he began applying pressure to the gash by pushing down on the sleeve covering it, but it didn't look like it was working.

"An adult human body is sixty percent water. Two-thirds of it is in cells and the remaining one-third is in blood and intracellular fluids. Meaning, as a water magician, I should be able to manipulate human blood too..."

Ryo visualized the inside of the swordsman's left arm. In his mind's eye, he passed through his own hand supporting it and went right into the man's arm... He *felt* like he could see the currents of water swirling in his body... Then he focused on the blood vessels themselves.

"I found the point of hemorrhage!"

He coated the outside of the ruptured vein in a membrane of water, trying very, very hard to avoid crushing the blood vessel...

"I did it."

In his mind, the blood had stopped leaking from the blood vessel. Still, he wouldn't know what had actually happened until he removed the hand applying pressure to the wound. He finally lifted his hand to inspect the swordsman's arm. The blood was...*not* oozing!

"Ha! I managed. Somehow."

Then he carefully loaded the man into his cart and slowly pushed it home.

Abel opened his eyes and then looked around.

"Someone...saved me?"

He could move his limbs freely. No chains bound him. The necklace he always wore was still there. His sword, which he thought of as his partner, and the remainder of his gear rested right next to the bed he was lying on.

He felt no pain when he moved his arms and legs. As for clothing...he still had his trousers on, but his torso was bare. Though he had a somewhat fresh wound in his left arm, it didn't bleed.

Overall, he was in decent health and it didn't seem like he had been captured.

Abel planted his feet on the ground and stood from the bed. Then he picked up his sword, which was leaning against the wall.

"I'm in a house... A pretty big one at that. The village mayor's, maybe?"

He passed through the living room, opened the door of the house, and stepped outside. There, he found the sun shining down brilliantly upon a spacious yard.

"This isn't...a village? Where in the world am I?" He asked himself.

"Ah, so you're awake? I'm glad you survived."

Abel turned around in surprise. He hadn't sensed the other man's presence at all. Upon seeing him, he was taken even more aback. He was a head shorter than Abel himself. Appearing to be in his late teens, he possessed black hair and black eyes, his skin darkly tanned.

Most shocking was that he hardly wore anything that could rightly be called clothes. Only a pair of sandals and a loincloth, both tanned from some sort of animal hide, covered his body.

I'm almost positive even children in the slums wear proper clothing... No, that's not the first thing I should be saying to him.

"I'm Abel. You're the one who saved me, right? Thank you," he said, bowing his head.

"It's fine. I didn't do much. Just carried you home after you washed up on shore. Unfortunately, I was only able to save you, Abel. It was too late for the others..."

"Oh, so they washed up as well? Don't worry about them. They were smugglers."

"Smugglers?"

Unable to comprehend the situation, Ryo tilted his head in bewilderment.

They were smugglers...? So what does that make Abel, since they landed on the beach together? A smuggler too? No, I doubt he'd tell me if he was. He's pretty blunt, but he doesn't seem like a bad guy. A blunt guy, huh... Oh, wait. We're talking. I don't think he's speaking Japanese, but somehow we can understand each other... I have no idea how he did it, but good job, Fake Michael. A talented man as always.

"How about we eat now? You must be hungry. I hung your clothes up over there, Abel. I think they should be dry by now. Oh, right. Let me introduce myself. My name is Ryo. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

His savior, Ryo, was different in many ways.

First, as far as food went, Ryo had no bread, but he did have rice. The grain was a common staple in the southern regions of the Central Provinces and Abel himself had eaten it before. He remembered the specific dish that Ryo had prepared, one which was paired with...some sort of well-seasoned, thick sauce. In any case, it tasted exquisite.

The seared, seasoned meat Ryo served him was superb. Then there was the thing he called an "onigiri," a compact mix of grilled meat and rice. Abel thought it even more delicious than the combination of bread and meat.

He learned that Ryo's clothing—or at least his loincloth—was made from some sort of boar leather. When he asked him where he got the leather from, he learned that Ryo had tanned it himself. He could spot traces of the effort in the material once he found that out. What surprised Abel even more was that Ryo didn't have any other clothes.

"You really don't have anything else to wear...?"

"That's right. I haven't made anything since. I don't really have the cloth or thread to spare."

"Wait, what? It's not like you have to *make* your own clothes. You could just buy some..."

Too late, Abel realized he might have made a baseless assumption. You

needed money to buy things, so what if his savior didn't have any and that was the reason he couldn't? He regretted his rash words, which Ryo could have easily interpreted as an insult.

"Well, you see, there isn't a single person living around here, much less a town."

Not in a million years could Abel have imagined his reply. When he pressed him for more information, he discovered this place was called the Forest of Rondo and it was uninhabited by people.

"The Forest of Rondo? Sorry, but I've never heard of it. The only thing I remember is the others on the ship saying something about the tide taking us much farther south than planned..."

"Ah, I suppose that makes sense. Speaking of your ship, Abel, what happened to it?"

He recounted the tale in a few words.

The ship had left port earlier than scheduled and that was why he hadn't been able to get off in time. When they went out to sea, they encountered a storm and the rudder sustained damage, at which point the ship was blown considerably south. Unfortunately, they encountered another storm and that took them even farther south. Then, finally, a kraken destroyed the ship.

"A kraken!"

Goose bumps erupted on Ryo's skin.

"I can't believe you survived all that, especially a kraken..."

"Well, I guess you could say luck was on my side, considering the rest ended up dead."

"Oh, true."

Ryo's weapons made Abel curious too. He had two knives, one on each side of his waist. This indicated to him that Ryo was most likely a knife fighter, but his lack of armor didn't match up. Only the loincloth, which... While he knew very well that knife fighters and spies preferred to wear light armor, this was *too* light.

Ryo had told him that there weren't towns or people here. Since the exquisite seared meat he'd eaten was definitely some sort of rabbit, he thought Ryo must have hunted it down himself. At the least, this meant Ryo was capable of holding his own in a fight. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to survive in a land where krakens lived off the coast.

"The meat you served earlier was excellent, Ryo. I don't suppose you hunted the beast yourself?"

Abel wanted to satisfy his curiosity, but he hesitated to ask directly, so he phrased the question as subtly as he could.

"That's right. I hunt a lot in the eastern part of the forest. What we just had was lesser rabbit thigh meat."

"Ah, so...are you a knife fighter? I imagine hunting lesser rabbits with a knife would be incredibly difficult."

Subtlety clearly wasn't Abel's forte given that he found himself asking each question as straightforwardly as possible.

"Oh, I'm actually a water magician. I use these knives for self-defense and butchering and whatnot..." Ryo said bashfully, having remembered what Fake Michael had said about only twenty percent of Phi's population having the ability to use magic. He expected Abel to say something like, "Whoa, you can use magic?" or "You're one of the chosen, huh?" or "I wish I could use magic too."

In reality, though...

"Magic, huh?" Abel said. "Only half of the people in the Central Provinces can use magic, you know. I'm not one of them, by the way."

"Half..."

But...Fake Michael said it was twenty percent! He lied to me?!

Depressed, Ryo slumped, his expression almost comically crestfallen.

"Hm? What's wrong, Ryo?"

"N-No, it's nothing..."

“Ryo, I want to talk to you about something,” Abel said, broaching the topic after they finished eating grilled meat and taking care of the minor cleanup.

“Hm? What is it?”

“I want to go to the beach where I washed up to check something. Do you mind showing me the way there?”

“No, not at all. Shall we head out now then?”

Ryo wore his usual attire of loincloth, sandals, and the two knives. He hadn't been using his bamboo knife-spear much lately. The only reason he'd even made it in the first place was the sense of security it gave him when he used it for ranged combat. Using Murasame in his daily training with the Dullahan and then in his final melee encounter with the one-eyed assassin hawk had taught him how to master the special blade to the point that he no longer needed the assurance of the spear's distance. He had indeed grown stronger.

That wasn't how Abel viewed the situation though.

“Ryo. You said you're a water magician, right?”

“Yes, that's correct.”

“So where's your magic staff? Why aren't you taking it with you?”

“Well...”

In the Central Provinces, the last place Abel had been, it was a basic principle for magicians to possess staves because they played a vital role in magicians' lives—by acting as conductors of magic, staves aided their users in controlling the activation and efficacy of their magic. Without staves, magicians needed ten times more magical energy to activate their magic and even then, they would only produce results a tenth as effective. In other words, Abel frankly thought Ryo was useless without a staff.

“Oh, well... I don't have one,” Ryo said, having never once used a staff or wand or whatever...

Abel deeply regretted asking when he heard that response.

I screwed up again... Living in poverty is hard in a lot of ways, so it's possible he lost his staff at some point and it wouldn't have been a priority. How could I

insult my savior like that? What a stupid question... Oh, wait a sec. I think I remember hearing rumors about “Inferno Magicians” or something who can use magic in a monstrous capacity even without staves... Right, maybe a staff isn’t the be-all and end-all I think it is.

Despite the various thoughts churning in his mind, Abel made sure to be more circumspect when he spoke again.

“Ah, yeah, of course. Not everyone has one. Since I’m a swordsman, as long as I have this sword, I’ll be just fine,” Abel said, tapping the weapon on his back. “If anything happens, I’ll take the lead and fight. You can stand back, Ryo.”

“No way. I can’t just let you shoulder the entire burden...”

“Please, let me do that much for you. It doesn’t sit right with me to be saved without returning the favor. You could say it’s a matter of honor for me,” Abel said, bringing his face very close to Ryo’s.

“Oh, well...if you insist. Thank you. I’ll be relying on you when the time comes.”

It was the best response Ryo could muster.

The dead bodies were no longer on the beach. Not even five hours had passed since Ryo carried Abel back to his house, but the corpses of the two smugglers were gone. Of course, Ryo hadn’t done anything to them. Most likely, something from the sea had done the job.

“The other two were most certainly dead,” Ryo said dispassionately. “Perhaps scavengers devoured their bodies? Or sea monsters dragged them down into the depths.”

“I’d have ended up like them if you hadn’t found me, Ryo,” Abel said, beads of cold sweat rolling down his back.

“Lady Luck has truly favored you, hm, Abel?” Ryo asked, smiling cheerfully.

“Yeah...I guess she did. That’s how I’ll think of it. Also, you don’t have to speak so formally with me. It makes me feel awkward, considering you’re my savior and all.”

“It’s only right since you’re older than me... But if you say so, sure.”

“Thanks for humoring me. I’d rather just keep things casual, since that’s how my friends and I are with each other.”

“Friends, huh...” Ryo said, reflecting on the idea.

I asked Fake Michael to place me in an isolated location because I’d thought I wanted to be alone. But...having friends sounds nice. I feel kinda jealous now. I mean, twenty years is a long time to have been all alone.

Behind him, Abel was searching for something.

I knew it, Abel thought. There’s nothing left. Or it sank to the bottom of the ocean. Might even be inside the kraken’s stomach. Not much I can do about it now. I’ll figure it out after I meet up with the others again.

“I didn’t find what I was looking for,” Abel said. “Thank you anyway, Ryo.”

“That’s too bad. What now then?”

“For starters, I want to get back to my friends. If I can get to the town of Lune, I should be able to send them a message from there...”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know where that is,” Ryo replied, shaking his head. “I think it’s probably way north of here, though...which means you’ll have to travel pretty far. There aren’t even people in these parts, much less any towns.”

“Is that right... Guess I’ll just have to steel myself for anything then.” Abel fell silent as he mulled things over. After a bit, he looked back at Ryo. “Hey, Ryo. Why don’t you come with me?”

Abel’s invitation came as a complete surprise to Ryo. Navigating through this forest alone was definitely a challenge. It would be tough even for Abel to solo the trek despite his skill with the sword. Breaks would only make the journey more difficult. If the two of them went together, one could sleep while the other kept watch. If he went alone, he wouldn’t be able to get enough sleep because he’d always have to be on guard. The longer he stayed awake and wary of his surroundings, the more tired he would become. And exhaustion eventually led to mistakes. It was an inescapable fact of life for everyone, novices and experts alike.

That's why, on modern-day Earth, the smallest military unit is the two-man cell.

Be that as it may, up until now, Ryo hadn't imagined ever leaving the Forest of Rondo. He'd constructed a rice paddy around the house, dug a sewer system, and paved the paths he often used with cobblestones. He even cultivated a huge variety of fruits within the barrier. Though vegetables were strangely lacking in his diet, he nevertheless had no complaints about his life here. He really didn't, but...when Abel had asked him to come with him, he couldn't deny that a small part of him had been inclined to agree right away.

I don't have any complaints. I'm not unhappy either. But...well, I sort of—kind of—want to see what a town looks like in this world of sword and magic. Juuust a little. I do feel like it'd be such a waste to just throw away this slow life that I took so long to build for myself...

Ryo's lack of reaction made Abel panic a bit.

"Sorry about that. Should have eased you into it, huh? How about you go with me as far as Lune? I'd really appreciate your company. Think of it as being my guide. Wait, no. Think of it as a job! Yeah, a job. I'll pay you to go with me. I'll even help you out if you feel like taking a stab at life in the town once we get there. I really don't have the slightest clue how to get to Lune from here. So, what do you say...?"

After blurting all that out, Abel lowered his head and waited in silence.

Oh, right. I don't have to leave the Forest of Rondo forever. I can just come back once I see a bit of the world. It's not like I age anyway... Pretty sure Fake Michael's barrier will hold while I'm gone too.

Ryo had no logical basis for his assessment of the barrier, only a tremendous faith in Fake Michael.

"Yes, all right," Ryo said. "I need to take care of a few things first though, so the earliest we can leave is tomorrow. If that works for you, I'll accept the job."

"Ahhh, you're a lifesaver, Ryo!"

Abel grasped Ryo's hand in both of his and shook it happily. To him, Ryo represented a ray of hope. He had survived thus far only thanks to the fact that

Ryo had found him and carried him back to his house.

Ryo might not have known where the town of Lune was, but he sounded pretty certain about it being “far north.” This meant he must have known enough about the region to make an educated guess. Besides, it’d be way too difficult for Abel to set out on his own considering he didn’t even know how far this forest extended.

He might not be great at combat since he’s a magician without a staff, so I’ll just handle that end of things. It’ll be nice just having someone to take turns keeping watch at night. Oh, that reminds me... I’ll buy him a staff and clothes once we reach the first town on the journey. I don’t think he’ll be insulted if I do that much. Come to think of it, they might not even let him into the town with the way he’s dressed...

Evidently, Abel was under the mistaken impression that poverty was the reason Ryo lacked a staff and wore only a loincloth... Well, at least he wasn’t wrong about Ryo being penniless.

As for the man himself, Ryo being Ryo, he decided to take care of a few things in preparation for leaving his home unattended for an indefinite period of time. He didn’t have to do anything to the house itself since it and its functions, such as the barrier and silo, had been carefully designed by Fake Michael. He knew they would continue operating just fine even if he wasn’t there.

The rice paddy was a loss though. He’d just have to rebuild it when he came back, so he froze some of the unhulled rice. He could eat it or grow it after his return.

Same went for the fruits growing in his yard. All he could do was pray that a few of them survived any rainfall.

Basically, pretty much everything he left behind would be fine, in one way or another. The problem was what to take with him. The stereotypical isekai thing would be some kind of limitless inventory or magical subspace to store things...but he didn’t have anything like that, which meant he needed to carefully choose what to take with him.

First, he decided to bring salt and black pepper. He put the seasonings in a small drawstring pouch that had been tanned from kite snake skin. Suspended

as it would be from his waist, it wouldn't be much of a hindrance. Besides, he didn't need much of either, but food tasted bland without them, so they were absolutely essential on this journey.

He also tossed wound herbs in their original form into the pouch as well as flint. He should be able to create a spark using the knife Fake Michael had provided for him.

He could make water on his own.

Wait, will this really be enough? Didn't take long at all, huh?

If you didn't need extra clothing like Ryo, it turned out you could get away with traveling very light.

The only thing left is to say my goodbyes...

After they finished eating dinner, Ryo told Abel he'd be going out for a bit.

"At this hour?" Abel asked, dubious.

"I am. This is the only time we can meet, so I need to let him know I'll be away for some time. Please wait here while I'm away, Abel."

"Yeah, sure."

He said no one lives around here, Abel thought... So who exactly is he telling about his journey? Maybe the spirit of someone he loved dearly? Just because he's alone now doesn't mean it was always like that. Anyway, this isn't something I should stick my nose into.

Ryo stood at the shore of the lake situated in the center of the vast marshlands to the north. As the moon approached its zenith in the night sky, the Dullahan appeared, as usual, astride his headless horse. At this point, their normal routine would be for Ryo to take up a fighting stance with Murasame. He would signal for the Dullahan to do the same and then they would cross swords.

Today was different. Ryo approached his master without removing Murasame from his waist.

“I have something to tell you today,” Ryo said. “I’m leaving the Forest of Rondo tomorrow and I won’t be back for some time, so tonight’s session will be the last one for a while.”

He didn’t know if the Dullahan understood his words. In fact, he didn’t know what a Fairy King *was* in the first place. Even if he didn’t understand, the Dullahan had trained him in the art of the sword for a long time now, so Ryo felt it was only right to at least try to express his gratitude.

“Thank you for everything. Truly, from the bottom of my heart. It’s only because of you I was able to survive this long.”

Maybe Ryo imagined it, but the Dullahan seemed a bit sad now. Of course, he couldn’t read the Fairy King’s expressions on account of him missing a head and a face to go with it. Nevertheless, he felt a sadness cloaking his teacher.

“I don’t want this to be like our usual practice matches. I want you to come at me with everything you have tonight,” Ryo said, creating Murasame’s blade.

In response, the Dullahan unsheathed his sword and took up his stance.

Then, their sword fight began.

It lasted for a ceaseless two hours. The score was two against three, in favor of the Dullahan. Though Ryo had managed to score those two fatal hits...he lost when his master finally struck his third blow.

Another loss didn’t make much of a difference to Ryo since he’d never won anyway, so he sprang up onto his feet to say goodbye. Even though he felt unsteady, he still managed.

“Thank you very much,” Ryo said, bowing his head deeply.

The Dullahan approached him and gave him something.



“What are— A robe and a cloak? For me?”

He took the clothes and put them on. They fit him perfectly, like they were made specifically for him. The robe was white, but beautifully embroidered and easy to move in. The cloak, which seemed to have been made as a set with the robe, took on a pale blue hue when placed over the robe. Not to mention the beautiful blue gradation in its lining!

Ryo immediately fell in love with the clothes.

“Thank you so much! I’ll cherish them.”

He bowed deeply once more. When Ryo straightened, he thought he could sense his master’s satisfaction. Before long, the Dullahan mounted his headless horse and disappeared as usual.

Ryo and Abel

“Should we get going then?” Ryo asked after doing a final check to make sure he hadn’t forgotten anything.

“Yeah, good idea.”

Abel had been shipwrecked with nothing but his clothes, a coin purse, light armor, and a sword in his possession. Ryo, meanwhile, had only the robe and cloak given to him by the Dullahan, his loincloth, sandals, knives, and seasonings. Fortunately, since they would be traveling through the forest, the fewer items they carried, the better. They needed to be light on their feet.

“We’re going to find food as we go. I can provide water, salt, and the seasoning called black pepper, but we’ll have to hunt animals and monsters for meat and forage for fruits and such while we travel. I don’t anticipate any problems considering the wealth of life-forms inhabiting this forest.”

“Got it.”

“As we head north, we’ll eventually run into a massive marshland. I know the area pretty well until that point because of how often I go there. There shouldn’t be any dangerous monsters on the way now.”

As he spoke, an image floated to the surface of his mind of his first meeting with the one-eyed assassin hawk. He had met it in the northern reaches of the forest.

“Oh, yeah?” Abel said. “Then let’s use the marshland as our first waypoint.”

Once they left the barrier, the two of them walked in silence for a while. Ryo reminisced about the twenty years he’d spent in the forest while Abel contemplated the mystery that was Ryo.

Finally, unable to contain himself any longer, he broke the silence.

“Hey, Ryo. There’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Uh...what I’m about to ask you might come off as rude, so you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but...where did you go last night?”

Abel had agonized over whether or not he should ask Ryo what had been on his mind. Even as he remained indecisive, he ultimately blurted it out anyway...

“Oh, I don’t mind telling you. I visited my teacher. I wanted to inform him about my trip.”

“Your teacher? Then he’s the one who gave you that robe and cloak?”

“Yup, that’s right. They’re farewell gifts.”

Though both the robe and cloak were well-made and beautiful, something about them felt off to Abel. He had grown up surrounded by exquisite, high-quality goods, which explained why he had an eye for beauty. This same sense told him something was off about Ryo’s clothes.

Do they have some kind of magical effect?

He couldn’t be sure.

“Is there something special about them?” Abel asked.

Normally, such a question would be taboo, but since they were now a party, they needed to know the kinds of weapons, gear, and skills their comrades had. This information would be vital for them to work as a team when push came to shove.

Of course, Abel’s reason for asking Ryo was a little simpler—he just wanted to know the source of the strange feeling he had.

“Hmmm. I don’t think so, since he didn’t mention anything.”

The Dullahan had never spoken a single word to Ryo. Obviously, considering his lack of a head and all.

“Well. Huh.”

There wasn’t much Abel could do given the circumstances. Though he wasn’t fully convinced he was wrong, he decided not to press further.

During their talk, they had arrived at the wetlands.

“We’ll have to take a detour to the west in order to keep moving north,” Ryo said. “I’m not really familiar with the area beyond this, so we’ll have to tread carefully.”

“Roger that,” Abel said. “I don’t know how to put this, but a lot of magicians speak really logically, huh? The ones I know from back home all talk like you too, Ryo.”

“Oh, really...? I haven’t met any other magicians, so I can’t comment one way or the other...”

Never mind other magicians, Ryo thought ruefully. Abel’s the first person I’ve ever met here.

Even after circumventing the massive marshlands and exiting north of it, they still hadn’t encountered any monsters. Only after late afternoon began turning into evening did they finally run into one.

“It’s a lesser boar, huh?” Ryo said.

“Like I told you yesterday, I’ll handle it. You stand back, Ryo,” Abel said, unsheathing his sword and holding it at the ready.

Ryo did as instructed and stood back.

In his mind, Ryo replayed the scene of his first battle on Phi.

That’s right, my first fight was against a lesser boar. I couldn’t even move because it was the first time I’d ever been exposed to another creature’s bloodlust. In the end, I managed to corner it with an Ice Bahn-Icicle Lance combo and finish it off by stabbing it with my bamboo spear... Sure does bring back memories.

As Ryo reminisced, the battle began with the lesser boar charging at Abel.

“Combat Skill: Sidestep.”

Just as the boar was about to strike, Abel evaded its rush by shifting his body the slightest bit to the side. Immediately after, he counterattacked.

“Combat Skill: Total Impalement.”

He plunged his sword through the lesser boar's left ear and into its brain, defeating the monster without giving it a chance to inflict any kind of damage on him.

Ryo was stunned...not by Abel's superb display of skill, but by what he learned for the first time.

Combat Skill?! What the heck?! The first one he used to dodge to the side and the second he used to stab it! I didn't even know something like that existed on Phi!

"Ha! That takes care of dinner, huh? Hm? What's wrong, Ryo?"

"Oh, well, it was my first time seeing 'Combat Skills' in use..."

"Oh, right. Magicians don't use them, do they? The best way I can describe them is...techniques reserved exclusively for swordsmen and others who use weapons in combat."

"I see..." Ryo said, nodding emphatically.

"Anyway, we have more important things to focus on. It'll be dark soon, so we should get to work on setting up camp. Also, the lesser boar will bleed out naturally since I stabbed it through the ears. Should make it easier to butcher and cook..."

"You're absolutely right. I remember passing a huge tree with a hollow. Why don't we make camp there? It should have enough space for us to make a fire," Ryo replied. He was finally thinking about the most important thing of all. That's right. Food.

"You're pretty observant, huh? Then let's butcher this lesser boar and take only the edible parts."

Abel took out his knife, getting ready to dismember the monster right there and then.

"I'll find some dry branches for kindling and get a fire going for us," Ryo, a water magician skilled in starting fires, offered.

The lesser boar's thigh meat tasted delicious. The salt and black pepper

combo was undoubtedly the most sublime for searing. Although Ryo felt a certain amount of satisfaction, he couldn't help but think that the meal would've been better with rice.

Abel, on the other hand, seemed quite pleased with their meal. Perhaps this was the difference between someone who had spent so long settled into their slow life and someone who had spent so long on the road.

Ryo hadn't expected to feel homesick so soon into their journey. He was also only now realizing what a staple of his diet rice had been. The sadness of the loss weighed heavily on him.

If I knew this is how things would be, I should have just forced myself to find a way to bring some rice with me...

He lacked a concrete plan on how he'd even make that happen, but Ryo was convinced he could do it. Rice was crucial. When he returned home, he would grow it lovingly and carefully.



"Okay. I'll doze first, Ryo. I doubt I'll fall into a deep sleep, but don't hesitate to wake me up if anything happens."

With that, Abel entered the hollow in the giant tree. Ryo would wake him up when the moon reached its zenith in the sky tonight.

Since I have time on my hands, I'll practice controlling my magic.

Ryo had plenty of magical energy to spare because all he'd done today was walk. No combat either. He didn't know how much of his magical supply he would recover when he took his turn to sleep, but it should at least be enough to replenish what he'd expend during his evening training...or so he assumed.

Before, he used to practice his magical control by constructing massive five-storied pagodas or Tokyo Skytrees of ice in his yard. Lately though, he'd taken a shine to creating the Tokyo Tower as small as he could make it.

As is the case with most things, it's extremely difficult to make a large object smaller. When it comes to miniaturization, it's only natural for various technologies to be required in the process, not to mention a careful attention

to detail is necessary from design to manufacturing.

This *attention to detail* is what magic, or more specifically its *control*, is all about.

Ryo needed a tremendous amount of magical energy to build an enormous Skytree. However, in terms of magical control, he thought he could train more efficiently by building tiny Tokyo Towers... That was how he felt anyway.

Regardless of the size of his creations, he enjoyed this training, so he was perfectly happy doing it.

He slowly and deliberately constructed a Tokyo Tower using strands of ice thinner than thread. Right hand, left hand, right foot, left foot. He used all four limbs simultaneously—using one at a time no longer put enough stress on his focus, so it didn't cut it as an exercise. After all, wasn't it important to create training regimens that were both fun *and* taxing?

While Ryo was building Tokyo Towers in the palms of his hands and on his toes, several monsters approached, lured by his scent. Abel had told him to wake him up if monsters appeared, but Ryo chose to let him sleep. They'd be walking a long distance tomorrow as well, so it was best for him to rest.

So Ryo selfishly decided to handle the situation himself. Having said that, the monsters weren't particularly strong, meaning he didn't even have to move from his spot to dispatch them. All he had to do was stab one through the head, from its right ear to its left, with a Water Jet—just like Abel had done earlier to the lesser boar with his sword. Of course, Ryo knew from his own experience how incredibly easy it was to pierce a monster's head through its ears. This also ensured a quiet kill, meaning he could avoid disturbing Abel's sleep. Ryo didn't even have to worry about disposing of the carcasses. He saved one lesser rabbit for the next morning's breakfast and left the rest of the carcasses for other monsters to scavenge throughout the night. Once they filled up their bellies, they certainly wouldn't come after Ryo and Abel. That's just how the forest was at night.

Later that night, Abel switched places with Ryo to keep watch. When he sat near the campfire, he noticed the carcass of a lesser rabbit. He could see where

the blood had drained from its ear.

A single thrust with his knife through its head, huh? Not bad... Wait. Hold on. He managed to take down a lesser rabbit in one shot? And with a knife, no less? I don't even think his skill is the issue anymore. It just doesn't make sense why he'd go after it in the first place. Wouldn't it have run away when he got close? If it didn't, does that mean Ryo is just that stealthy? I feel like he's a natural-born knife fighter instead of a magician. I suppose I didn't expect any less from someone living alone in this forest.

After tossing more dry kindling on the fire, Abel picked up the cup and pitcher Ryo had made out of ice.

And this is another thing I don't get. When the hell did he even make these? He told me to drink if I got thirsty while he slept, but...I'm worried about his supply of magic. Before we ate dinner, he sprayed us both down with water, saying the impromptu shower should work since they couldn't take a bath. That combined with the cup and pitcher should have consumed a lot of his magical energy... Except it doesn't seem like he's run out... Hmmm, I really don't get it.

He glanced at Ryo, curled up in his robe as he slept in the tree's hollow.

Yeah, I really don't think that robe is normal... Pretty sure no human made it, at least. That begs the question...what sort of teacher would give that as a farewell gift? "I need to let him know I'll be away for some time." When he told me that, I assumed he was talking about the spirit of someone who used to live with him, but...a spirit definitely didn't give him those gifts. So if the person isn't human, what the heck is it? A legendary creature like a dragon or something? I know it's not man-made. It can't be. Which means...a spirit is still a possibility... No. No way. Then again...

His endless questioning only created more questions, never any answers. It was fine, though. He didn't have anything else to do while he kept watch. A good way to pass the time.

Eventually, the eastern sky began to lighten and Ryo naturally woke up around then.

"Good morning, Abel."

“Yeah, morning.”

That night, not a single monster had attacked Abel.



After they ate the lesser rabbit Ryo had hunted during the night, the two of them set off toward the north. Of course, there were no roads within the dense forest. They could just barely make out game trails, but they were by no means easy to traverse.

They walked single file, with Abel in front and Ryo taking the rear. It had been Abel’s suggestion. Even if monsters attacked them out of nowhere, as the swordsman, he would be able to respond quickly and efficiently. That had been his argument.

Ryo hadn’t had any objections. He was happy to stay in the back creating tiny Tokyo Towers in the palms of both hands as they walked. If all he had to do was keep watch behind them, he was just fine with the prospect. Leading their duo would mean focusing his attention ahead *and* behind, which would only tire him faster.

That day, monsters sporadically attacked them, but they consisted of only the weak ones like lesser rabbits, lesser boars, and lesser snakes.

“Ryo, we’ll leave the carcasses where they are. Once it gets closer to midday, we can decide which ones to keep for lunch.”

“Got it.”

Magic stones could also be extracted from near the hearts of these monsters. Alchemists used them in their work, but magic stones harvested from weak monsters with “lesser” in their names were of little use, due to their small size and poor quality. So, adventurers never bothered collecting magic stones from the lesser monsters. Nobody bought them, so gathering them was a complete waste.

It was another story entirely for greater monsters, whose magic stones could be sold for a pretty sum indeed. However, none of these greater monsters crossed Ryo and Abel’s path through the forest.

Abel was completely in charge of combat. Ryo stayed behind him, watching his movements. Yesterday, for the first time, he learned about the existence of Combat Skills. The very idea fascinated him tremendously. Naturally, he couldn't use them, but he felt like the Dullahan hadn't used any either during their swordsmanship training... Although it was definitely possible his eyes just weren't good enough to pick up on them...

He'd noticed that the moment Abel activated a Combat Skill, part of his body shone white. Then there were the effects of the skills: Sidestep increased the offensive power of his legs when he used it to dodge to the side while Total Impalement strengthened his grip and upper body.

In the twenty years Ryo had spent crossing swords with the Dullahan, not once had his master's body glowed in a similar fashion. The only conclusion he could now draw was that the Dullahan hadn't ever used any Combat Skills. If his teacher had attained such a high level of strength without them, that was just fine. He saw no problem there. Still, he couldn't help obsessing over techniques he'd just seen for the first time.

Besides, the fact that Abel could turn the tables in just one move by saying "*Combat Skill: XXXX*" was...insanely cool! It basically riled up Ryo's main character syndrome.

Abel, on the other hand, had naturally noticed the way Ryo's intense gaze practically devoured him while he was fighting.

Is he interested in how swordsmen fight? Abel thought. *I guess I shouldn't be too surprised, since swordsmanship incorporates some aspects of knife fighting...*

Abel was used to being stared at, so he thought nothing of Ryo's curiosity. He'd been called a prodigy with the sword since childhood. He had learned magic too, but it had never *felt* right, which only made him fall in love with the sword even more. He had spent all his time practicing his sword skills from morning till night. He'd also learned various Combat Skills.

As his father's second son, there was no need for him to take over as head of the family. He took advantage of this fortune of birth and became an adventurer as soon as he reached the age of majority—eighteen. Eight years

later, he was now a well-known B-rank adventurer.

Near lunchtime, Ryo and Abel found themselves in one of the small clearings scattered throughout the dense forest. The one-eyed assassin hawk had launched a surprise attack on Ryo in one such clearing some time ago...

Klink.

Abel had unsheathed his sword and swung it down in front of him, repelling something with the blade. Something invisible...

“An assassin hawk!” Ryo shouted.

When Abel looked up, he saw a massive hawk staring down at them as it beat its wings in midair.

“That attack was air magic,” Ryo said, running to stand beside Abel.

“An assassin hawk, huh? Well, this isn’t good. If it was me and my party, we’d run into the forest and try to escape. What do you think?”

“Unfortunately, that’s not an option. There’s a normal boar behind us and a monster I’ve never encountered in the forest ahead of us.”

“Seriously? When did they even get the jump on us? Did we walk into a trap?”

Ryo thought about it for a bit then shook his head. “No, I think this is just a coincidence. Although it’s likely this clearing is an assassin hawk hunting ground.”

Assassin hawks clearly knew that they could use their advantages more effectively in an open clearing like this. Ryo could attest to this from his own experience with the one-eyed monster.

“So what do we do now?” Abel asked.

“For now, let’s just ignore the monster in the forest ahead of us. There’s a good chance they won’t show up if we keep the fight here.”

“Sounds like a plan. Which means beating the assassin hawk *and* normal boar, huh?” Abel said, sighing at the danger both opponents together posed.

“I’ll handle the assassin hawk while you take care of the normal boar, Abel.”

Ryo's words surprised Abel. Even a swordsman like him would die if he got careless against an assassin hawk's air slash and rush attacks.

"Wait, but..." Abel began.

"I imagine it'd be difficult for a swordsman to contend with an aerial monster like an assassin hawk. Defense, as a water magician, is fortunately my specialty. We can prepare the poultry and boar meat however we'd like for lunch today," Ryo added with a cheerful smile.

With that declaration, Ryo faced the assassin hawk.

"Ugh...fine," Abel replied. "I'm rushing back here the second I take down the normal boar, so don't you dare die."

Then Abel turned and ran off.

"And you should keep a cool head, Abel, or you'll hurt yourself."

He heard Ryo loud and clear.

Usually, when Abel and his party faced off against a normal boar, their tank, Warren, would interrupt the monster's charge while he and Lyn, their air magician, would deal the killing blow with a combination of his sword and her attack magic.

But Warren wasn't here right now and the longer Abel took to dispatch the boar, the higher the chances were that Ryo could be killed by the assassin hawk.

"I'll have to end this as quickly as I can."

Soon after, Abel caught sight of the normal boar. "I'm amazed Ryo sensed this monster from so far away. No, that doesn't matter right now. I'm dead if I don't focus."

Upon seeing the human headed its way, the normal boar generated two small rocks and fired them at Abel.

"No way I'm getting hit. *Sword Skill: Perfect Shadow.*"

Sword Skill: Perfect Shadow was one of the most difficult techniques for a swordsman to master. This technique allowed the user to dodge incoming long-

range attacks, including magical ones, with minimum movement. Abel used the skill while sprinting, preserving his momentum while simultaneously evading the barrage of rocks.

The normal boar dropped its head.

Abel knew what that meant. A boar-type creature lowering its head signaled its intention to charge. Normally, he would wait and avoid the charge right before impact by using Combat Skill: Sidestep. Since time was of the essence at the moment, he continued his own headlong rush toward the normal boar.

It would be extremely difficult to get the timing right.

“I don’t have a choice. I’ll give up on Sidestep.”

As he was muttering to himself, the normal bear suddenly charged forward at a speed unmatched by a lesser boar.

“Sword Skill: Zero Turn.”

As soon as they met, Abel dodged the enemy’s attack by rotating his right leg forty-five degrees. He used the momentum of his turn to drive his sword into the enemy’s left side. The weapon flashed as it pierced right through the normal boar’s left ear.

“Giiii.”

As the boar dropped to the ground and its agonized death throes echoed throughout the forest, Abel fell on one knee. No matter how much of a prodigy he was with the sword, executing those moves back-to-back placed a heavy burden on him.

He didn’t have time to rest here though. Ryo was fighting the assassin hawk back in the clearing.

Abel made himself stand through sheer force of will. He took a deep breath, and then once he had his breathing under control, he turned around and sprinted back toward Ryo.

Abel was much slower in the wake of his fight. Even so, he ran as fast as he could. Once he got back to the clearing, he saw...

Ryo cutting the assassin hawk's neck to drain its carcass of blood.

"Oh, hi, Abel. Welcome back."

"Uh... Yeah, thanks... You took it down...?"

"Yup, I did. I was just about to start the bloodletting. You remember that monster ahead of us that I mentioned? They retreated deeper into the forest."

At those words, Abel fell to his knees.

"Huh? Abel? What's wrong? Are you hurt?" Ryo asked, panicked.

"No, I'm fine. Not a single scratch," Abel said. "Just a bit tired."

Abel was just glad they were both all right...and he decided to leave it at that.



"All right, we're going to have bandit's fried poultry and roasted boar cheek for lunch," Abel said. Both meat dishes.

"Abel, black pepper helps with recovery, so don't hold back on adding it."

"G-Got it."

Ryo smacked his lips, relishing his first poultry dish in some time. Compared to rabbit-and boar-type monsters, the chances of running into bird-types were fairly low. Abel had a lot he wanted to say, but adventurers were the sort who prioritized food when it was presented to them, since that was an essential skill for them to have. So the first thing he did was focus on devouring his meal.

For some time, only the sounds of their chewing reverberated in the clearing.

Abel had been exhausted after using two Sword Skills in rapid succession, but he felt much better after they finished eating. The two of them downed the water Ryo had produced then exhaled in satisfaction.

"If it was dusk already, I'd suggest we just set up camp right here," Abel said. "That's how good I feel right now."

Ryo smiled ruefully. "Don't you want to meet up with your friends as quickly as possible, Abel?"

"Yeah, but I have a feeling it'll take us a few weeks since we don't exactly

know the way. So there isn't much point in rushing."

"Hm, you're right. We can't even make an educated guess on how long the journey will be. Having said that, we still have enough daylight to walk for a few more hours, so let's get going," Ryo said, standing.

"Guess I have no choice, huh?"

Abel stood.

"You need to be more proactive, Abel. I mean, the whole point of this journey is to get you back to your friends..."

Later, as they walked in their usual formation—Abel in the front, Ryo in the rear—the swordsman called out to Ryo. "Hey! I wanted to discuss the battle earlier..."

Ryo stuck incredibly close to Abel. The forest was so densely wooded that they could easily lose one another if they strayed too far.

"Sure, what is it?" Ryo asked.

"How did you fend off the assassin hawk's attacks? Its rush and invisible air magic attacks are no joke. It also moves so fast it's impossible to react using sight alone," Abel explained, still watching the forest ahead of them.

"I used a water magic spell called 'Ice Wall.' It's a barrier made of ice."

"Whoa, magic like that actually exists?"

"Abel, please turn around and face me."

When Abel turned, he found nothing particularly out of the ordinary. Ryo stood just in front of him, within touching distance. Wait, something wasn't quite right...

"Hm? What is this?" Abel said, squinting at the transparent wall. He rapped his knuckles against it.

Knock. Knock.

"It's so clear."

"Yup. Hard to notice, right?" Ryo said.

I get it now. The assassin hawk killed itself by crashing into this transparent wall, huh?

With that thought in mind, Abel continued speaking.

“Water magic is amazing, huh? I’m sorry to say, but there isn’t a single water magician among the magicians I know, which is why I don’t know much about them.”

He knew quite a few fire, air, earth, and light magicians, but he had no water or dark magician acquaintances. Dark magic itself was incredibly unique, so there were hardly any of such magicians in the Central Provinces. It was tough to find them even if you scoured the entire region. As for water...

“That damn old man told me water magicians don’t do well in combat, but it’s obvious you’re pretty good at it. I’m gonna give him a piece of my mind next time I see him.”

“Hm? What was that, Abel?”

“Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself. Don’t worry about it.”

Ryo couldn’t stop thinking about the monster he had sensed ahead of the clearing when he was fighting the assassin hawk. At the very least, he knew it was a type he’d never encountered before. Once he and the assassin hawk started fighting, it left without ever making an appearance. He’d sensed the monster hadn’t been all that big. They were now traversing the area where Ryo had thought the monster had been to confirm his suspicions. He saw no signs of damage like felled trees. If the monster *had* been large, it would have surely knocked over trees while passing through given how dense this forest was.

I suppose it’s only natural I’d obsess over it.

If it’s pointless to think about, then don’t think about it. Another one of Ryo’s strong points.



“I’ve been hearing something for a while now,” Abel whispered.

Ryo nodded.

They walked for a while longer, then the forest gave way to a marsh. There,

they found living things that weren't human, boars, or even rabbits.

The bipeds had lizard-like faces and measured two meters tall. Something that looked like scales covered their bodies. Thin tails grew out of their backs. They clutched white spears that stood as tall as them in their hands...

"Lizardfolk..." Abel murmured, frowning. Lizardfolk lived in groups, meaning a village or settlement of lizard people most likely existed deeper in the marsh.

"Lizardfolk... Monsters who inhabit wetlands in groups," Ryo said. "Once they mature, they shed their tails, which they then use as spears. They can't communicate with humans, so the lizardfolk will attack humans on sight. Human organs are one of their favorite foods."

Abel stared at Ryo in surprise. "You know a lot about them, huh? Did you fight with them or something?"

"No, nothing like that," Ryo replied, shaking his head. "I just read the entry on them in one of the books I had at home, *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition*."

"Makes sense. Lizardfolk don't use magic, but they're pretty dangerous in their habitat, the marshes. Plus, they live in groups, so there's definitely a lot of them. We'll detour around here."

Of course, Ryo had no objections. They both turned south, which also happened to be downwind.

After walking quite a long distance, they left the wetlands behind and turned north again. Though they frankly had no clue how big the marsh actually was, they'd both agreed that it was best to get as far away from it as they possibly could.

But...their plan promptly fell to pieces.

"Abel, seems the lizardfolk have noticed us."

"Seriously?" Abel replied. They were once again within the dense forest, which meant the lizardfolk shouldn't pose as much of a threat. "Think we should intercept them here?"

“Don’t worry about me and fight as you normally would, okay?”

“G-Got it. Don’t you overdo it either. Just do your best with your wall from earlier.”

Having gotten to know him, Abel now felt like Ryo could handle himself just fine.

Of course he can, considering he lived alone in the forest. Right, then. All I have to do is keep the ones in front of me occupied so they can’t get around me!

While those thoughts ran through his head, the lizardfolk’s vanguard appeared.

“I don’t know how many the enemy has on its side, so I’ll save up my Combat Skills for now.”

Abel charged forth and mowed down the first lizardfolk with a horizontal slash of his blade that killed his foe instantaneously. Then he turned to his right and rushed toward a second creature, then a third, and like that Abel ran through the ranks of the lizardfolk, refusing to give them a chance to surround him. With the smallest movements, he cut each one of them down.

He was an outstanding swordsman even without the use of Combat Skills.

Abel is incredible, Ryo thought. There’s no hesitation at all in him. He clearly isn’t self-taught either. Every single move he makes is refined, proof of the training he underwent since he was a child...

Ryo was honestly impressed. A first-rate swordsman who had forged himself diligently through his own efforts lay before his very eyes. However, even Abel, as skilled as he was, missed the two lizardfolk that slipped past him and headed directly for Ryo.

“I’m fine!” Ryo shouted.

Abel spared his companion a quick glance before turning back to finish off the lizardfolk around him.

“Icicle Lance 2,” Ryo shouted.

Two ice lances shot forth from Ryo’s hands and unerringly pierced through the monsters’ foreheads.

“I feel like I haven’t used that spell in a while.”

Just as they were about to wrap things up with the lizardfolk, something entirely different approached.

“Abel, something big is about to join the lizardfolk.”

“What?” Even as Abel questioned Ryo, his killing hand didn’t rest. He remained focused on the lizardfolk ahead. The big something approaching them was...

“A lizard king! Damn it, why now of all times?! Go back and sleep in your colony!”

Only one lizard king existed in each lizardfolk settlement. Though the lizard king was a higher order of lizardfolk, it wasn’t a true evolution. A lizard king, like a king or chieftain in human terms, merely served as the leader of its colony of lizardfolk—with the important caveat that only the largest and most highly skilled fighters could become lizard kings.

“Four lizardfolk and a king, huh? Well, this is kind of a pain.”

“Abel, you handle the king. I’ll take down the others with my magic.”

“But, Ryo, you don’t have a staff...”

“Icicle Lance 4.”

Just like the two ice lances a few moments ago, these four also found their marks through each of the remaining lizardfolk’s foreheads.

“You’re joking,” Abel said, stunned.

“I...just saw him launch four ice lances, right...? But I’m pretty sure I remember Lyn telling me that rapid-fire magic doesn’t exist... Oh, wait, maybe it does in water magic? Because it’s technically not rapid-fire? Wait, now I’m even more confused.”

“Abel, the lizard king is coming.”

Ryo’s words snapped Abel back to reality.

“Okay, I’ll think about this later. First things first: take down the lizard king.”

Since the fight was one-on-one and didn't take place in a marsh, even a lizard king was no match for Abel.

It was hard to remain in their current location given the mountain of lizardfolk corpses now littering the ground, so they struck out toward the north and quenched their thirst on the way.

"Water, spill forth. Cup, arise," Ryo said, thinking it would be cool to chant the spell in front of Abel.

Abel scrutinized Ryo's creation while simultaneously walking and drinking water. "Hey, Ryo."

"What's the matter, Abel?"

"You know last night when you poured water into the pitcher? Wasn't the spell 'Water, be born'?"

"Uhhh..." Ryo unintentionally shifted his gaze from Abel's. "W-Was it? Are you sure you weren't imagining it, Abel?"

With Ryo behaving so suspiciously, nothing he said would sound convincing.

"Well, whatever," Abel said. "What was with those ice spears earlier then?"

"What do you mean 'what'... It's just like the spell name says. They're Icicle Lances constructed from water magic."

"No, let me be clearer. You remember the ones that flew toward the remaining four lizardfolk?"

"Yes, they certainly did fly. That's just how the magic works. So...I don't really have an answer for you."

Abel considered how to phrase his question, then decided instead to tell Ryo the facts he knew. "So, one of my friends is an air magician, and according to her, the way magic works is one chant equals one cast. But you made *four* Icicle Lances fly just now, right? I think that's strange."

"I can't comment on how things work for air magicians, but what you saw is perfectly normal for a water magician," Ryo said, perfectly confident. "No

problem whatsoever.”

“Oh. So that’s how it is...”

Confronted by Ryo’s supremely confident expression, Abel couldn’t think of anything else to say.

They came to a small clearing in the forest after walking thirty minutes from the location of the lizardfolk massacre. Past experience had taught Ryo that assassin hawks were likely to show up in places like these, but...when none appeared after waiting for a while, they decided to make camp here.

“About dinner... I’m guessing lizardfolk aren’t particularly delicious?” Ryo asked.

“Yeah, their flesh is insanely disgusting. That’s why I left all those carcasses behind.”

“I thought as much... Then I’ll go hunt something. Will you gather kindling and start a fire, Abel?”

Abel readily accepted Ryo’s suggestion because he no longer had even an ounce of doubt about Ryo’s magical prowess. He also acknowledged that magicians were much more suited to this sort of hunting than swordsmen.

“Got it. Go rustle up that something for us,” Abel said, beginning to gather dead branches to use as kindling while Ryo pushed his way a little deeper into the forest.

Haaa... I’m just going to stick to “Water, spill forth” from now on, Ryo thought inconsequentially to himself.

Ryo didn’t have much trouble finding a normal rabbit, which he killed with Water Jet. Then he discovered a loquat tree.

“Oooh, now we can add dessert to tonight’s menu.”

He went back to the campsite with his arms laden with normal rabbit and loquats. Abel had just come back as well with his supply of dead branches.

“Abel, we have fruits for dessert tonight.”

“Oh, yeah? Huh... I’ve never seen those fruits...”

“Really? I guess the people in this country don’t eat these, hm? We call these ‘biwa’ where I come from. They’re also known as ‘loquats.’”

“First time I’m hearing that name too. They smell sweet. Can’t wait to try some.”

Abel set down his armload of kindling and set about starting a fire.

“Pitcher, arise. Cup, arise. Water, spill forth.”

Ryo handed the cup of water to Abel as he tended to the fire.

“Did you hear the spell, Abel? ‘Water, spill forth.’ You heard it, right? That’s the correct one.”

“Huh? I don’t know what we’re talking about...”

“The spell to make water. ‘Water, spill forth.’ It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think? Memorable?”

“Uh, sure...”

Ryo had learned the art of applying pressure to get his way.

Wall

The next day, the two of them continued proceeding north without incident—until lunchtime, at least.

“A...wall, huh?” Abel said.

“That is indeed...a wall.”

A range of boulders stretching from east to west, with no apparent break, loomed roughly hundred feet above them. “Wall” was the only way to describe the obstacle hindering their route forward.

“Yeah, there’s no way we can climb this.”

“The top slopes away in a reverse bank angle, so I definitely won’t be able to make the climb.”

A reverse bank angle occurs when an overhang juts out at a ninety-degree angle toward the viewer from the vertical rock face. Surmounting the overhang with your bare hands would require advanced rock-climbing skills.

“Ugh! If I were an air magician, I could climb over it so easily!” Ryo said.

“I doubt that. Pretty sure even air magic would be useless in this situation.”

Abel tried imagining Rin, his party’s air magician, climbing the wall before them. *Yeah, definitely impossible.*

“Looks like we’ll have to go either east or west to find a way out.”

“True, but...I’m getting a bad feeling regardless of the direction we choose...” Ryo said, though he didn’t really have a reason for this feeling.

Abel took out a single copper coin from his coin purse. “Then how ’bout we let a coin toss decide?”

“Heads, we go east. Tails, west.”

With that, he used his thumb to flip the coin into the air. He snatched it as it fell and opened his palm.

“Heads. East it is.”

“Understood. Let’s get going then.”

Though Ryo nodded, his eyes remained glued to the coin in Abel’s left hand.

“This coin caught your eye, huh? Something wrong with it?”

“No. It’s just my first time seeing money...”

Indeed it was Ryo’s first time seeing money here on Phi. He had been living alone since his reincarnation, so there had been no opportunities to interact with currency or even a need for it.

“Ah, gotcha...”

Abel felt sorry for him because he thought poverty was the reason Ryo had never seen money. His misunderstanding about Ryo’s supposed poverty came from the clothing—loincloth and sandals only—Ryo had been wearing when they first met.

“Abel, can I take a closer look at it?”

He gave Ryo the copper coin, the least valuable of the royal currency. The basic unit of currency used in the Central Provinces was the florin. Of course, each country issued its own money, but the florin was the common monetary unit. There used to be a variety of currency standards before the adoption of the florin. Currently, one florin equaled one copper coin and florins were used in all manner of trade and transactions. Abel explained all this to Ryo.

So it’s like the ducat, which was the common unit of currency used in Europe from the Middle Ages to the 19th century.

Ryo readily accepted Abel’s explanation with that interpretation. The obverse side of the copper coin depicted a man’s face in profile while the reverse showed an engraving of some kind of flower.

“That’s a copper florin from the country I live in, the Kingdom of Knightley.”

“Knightley! Sounds so cool!”

He remembered an actress bearing that name back on Earth. She was incredibly beautiful! Ryo became even more excited.

“R-Right. The man’s profile on the front is the Kingdom’s current king, His Majesty Stafford IV. On the other side is the royal family’s flower, the lily.”

“Stafford Knightley... A perfect name for a protagonist! So cool!”

“Well, he has a bunch of middle names too, so I’m not really sure about the cool factor...”

Ryo’s ears didn’t register Abel’s mumbled words at all. Main Character Syndrome afflicts men no matter how old they are. Although...it might be a tad disrespectful to His Majesty to lump his name into the concept.

Ryo still couldn’t contain his enthusiasm at how awesome the Kingdom of Knightley’s name was.

This was the country where Abel lived. The country the two of them were heading toward.

As for Abel, he was, of course, happy about creating a good impression of his country. It was inevitable, however, that Abel’s impression of Ryo took a bit of a hit given the young man’s behavior. Abel now found him a bit pathetic.

Ryo stared at the coin in delight while following the rock wall east. Abel walked next to him.

“Oh, right, Abel. You said the florin is the standard unit of currency in the Central Provinces. Is the Kingdom of Knightley one of the nations in this coalition?”

“Yeah, one of three major powers actually,” Abel replied, nodding emphatically.

“Three major powers... What are the other two?”

“The Debuhi Empire and the Handalieu Federation.”

“Debuhi...” Ryo murmured, scowling.

“Hm? Did you have a bad experience with the Empire or something?”

Ryo’s scowl deepened. “No, the name is just incredibly uncool...”

“R-Riight... So names are important to you, huh, Ryo...”

Abel stared at Ryo, his eyes conveying clear dismay over his new behavior.

Ryo, oblivious, launched into an impassioned speech.

“A country’s name is important to its citizens and I’ll die on that hill! I certainly wouldn’t want to tell anyone I’m from the Fat Pig Empire... Wait, I just had a horrible thought... What if...the emperor’s name is Something Something Debuhi and he turns out to be a plump man...”

Abel shook his head. “No, the imperial family’s surname is Bornemisza. House Bornemisza. The current emperor is His Imperial Majesty Rupert Vi of House Bornemisza. He is over fifty years old, but he doesn’t have an ounce of excess flab on him. His body is still as honed as steel.”

“Then why doesn’t he change his country’s name?!” Ryo screamed.

He wasn’t screaming for the sake of his own aesthetic sense. No, he screamed for the citizens forced to bear such a devastating name for their country. He couldn’t deal with Debuhi... Maybe an anagram would work... No, Hidebu wasn’t any better... There were no other options, huh...



They continued following the wall east. Roughly two hours after they started in this direction, the rock wall was gradually growing shorter.

“I’m glad the height is decreasing, but we still can’t climb it, hm?”

“Yeah, it’d be way too hard. There’s no rush though. I’m sure we’ll find a way past if we just keep going like this.”

The rock wall measured only thirty meters high now, but this was not easily scalable.

It feels like it’s been gouged by a giant laser or something. I wonder if a light magician could use magic like that? Ryo thought.

There was no one to answer the question in his mind. Even if he had released it from the confines of his mind, no one would have been able to answer it.

They continued walking for another hour then the rock wall abruptly disappeared.

“Finally. It’s about damn time.”

“Oh, wow. It looks like there’s a meadow instead of a forest beyond,” Ryo said.

Aside from one-meter-high clusters of boulders here and there, a meadow stretched as far as their eyes could see, just like Ryo said. The change in scenery was quite jarring since they’d been traveling through the dense forest until running smack into the rock wall.

“I can see pretty far, but...not much point in speculating needlessly. Only choice we have is to keep going north, huh?”

“Then north is where we go, Abel.”

About three minutes into their walk in the meadow, Ryo heard a *klink*. Still acting as their vanguard, Abel drew out his sword and slashed at something that sped toward them through the air.

“A...rock?” he muttered.

Whatever threw the first rock quickly launched a successive salvo of thumb-sized stones at Abel. He either dodged them or deflected them aside using his sword, all the while straining to get a closer look at the enemy. The projectiles appeared to be coming from a boulder two meters ahead.

“*Ice Wall*,” Ryo said, creating a barrier to shield Abel.

Now that he no longer had to worry about the rocks, Abel squinted at their opponent.

“Ryo, this is bad. Pretty sure we’re in a rock golem nest.”

“I didn’t know golems even had nests,” Ryo said, running to stand next to Abel.

“Places where golems occur en masse are called nests. But this is my first time actually seeing one for myself.”

It turns out knowing about something isn’t always enough to help you.

“That boulder-like thing is a rock golem?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“I thought...golems are supposed to have arms and legs like people...”

Ryo’s knowledge was Earth-based. Though there was no historical evidence of actual golems on Earth, they originated in Jewish folklore as moving clay dolls. Well, given how many myths and traditions there are on Earth that entail instilling souls into soil or transforming soil into the likeness of human beings, perhaps golems had in fact existed on Earth at some point...

“Yeah, golems like those exist when they’re powered by alchemy. I’ve heard of a country in the west with a golem army. Naturally occurring golems supposedly form in a variety of shapes...so this particular golem is a boulder.”

As soon as the last words left Abel’s mouth, he whipped around and deflected a rock with his sword.

Klink.

Another rock flew toward them from behind.

“Ice Wall.”

Ryo created an Ice Wall behind them too.

“I just realized we passed boulders like this one on the way here. Do you think they’ve woken up?” Ryo said.

“They lured us in so they could pull off a pincer attack, huh? Pretty smart for clods.”

“Can you defeat a golem with your sword?”

By the way, *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition* had no entries on golem-type monsters, so Ryo knew nothing whatsoever about them.

“I’ve never gone up against one, so I don’t know.”

“Right, of course.”

“But I guess this might be a good experience too. I’ll get close to one and attack it. Ryo, you stay here.”

With those words, Abel slipped out from behind the Ice Wall in front of him and ran toward the rock golem approaching him from his right. Though the rock golem appeared to be nothing but a boulder, it was closing the distance

between them a little at a time.

A normal water jet wouldn't be able to cut through a boulder. But an abrasive jet could... I still can't use mine instantly, so...I'll just have to test it out later.

As those thoughts ran through Ryo's mind, Abel drew near the rock golem and prepared to slash it.

"Combat Skill: Total Impalement," he said, lunging.

Krsh.

Abel's magic sword, his partner in adventuring, sliced into the rock golem. Empowered by his Combat Skill, his blade pierced horizontally straight through its body and to the other side. Any normal creature would have died at this point, but...then the cut on the golem's body began repairing itself.

"Shit!"

Abel kicked the rock golem down as it mended itself, hoping to buy himself time to retreat back to the Ice Wall. The rock golem, however, seemed unable to fire rocks while lying on the ground, so Abel made it back to the safety of the Ice Wall.

"That didn't work," Abel said. "It repairs itself."

"Yes, I saw. Including the one you just attacked, there are seven active golems in front of us and five behind us."

"A total of 12, huh... The odds of us making a break for it aren't good."

"I agree, escape is impossible at the moment. Hm, well, would you mind if I test an attack out?" Ryo asked, looking up at the sky.

"Yeah, go for it. I'm all out of ideas."

"Here I go then. *10-layer Ice Wall.*"

Upon chanting the spell, Ryo created an Ice Wall parallel to the ground forty meters above the golems. When it fell a moment later, it crashed into the ground with a deafening roar, blasting soil and grass several meters into the air.

Ryo and Abel suffered no injuries while under the protection of the defensive Ice Wall, but the area around where the 10-layer Ice Wall crashed was an

unmitigated disaster. Naturally, there was no trace of the two rock golems that had been standing underneath the wall when it fell.

“Now that’s what I’d call a weapon of *mass* destruction! Scary stuff, huh?”

Ryo hadn’t done anything special. He’d simply created an Ice Wall in midair and dropped it onto the ground. The reason he went with the 10-layer version was because he thought the weight would do some serious damage...

Considering his penchant for creating Icicle Lances midair too, maybe he just enjoyed watching things fall from high in the air. Whatever the case, he was perfectly fine with the situation.

On the other hand, a dumbfounded Abel remained motionless. It took him five seconds to function again.

“R-Ryo...what the hell was that?”

“Look. I just created an Ice Wall like the one in front of our eyes in the air and let it fall. That’s it. Super straightforward, but effective, don’t you think?” Ryo said, trying to reassure Abel with a cheerful smile—though he would have preferred to look cool as a cucumber after his perfect execution of his plan. The weapon of mass destruction was much more effective than he had predicted.

“Now that I got rid of two of them, I’ll take down the rest using the same method.”

With that, he began casting the 10-layer Ice Wall spell in rapid succession, smashing the rock golems with each wall as they crashed to the ground. While doing so, he noticed that only the rock golem Abel had kicked down earlier had since stopped moving.

“All right, Abel, eleven defeated.”

“Eleven? Hm? Weren’t there twelve?”

“Yes. The one you attacked first hasn’t moved since you kicked it down.”

Ryo pointed at the creature in question.

“Huh...you’re right.”

Ryo dispelled the defensive Ice Wall so the two of them could approach the

downed rock golem. Abel poked it a few times with the tip of his sword, but there was absolutely no response.

“I wonder why it isn’t moving...” Abel said.

“I’m pretty sure your powerful kick shut it down. Abel, you should quit being a swordsman and become a grappler instead!”

“What’s a ‘grappler’? Also, I don’t think my kick is all that powerful either.”

Abel had been less concerned with inflicting damage than he had been with knocking the golem over. The way he pushed it down with the sole of his foot would be...the best description would be a yakuza kick in pro-wrestling terms. If his opponent had been a human, the kick would have hurt a lot, especially since it struck the solar plexus, but it couldn’t have harmed the golem all that much.

“Maybe there’s something...” Ryo said, squatting. He gingerly began inspecting the lower part of the rock golem, the one touching the ground. He theorized that something in the ground supplied the golem with energy and that only the lower part of the golem was able to receive it.

His knowledge of wireless charging for smartphones and other devices had inspired the thought. Installing that technology in the floors or walls of a house would negate the need for electrical outlets... He’d always had that thought back when he still lived on Earth, so seeing the rock golem stop moving after it was flipped over reminded him of the phenomenon.

Turns out...he’d been right about something being inside the golem.

“Abel, take a look,” Ryo said, pointing.

“Is that a...magic stone?”

The slightest sliver of a yellow magic stone peeked out from the bottom of the golem’s body.

“Should we try to dig it out of the golem?” Ryo asked.

“Yeah. These monsters are damn tough, but I think Total Impalement should work...”

“It’s fine. I can handle it. It’ll take a while, but I have the perfect water magic technique for the task. *Abrasive Jet*.”

Now that they were no longer pressed for time, the same Abrasive Jet he had decided against using earlier would be perfect for extracting the stone. He didn't know how big the buried magic stone was, so he carefully shaved away the rock around it a little at a time. After five minutes, he succeeded in pulling out the yellow magic stone. It was big enough to cover his entire palm.

"Wow. This...is pretty large."

It surprised even Abel, who until now had retrieved countless magic stones from the countless monsters he'd destroyed.

The value of a magic stone is determined by size, color, and the depth of the shade. The bigger the stone, the more value it has. In general, stronger monsters possess larger magic stones. Meanwhile, elemental attributes determine the color of the stone. For example, a fire-attributed magic stone is red and so on... The depth of the shade depends on the monster's life span and its accumulated experiences. The darker the shade, the more valuable the stone.

"Definitely the biggest I've personally seen. The yellow color means it's earth-attributed. I'm surprised by how dark the shade is too. The golem must have been here a long time, defeating any monsters that infiltrated," Abel said, marveling at the golem's stone.

"Oooh, the spoils of battle. You can hold on to it, Abel."

"Me?"

"That's right. I don't really have any pockets."

"R-Right, makes sense."

Ryo surveyed the areas where he'd crushed the rock golems for any viable pieces of magic stones. Unfortunately for them, the rocks had been crushed to tiny pieces.

"Well, this method was a failure," Ryo said, his shoulders slumping in disappointment.

"Nah, I wouldn't say that. If you hadn't done 'em in, we'd be done for... Not like you had any other choice to survive. Besides, it's not like you even knew the

magic stones could be harvested.”

“All true. What did that rich guy love saying? Oh, yeah. ‘Survive first and make money afterward,’” Ryo said, recalling the words of the man who received billions of yen in compensation every year, the same one responsible for destroying the Bank of England. Then he nodded emphatically.

“I see a bunch of them a bit farther ahead. They’re not moving yet, so what do you wanna do?”

Only the rock golems in the immediate area had attacked them. Clusters of boulders still remained a ways off to the west.

“Oh, you’re right... Honestly, I’m afraid of stirring up a hornet’s nest here, so I’d rather not make the first move if we can avoid it. Not to mention you can’t keep carrying magic stones forever in your pockets, Abel.”

“The issue of my pockets aside, I do agree about not biting off more than we can chew. In that case, let’s get a move on and head north.”

They started walking in that direction.

“Don’t you think it’s crazy we had no idea about this rock golem nest on top of the wall the whole time we were following it?”

“It makes sense location-wise, but I’m not sure how they even wound up here.”

“Maybe there’s some sort of special magic leaking from the ground...? Or maybe someone set a trap?” Ryo said, speaking as if he were a great detective on the case.

“Someone, huh... I doubt it. This definitely doesn’t seem like a place people would live.”

Ryo’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “Except we’re not limited to just people, are we?”

“What? You mean elves or dwarves?”

“Ha,” Ryo said, glancing pointedly at Abel, as if he’d just scored a point with his argument. Then he raised his hands in a “there’s no helping you” gesture and shrugged in exasperation.

“Hey, don’t look at me like I’m a disappointment.”

“No, I didn’t mean anything humanoid. More like akuma or something.”

“A-ku-ma... What’s that?”

“Huh? Huuuh?”

At the end of *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition*, Fake Michael had included an appendix titled “Special Compilation.” It contained two entries—one on dragons, the other on akuma. Since it had been deliberately handwritten into the volume, Ryo had assumed the existence of these two creatures was common knowledge for the people of Phi. Moreover, Abel always seemed knowledgeable when he’d explained various things to him about the Central Provinces. Based on that, Ryo thought his companion would be much more learned than the average person in this world.

But Abel had just said he didn’t know what an akuma was...

“Abel,” Ryo asked, “do you know about dragons?”

“Course I do. I’ve never seen one, but I know they’re beyond legendary.”

Ryo decided not to tell him dragons actually existed. For whatever reason, he felt like it was the right thing to do.

“Then have you heard of devils or demons?”

“Devils, yeah. They’re the antagonists of gods and angels.”

Ah ha. So akuma are known as devils here.

Except something about this reasoning felt a little off to Ryo. If that were the case, why hadn’t Fake Michael just written “Devil” for the entry instead of “Akuma”? Plus, the description had explicitly said, “Not...fallen angels. Their origins are unknown.”

Hm, something is definitely wrong here. No point obsessing about it though.

“So, Ryo, you think a devil set these rock golems here as a trap?”

“I mean, it’s a possibility, right? We can’t be absolutely positive one didn’t.” Naturally, nothing he said had any basis in facts. “Oh, Abel, didn’t you mention elves and dwarves?”

“Yeah, I did. ’Cause some jerk of a water magician was doing his damndest to make fun of me,” Abel replied, glaring at Ryo.

“Abel, you can’t become an outstanding swordsman if you let yourself get stuck on little things like that.”

“You’re the last person I wanna hear that from!”

After surviving harrowing ordeals time and time again, the two of them had essentially become brothers in arms. This was a good thing for the two traveling companions.

“Anyway, please tell me more about elves and dwarves and such.”

Clearly, Abel’s anger didn’t stop Ryo one bit from indulging his own curiosity.

“Grr... You can see dwarves pretty often in settlements. After all’s said and done, most of them are very good blacksmiths. One out of three expert blacksmiths are dwarves. There’s also a fair few dwarf adventurers. They usually act as vanguards because of their physical strength.”

“I see. Just like how I imagined them.”

“That’s some imagination you got there... The elf population is incredibly small. You’ll hardly ever see one in a town or city. In Lune, the city me and my party use as our base of operations, there was one elf adventurer, but I’m pretty sure there aren’t any others there. A vast majority of them build their settlements in the forests and generally never leave. In the Kingdom of Knightley, they inhabit the forests in the western part of the country.”

“I see. Also like how I imagined them.”

“Seriously, what is with your imagination?!” Abel asked, half angry and half amazed.

Once they bypassed the rock golem nest, the two of them walked quite a distance. Unlike the dense forest they had trekked through earlier, the plains naturally allowed them to pick up their pace. They were especially motivated to get away from the dangerous nest as quickly as possible.

Around the time the sun started setting, they reached a river.

“Let’s set up camp around here tonight,” Ryo said.

“Understood. Why don’t we grill salt-seasoned fish for dinner tonight?”

“Oh, yeah, that sounds good. I’ll catch the fish then.”

Usually, Ryo was in charge of hunting because his magic was more suited to killing game such as lesser rabbits. Tonight, however, Abel had volunteered to do the job.

“Are you absolutely sure?” Ryo asked.

“Come on, man. Stop looking at me like you don’t think I can handle it. I was the one in charge of catching the fish whenever I was with my friends, okay?”

“All right. Then I’ll leave it to you, Abel. I’ll go gather dry branches.”

Each went off to handle their assigned role: Ryo to gather firewood and Abel to fish in the river.

“Can’t believe him... I’m a pro at catching fish. I’ll show him.”

With those muttered words, Abel took off his shoes, rolled up the hem of his trousers, and drew his sword from his hip. Then he waded into the river up to his knees.

Once in the water, he waited quietly. Then he suddenly stabbed his sword through the river’s surface. When he lifted his weapon, a fish lay skewered on the tip.

“Nice.”

And that was how Abel continued catching their dinner.

It had been a while since the last time they ate grilled fish. Though they only used salt as seasoning, it was still delicious. Both Ryo and Abel loved meat, but...

“Sometimes, fish just hits the spot. Man, this is good.”

“It really is and it’s all thanks to you and your superb hunting skill, Abel. I underestimated you,” Ryo said, bowing his head in penance.

“Hey, not a big deal. As long as you understand now, that’s what matters.”

Abel seemed a smidgen bashful.

“I really think river fish is the best. Totally and completely different from the ones in the sea.”

“What, you hate the sea or something? Even though that’s where you saved me.”

“I do, actually. You see, I almost died once a long time ago...”

“Whoa, seriously? What the heck was it? I honestly can’t even picture something capable of that, considering your skill with water magic.”

“A kraken.”

With those words, Ryo swore to himself that he would defeat it someday.

“Huh? You were attacked by a kraken too, Ryo? But I don’t remember you having a boat or anything... Oh, did the kraken destroy it back then?”

“No, I fought it one-on-one in the sea and lost.”

“Yeah, I have no idea what you’re saying right now.”

“Well, it wasn’t like I *wanted* to fight it, all right? You know how men have a battle they just can’t escape? That’s what it was for me.” Then Ryo nodded eagerly, like he’d just thought of something good, and continued. “I lost back then because I tried to solo it, but I’m positive I could totally beat it this time with your help, Abel! Let’s fight a kraken if we find ourselves by the ocean, okay?! We’ll battle it down in the watery depths! It’ll be a rematch!”

“Uh, yeah, about that... Good luck, Ryo. I’ll be cheering from the shore! You can leave that to me. Despite how I look, I’m actually pretty good at cheering!”

“So...you’re running away... How cruel, Abel...”

“Hell yeah I am!”

That was how they spent another night on the subcontinent of Rondo.

Ryo kept watch for the first half of the night. Abel took the second shift.

When Ryo woke up early the next morning, Abel wasn’t sitting by the campfire.

Instead, he was swinging his sword a short distance away. His polished movements reminded Ryo of a beautifully executed sword dance. He moved deliberately but without delay, each swing a testament to the training drilled into his body.

Ryo's frame of knowledge for the sword arts was based on what he knew of Japanese swordsmanship and Abel's movements were completely different from those. Yet, despite being a complete amateur when it came to Phi's sword arts, he still found himself entranced by the way Abel moved.

He could tell that Abel didn't cut corners on any of the basics. It was clear from the way he wielded his sword how each phase of his learning had led him to this point. Perhaps it was innate talent coupled with effort that eventually led to an outstanding specimen like Abel.

He doubted Abel himself considered his skills a result of his own hard work. "It just comes naturally to me," he'd say, or "Swordsmanship is a normal part of life for me." Ryo bet that was how Abel had convinced himself of his inherent skill over his long years of training... But from an outsider's perspective, it definitely looked like hard work.

Having said that, hard work didn't necessarily give someone the results they wanted when they wanted, which is why there were also people for whom hard work never paid off. What a tragedy for them.

Ryo, however, firmly believed that hard work never betrayed you. He would be the first to admit that it didn't always give you the results you wanted when you wanted, but eventually the results of your efforts would manifest.

Nevertheless, people who didn't understand this fundamental truth no matter how often you explained it to them also existed. Maybe it was because people couldn't understand what they hadn't experienced for themselves. Humans believe in what they want to believe... Perhaps that's the kind of creatures they are.

Seeing someone like Abel up close, Ryo felt like he could change himself a little too. He remained spellbound as he continued watching his sword dance. Thrilled by the sight before him, Ryo unconsciously analyzed each of Abel's movements and committed them to memory.

“Oh, hey, Ryo. I see you’re awake.”

After completing a sequence, Abel called out to him. He’d noticed basically from the start that Ryo had been observing him, but Ryo hadn’t tried to interrupt him and Abel had wanted to keep exercising for a little longer, so he’d continued swinging his sword. Being watched hadn’t bothered him at all since he had become used to having an audience at a young age.

“You’re incredible, you know that, Abel? I always thought your swordsmanship was lovely, but it’s so refined that I think ‘beautiful’ is a better description.”

Ryo’s genuine words of praise came from the bottom of his heart.

“Agh, enough already. I’ve been doing this for a long time, okay? It’s basically second nature to my body. Let me wash off the sweat in the river real quick and then I’ll head over to you.”

Ohhh, I see now why he’s doing morning practice. He can just dip himself in the river after he finishes instead of asking me to use my Shower spell on him. Wow, he sure is thoughtful.

Breakfast ended up being the fish Abel had caught in the river while rinsing off. Breakfast—the most important meal of the day...a truth that spans across all eras and countries.

“Looks like this river is flowing down from the north. Whaddya say we follow it upstream then?”

“I think it’s a great idea.”

Maybe...

With that thought, Ryo decided to reveal what he knew to Abel.

“Abel, the region we’re in is surrounded on three sides—to the east, south, and west—by the ocean.”

“Okay, now I understand why you said we should keep going north.”

“Yes, precisely. But I believe mountains are situated in the north. There’s a range running from east to west that connects with another one. They essentially form a lid over the subcontinent of Rondo. Evidently, people live on

the north side of those mountains, after you cross over them.”

This information brought a dubious expression to Abel’s face.

“Ryo, it’s not like I’m doubting you, but...who told you that?”

“It’s best if you don’t ask. All I’ll say is that it came from a being who surpasses the limits of human intellect.”

Ryo maintained eye contact with Abel the whole time he spoke. At times like these, the eyes spoke louder than the mouth ever could. He mustn’t look away.

Seeing the resolve radiating from Ryo, Abel nodded decisively. “Okay, I trust it only because it’s you, Ryo. Besides, it’s not like I have any other reliable sources of information right now.”

Ryo bowed his head gratefully. “Thanks, Abel.”

“Nah, I’m the one who should be grateful. I’m guessing the reason you told me now is because the farther north we go following this river upstream, the higher the chance we’ll find its source in those mountains, right?”

“That’s right. Remember, though, that crossing over the mountains is only a possibility. For now, we’ll stick to the plan, but I want you to keep that possibility in the back of your mind just in case.”

“Got it.”

Then the two of them set out for the day, walking north along the river.

After a while, they encountered a horned bison drinking from the river, a bovine-type monster that Ryo had once watched stab an alligator with its horn in the river near his house. Abel showed it no mercy as he took it down and it wound up being their lunch that day.

He remembered something else from that time too: the piranhas in the river. However, the savage fish didn’t seem to lurk in this particular river. If they had been, Abel would have been devoured yesterday during his fish hunt. Ryo only just realized what a terrifying request he’d made of his comrade.

“Hey, Ryo.”

“Huh? Oh, Abel, what’s the matter?”

“You’re hiding something from me, aren’t you?”

Jeez, does he have ESP?!

In Ryo’s mind, he saw his own face twisted in a dramatic expression of astonishment. He had to talk his way out of this sticky situation. At times like these, the eyes spoke louder than the mouth ever could. He mustn’t look away.

“I-I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, you’re staring right at me, but I can see the sweat dripping down your face and the tremor in your voice. It’s not exactly hard to figure you out, buddy.”

There was clear reproach in Abel’s gaze as he stared at Ryo.

Ryo tried desperately for a few more minutes to play it off, but he finally gave up and told Abel about the horned bison and piranhas.

“Wow, I had no idea scary fish like that even existed...”

“You have to understand that I didn’t keep it from you on purpose, Abel. I wasn’t trying to sacrifice you or anything.”

“I know you didn’t... I didn’t see any yesterday or today, so maybe there just aren’t any in this river... Ryo, you got anything else I should know? You sure you’re not hiding important info that could cost me my life? Absolutely positive?”

“I am. I’ve told you everything I know.”

He was lying, of course. Ryo hadn’t breathed a single word to him about the dragon or the Dullahan, but he thought it was best that Abel did not know about those two topics, which was totally different from the thing with the piranhas. He’d honestly just forgotten about those freaky fish.

Ryo knew he was being selfish with his decision.

It went without saying that Abel hunted fish in the river much more cautiously that evening than the day before.

A Great Monster Battle

Ryo and Abel were in a pinch.

“Abel, what do you think that over there is...?”

It was still far up ahead, but they could see some sort of enormous living thing sleeping on the riverbank.

“It looks like a massive...hippo?”

“Pretty sure you’re right, Ryo... It’s my first time seeing one too, but I’m almost positive that’s a behemoth.”

The two of them held the conversation in whispers. Common sense would dictate that they were so far away it would be impossible for the monster to hear them. Even so, they tacitly decided it was best to speak in low tones. They certainly didn’t want a mistake on their part to be the reason it attacked...

“Abel, you want to hunt it, don’t you?”

“The hell I do!”

The humongous monster easily measured at least a hundred meters long. If it truly was a behemoth, then it would be the first one sighted by humans in over a hundred years—at least within the Kingdom of Knightley. It might not be a dragon, but it was still a well-known monster.

“Something that size could easily stop my 10-layer Ice Wall, huh? I doubt the spell would work on it like it did on the rock golems.”

While a cold, nervous sweat covered Abel’s body and tension leaked from his low voice, Ryo sounded like he was enjoying himself a bit. For Ryo, this was a sight he never would have been able to experience on Earth since this particular version of the hippo didn’t even exist there. Though he understood the danger they were in, he also couldn’t deny the flutters of excitement coursing through him.

“Yeah, you’re right, so don’t even think about trying it, Ryo. Do you hear me?”

“Abel. You think I’m insane, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.” Abel nodded emphatically, which shocked Ryo.

Then Ryo noticed something flying toward them from the north.

“Abel, something’s closing in on us.”

Abel looked toward where Ryo indicated. Despite possessing excellent eyesight, all he could tell was that something unknown approached them. He couldn’t see it clearly. Even at this distance though, he at least knew it wasn’t a bird.

“Dragons...?”

“No,” Abel replied. “Wyverns, since their hands and wings are fused.”

“Oooh, dragon prototypes!”

Well, that was rude of Ryo to say.

“I see six of them...”

There were many eyewitness reports of wyverns even in the Central Provinces. They had lizard-like faces, long necks, long bodies, and long tails. Their legs sported talons while their arms were basically wings. Given that a dragon’s arms and wings were two separate appendages, this difference in appearance allowed people to distinguish between the two monsters...supposedly. It was just hearsay considering the dragons’ general status as fabled creatures.

Although wyverns weren’t in the same class as dragons, they still weren’t opponents that a few adventurers or knights could simply manage. This was true of a single wyvern, and currently six of them were flying in from the north...

“So those wyverns... They’re targeting...”

“Yeah, the behemoth.”

“Wow! I get to watch a great monster battle!”

“Damn... The behemoth is totally outnumbered...” Abel said. He had participated in countless wyvern hunts, so he knew firsthand how strong and

dangerous they were.

“I don’t think BeheBehe will lose so easily!”

At some point over the past few minutes, Ryo had affectionately named the behemoth BeheBehe. Well, if you didn’t take into account its prodigious size, those cute, round eyes and hippo-like appearance definitely made it adorable...probably...maybe...?

“To gang up on someone like that is an absolute disgrace to the Way of the Dragon!”

“The Way of the Dragon... I... Sure, whatever you say, but you can’t deny that striking from the air is an overwhelming advantage. Wyverns use air magic to attack. The invisible air slash and the more advanced sonic blade are particularly dangerous.”

“Sonic blade! The attack where I’d create two clones of myself and unleash a sonic blade from each while charging at the same time!”

Otherwise known as the breakdown rush, the one tactic Ryo was absolutely obsessed with.

“I’ve never heard of anyone cloning themselves... Or of a simultaneous charge with a sonic blade,” Abel replied, taking Ryo’s reckless remark seriously—because he was a good guy.

In the meantime, the sleeping behemoth had woken up and readied itself to fight back against the imminent threat by standing up on all fours. A distance of forty meters separated the six wyverns hovering in the air and the landbound behemoth.

The wyverns made the first move. They launched air slashes by flapping their wings—or so it seemed to Ryo and Bel. At this distance, neither one could visually confirm the warping in the air that indicated the attack. They couldn’t even hear anything, that’s how far they were...

But the behemoth knew how many air slashes were launched at it as well as their trajectories. Six stones, each roughly the size of a human head, appeared instantly around the monster. The moment they did, the behemoth shot them

forward, essentially countering the air slashes in this way.

“Whoa.”

“Nice work, BeheBehe! I knew you could do it!”

“I think they’re going to use their ranged attack next, the sonic blade.” Abel made this prediction based on his past experiences fighting wyverns.

“The most dangerous thing about a sonic blade is how it splits after being fired.”

“A saturation attack then? Air magic is brutal, isn’t it?!”

Nothing could be more dangerous for a target than being on the receiving end of a magical attack that split right before impact. Just as Abel predicted, the six wyverns each unleashed a sonic blade. Unlike an air slash, a sonic blade was air magic visible to the naked eye. The six air blades rushing toward the behemoth split into many smaller ones less than halfway to their target.

Except the behemoth itself might have expected as much to occur. Instead of using projectiles like it did before, the creature instead created a giant, stone barrier in front of it to ward off all the sonic blades.

“I heard behemoths were land monsters, but I had no idea they were so good at earth magic.”

“I knew it’d be a knockdown dirty fight. I just didn’t expect it to revolve around magic.”

“Yeah, except neither side has managed to deal the decisive blow.”

Gathered in one spot, the flock of wyverns flew forward together and began circling the behemoth.

“Huh. I see what they’re trying to do. By attacking from all directions, they nullify the stone barrier.”

“Grr... Don’t give up, BeheBehe!”

Once the wyverns completed their siege formation, they were ready to fire another round of sonic blades. Only then did Ryo sense something amiss around the behemoth. He couldn’t find the source of this feeling, which was

exactly why he knew something was off. He'd experienced this sensation before.

The sense of wrongness spread rapidly from the area directly around the behemoth. The moment the wyverns entered this vicinity, the sonic blades they launched at such close range immediately vanished and the wyverns themselves fell to the ground, as if they'd instantaneously lost the ability to fly.

"Paralysis? In all directions?"

"No... I doubt it..."

When Abel glanced at Ryo, he found his friend looking a little pale.

"I think it's magical nullification."

Yes, indeed, Ryo knew this sense of wrongness because it was the same one he'd experienced himself against the one-eyed assassin hawk. It had acquired the ability after its evolution.

He now understood that the wyverns likely flew using the power of air magic. Otherwise, their huge bodies wouldn't be able to hover in the air so easily. Gliding through the air, maybe, but *stopping* in midair? No way, impossible without magic.

And the behemoth had sealed that magic away, causing them to drop to the ground and rendering them unable to fly or attack with air magic. If paralysis wasn't in play, then they should have still been able to move at least.

Those thoughts ran through Ryo's mind while he watched the scene unfold in the distance. A few of the fallen wyverns lurched to their feet, their aggressive stances indicating their continued willingness to fight.

"Magical nullification? As in an inability to use magic? Is that even possible? I've never heard of human magic users being capable of that, much less monsters. There's no way, Ryo."

"Look closely. See how the fallen wyverns are trying to get up? They wouldn't be able to move at all if they were paralyzed."

"Oh, yeah, you're right. But magical nullification...? Hard to believe, honestly. Although...I've heard dungeon traps like that exist..."

“Dungeon, you say?!”

A true fantasy trope!

“Abel, are you telling me there’s a dungeon in the Kingdom of Knightley?”

“Yeah, I am. The Central Provinces’s one and only dungeon too.”

Ryo’s excitement rocketed when he heard that. “Amazing! And it has magical nullification as a trap?”

“No. Not in the Kingdom. There are rumors of them in dungeons in the Western Provinces though. Magical nullification rooms, apparently.”

“Ah ha! If magical nullification exists in dungeons, then it’s not so strange for monsters to possess the ability too!”

“Uh, no. It’s *really* strange, actually...” Abel frowned and shook his head. “You interested in dungeons then, Ryo?”

“Of course. I’d love to explore one someday!”

“You’re in luck then. Lune has the only dungeon in all of the Central Provinces.”

The unexpected news stunned Ryo.

“You’re joking... Why did you wait so long to tell me that, Abel?!”

“Hey, don’t blame me. I had no idea you were even interested in dungeons until now.”

The battle between the wyverns and behemoth continued even as they chatted. By this point, however, it had become less of a battle and more a one-sided slaughter. Not only had the wyverns lost their overwhelming aerial advantage, but they were also unable to use their air magic or fly. On the other hand, there was the behemoth, who posed a threat by dint of its tremendous size alone.

The wyverns failed to make a single scratch on their opponent despite the variety of physical attacks they used. What made the situation worse was that the behemoth could still control magic. As the behemoth crushed a few wyverns under its feet, it blasted rock projectiles at the ones behind it to stop

them from escaping.

The unilateral offensive ended in fewer than five minutes. Once it did, only the six wyvern corpses remained.

“Well, that was a terrifying spectacle, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah. Behemoths really are something else.”

Before the battle began, Abel had been sure the wyverns would win with their overwhelming advantage. He never could have imagined the fight turning into such a one-sided bloodbath. He swore deep in his heart that he would never, ever face off against a behemoth.

“Then you won’t mind round two being Abel VS BeheBehe, right?”

“Piss off!”

The two of them took a huge detour around the behemoth single-mindedly eating the wyverns and continued their journey.

After their easterly detour took them well away from the behemoth-versus-wyvern battlefield, they once more headed north. A while later, Abel spoke to Ryo as they walked.

“Hey, Ryo. If my eyes aren’t playing tricks, I’m pretty sure there’s an incredibly high mountain range up ahead.”

“Wow, Abel, what a coincidence, because I’m seeing the same thing myself.”

Though the snow-covered mountains remained a good distance away, they rose so high into the sky they pierced right above the cloud line. The mountain range measured around six or maybe even seven thousand meters high. By Earth standards, it would probably be classified in one of the highest categories for height.

“Sooo...that’s the ‘lid’ you were talking about, huh?”

“I believe so, yes.”

Ryo hadn’t expected this geographic colossus either.

“Before we even attempt to cross over those mountains...we should probably hunt and dry as much meat as we can while we’re in the foothills. We might be able to keep hunting halfway up, but I think food is going to get much scarcer beyond that point.”

“Yeah...you might be right, especially with all that snow.”

“Sheesh... If I were an air magician, I could cross over that range in a single flight!”

Ryo’s words made Abel imagine his party’s air magician, Lyn, doing just that—except in his mental image, she just couldn’t do it no matter how hard she tried.

“Yeah, no, not a snowball’s chance in hell,” Abel said, rejecting Ryo’s fevered delusion.

They continued north and eventually found themselves trekking through the woods.

“Oh, Abel, I’ve been wondering. Have you defeated wyverns before?”

“Hm? Yeah, I’ve joined wyvern hunts a bunch of times in the past. Why do you ask?”

“Well, the ones that tried to kill BeheBehe came from the mountain range to the north, right?”

Upon hearing those words, Abel turned his head so slowly to look at Ryo next to him that if he’d been a machine, Ryo could have heard the gears grinding with the movement.

“Don’t tell me you think there are wyverns up ahead...?”

“Not think. *Know*,” Ryo said, his sunny expression in contrast with Abel’s astounded one.

The truth was, Ryo wanted a closer look at the wyverns. Earlier, he and Abel had been too far away from the battle with the behemoth to see much.

“Wyverns aren’t the kind of opponent that can just be taken down with one or two people. A wyvern hunt needs to recruit at *least* twenty C-rank adventurers. Even then, casualties still occur on the adventurer’s side.”

On countless occasions, Abel had seen adventurers injured and killed by wyverns. They were one enemy he wanted to avoid at all costs.

“How do you fight them on your hunts? Your Combat Skills won’t work on them since they remain up in the air, right?”

“Swordsmen like me act as decoys when we go up against aerial monsters like them. Once we lure them to the ground, it’s our job to deal the killing blow. Having said that, bows and arrows aren’t effective against wyvern-class monsters, so magicians end up being the main offensive force.”

“Oooh, three cheers for the magicians.” Ryo enthusiastically waved his arms in the air.

“Yeah, but it’s not like one or two magicians are enough to defeat them, okay? As long as they’re alive, wyverns protect their exteriors with air magic. Because of that, they barely sustain any damage even against fire magicians’ attack magic,” Abel explained, recalling his past experiences with the monsters as well as other important points about them.

“Just goes to show that fire magicians aren’t such a big deal, hm?” Ryo said. As a water magician, he felt a natural rivalry toward fire magicians, so he found himself unintentionally insulting them—even though he hadn’t met a single one since his arrival on Phi. Of course, he’d never met *any* other magician period in all his life. Other than himself, that is.

“You might not think so, but it’s a fact that fire magic is the strongest when it comes to attack power. Wyverns don’t sustain any damage from air magicians’ attacks either because of their affinity for air magic.”

“Oh, really? Is that how it works?”

“Yeah. Attacks like air slash don’t hit them.”

The bait ball and kraken Ryo had encountered in the sea came to mind.

I wonder if wyverns can take away magical control just like those jerks. Maybe it’s possible when users of the same elemental magic face off against each other...

“And that’s why fire magicians focus exclusively on firing attacks like Fire Ball

and Fire Lance. It's the only way to chip away at a wyvern's stamina."

"I don't know how to say this, but...I feel like that fighting style is very, um, haphazard..."

"Can you blame us? No definitive method to hunt wyverns has been established. Blast them continuously with fire magic, chip away at their stamina, and thin their air protection. Then, if we get lucky, some kind of magic hits the mark and knocks them down to the ground. But the fire magic attacks enrage the wyverns, then their rush attacks lead to too many casualties," Abel replied, shrugging.

"Then maybe humans should just leave them be? Isn't that an option?"

"Easier said than done, especially when they show up on the roads merchant caravans take and attack them, leading to trade delays. You can already imagine what kind of domino effect those kinds of delays have. So regional lords, and sometimes the king himself, commission the adventurers' guild to hunt them down."

Abel stopped, suddenly putting himself on guard.

Something's off.

Ryo also felt a disturbance in the atmosphere. "The vegetation...something's wrong with the vegetation," he whispered to Abel.

In short, this was not an animal-type monster but the surrounding flora that was the source of the disturbance.

But nothing attacked them. Not a single thing...as far as their eyes could tell anyway.

Then Abel abruptly dropped to one knee.

"Abel!"

"I'm fine. Some kind of poison, I think, but I'll be back to normal in a flash."

A few moments later, Abel stood, apparently recovered already from the poison. Then he unsheathed his sword and took up a fighting stance.

Ryo visualized the water molecules in the vapor within a twenty-meter radius

around them, then cast a spell.

Active Sonar.

Instantly, a vast amount of information flooded his brain, making him dizzy. He had to power through it. The 'Pulse' he emitted from his body spread, rippling through the surrounding water molecules like the little waves that were created when you dropped a pebble on a clear, reflective water surface. When the 'Pulse' reached a foreign substance drifting among the ripples, it sent feedback to Ryo, whose past experience allowed him to identify it.

This feels like a paralyzing poison. The density is most concentrated toward...the right...though I can't see anything... No, wait, there's a slight wavering.

"Squall."

A violent rain fell, slamming the particles of the paralyzing poison wafting in the air to the ground.

"Ice Casket."

Then he completely froze the source of the paralyzing poison. Before, he had only been capable of controlling the area ten centimeters or more from the surface of a creature's body. Now, as a result of his considerable effort, he could ice all of the air surrounding it.

"That clump of ice. Is it...?"

"Yes, that plant was spreading the poison. Freezing it completely stops the poison from secreting."

"But...what the hell is it..." Abel said, stunned. He'd never seen a plant like it. Perhaps it was because the refractive index had changed after being frozen, but now they were able to see a plant-type monster that looked exactly like a Rafflesia.

"I think it must have the ability to reflect light like a mirror and blend in with its surroundings."

"Is that why we couldn't see it until now...?"

Abel had sensed the disturbance too, but he'd been unable to identify the

source. This was only natural since the monster could effectively make itself invisible.

“What do we do about this block of ice then?”

“We’ll just leave it like that and get as far away as we can from it. It’ll eventually thaw out. Plants can survive even after defrosting. It can live happily here after we’re long gone.”

“And...what happens to living things other than plants?”

“Well, they die. In experiments, I’ve tried to make subjects’ hearts pump and circulate blood even while frozen. I also tried putting others into a state of suspended animation by flash-freezing them. But...I have yet to succeed. I’ll definitely try harder.”

“R-Right...” Abel swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry. He couldn’t help but inadvertently imagine the possibility of himself being iced. Of course, he knew Ryo would never do something like that. Even so, if he considered whether it was possible or not on a purely hypothetical basis, then...it was inevitable he would think about it.

Ryo’s voice pierced through his morbid thoughts.

“Abel...I can tell from your face exactly what you’re thinking!”

“Wh-Wha...”

He couldn’t conceal his unease.

“You’re thinking an ice coffin must feel nice and cool in the summertime, right? Sheesh...I sure have my work cut out with you, huh?”

“Yeah, now I feel relieved...for a lot of reasons.”

Even through his disappointment, Abel also felt a bit happy for some reason.



They were relaxing after having finished their dinner. Just because they were on a journey didn’t mean they always had to be tense. A constant state of tension wasn’t good for the body. Best to relax when necessary and be on alert when needed. That’s what was important.

“A plant monster that expels a paralyzing poison...and one that’s invisible to boot... Honestly, it’s the first I’m hearing of something like it,” Abel said, referring to the Rafflesia-like monster they’d encountered in the afternoon. Even with his wealth of experience as an adventurer, he had never heard of it before then.

“I’m just now realizing plant-type monsters didn’t exist near where I used to live.”

“I know that plant monsters are unevenly distributed in their habitats because unlike the animal kind, they can’t move. So it’s very possible to never see one. That said, there are adventurers who only hunt the plant-types too.”

“Ooooh, well, isn’t that interesting? Is it because they drop interesting materials?”

“Yeah, things alchemists use in their experiments or to make their equipment.”

“I’m actually really keen on alchemy!” Ryo said, a sparkle in his eye. He was enthusiastic about the topic even though he had yet to encounter it himself.

“It’s apparently really hard to become a full-fledged alchemist.”

“I don’t mind at all! As they say, spending three years on a cold stone will make it warm!”

Abel wasn’t sure what the saying meant, so he decided to ignore it. “Oh, right. Ryo, I’m curious. How did you protect yourself against that monster’s poison?”

Abel had been able to recover from the status ailment because of an item he carried that neutralized most normal poisons right away. Though the effect hadn’t lasted long, the paralyzing poison on this particular occasion had been powerful enough to weaken him and force him to collapse to one knee. Ryo, however, hadn’t seemed affected at all and Abel found that strange.

“Well, I didn’t do anything special,” Ryo said truthfully. It wasn’t as if he’d intentionally built a resistance to poison. After all, he hadn’t even been able to find any detoxifying herbs in the area around his house.

Now I’m curious why nothing happened to me. Could it have been the Water

Fairy King's protection... No, something like that doesn't seem possible in this world... But maybe...

"Do you suppose it's the effect of this robe?" Ryo couldn't help but blurt out. There was no way to verify his suspicion anyway, so for now he chose to be grateful to the person who gave it to him.

Thank you, Master.

"Yeah, that's possible actually. At the very least, I'm positive that robe is anything but normal."

"Well, you can't have it, Abel, just so you know."

"Not like I want it."

"I silently thanked my master a few seconds ago for gifting it to me."

"Good. Important to show your appreciation, y'know."

Surprise flashed on Ryo's face when he heard those words.

"Abel, you're actually saying something decent for once..."

"What the hell, Ryo! I always say the right thing!"

"The only one who thinks so is you though. That's how these things go."

"*You* are the last person I wanna hear that from!"

The next day, the two of them set about procuring meat to dry for their journey through the mountain range.

"Abel, let's hunt some boar as well. Rabbit meat is delicious, but I think we should have boar on hand too. I'm thinking a greater boar since they're the biggest of the boar-types," Ryo replied after Abel asked what kind of meat they should hunt.

"I'm fine with boar, but...you do know that greater boars are a pain in the neck, right? Besides, don't you think they're too big?"

"Better too big than too small, as the saying goes. Easier to take down one big boar than a bunch of small animals. Wouldn't you agree? Also, the likelihood is high we'll end up hunting wyverns soon enough, so why balk at the notion of

taking down one or two greater boars before then?”

“Well...because we don’t really have a choice with the wyverns. I still don’t understand why you’re so excited about fighting them, by the way. You know, greater boars aren’t exactly easy to hunt either...”

“How can you be so timid when we haven’t even started?! You’re not worthy of your name, Abel!”

“Do I even wanna know what your definition *is* of my name...”

Ryo and Abel’s heated debate continued until they finally settled on five rabbit-type monsters and five boar-types...with the last of the boars being a greater boar. Incidentally, Abel himself drew a conclusion from the argument, which was “Ryo never backs down.”



They had no problems hunting five lesser rabbits and four lesser boars. After butchering the carcasses, Ryo froze the meat. Then it was finally time to take down the greater boar, which proved easy to find with Ryo’s Passive Sonar skill.

“Ryo, just like we planned. I’m counting on you to stop it with your ice wall and ice spears.”

“Repel, 5-layer Ice Wall. Pierce, Icicle Lance 4.”

Ryo added those extremely generic prefixes to his spells for no reason.

Abel was long past commenting on the matter by this point. He understood that Ryo’s magic would work the same with or without the random chants. All he did was shake his head slightly.

Regardless of the haphazard nature of his chants, Ryo generated a wall made of ice just like Abel had imagined.

Klang.

The greater boar charged without hurling any stones first, then collided with the ice wall. As soon as it stopped, four spears of ice impaled its legs.

Its screech of agony echoed around them, but the sound didn’t last long. The

moment the greater boar roared, Abel moved to its left side with his drawn sword.

“Combat Skill: Total Impalement.”

The blade glowed faintly red as Abel plunged it through the monster’s ear. The greater boar shuddered for an instant, then slumped to the ground as its strength drained rapidly.

“Haaa...” Abel exhaled quietly. Though they’d executed the plan perfectly, he had still been tense. After all, a greater boar’s claws could tear a human apart like they were made of paper. It didn’t matter that they’d immobilized it first by stabbing it with spears—Abel had still needed to put himself within the boar’s reach and that had naturally strained his nerves.

“Fantastic display as always, Abel.”

Ryo was genuine with his praise, having fully expected the swordsman to kill the monster in one strike. They had only wounded the greater boar through its feet and ears, which would make their next task so much easier. All in all, a wonderful accomplishment!

“All right, then, Abel. Please strip off its hide very carefully.”

“What?”

“I’ll be crafting a few things with it. Satchels for the dried meat, clothes for me, and a cloak for you, Abel. Leather made from a greater boar’s hide is more durable than a lesser boar’s. It also has a much nicer texture.”

“Ah...now I understand why you were so set on hunting a greater boar. You were thinking ahead for us, huh?” Abel said, shaking his head ruefully. He couldn’t deny that the hide of one greater boar was more than enough to make all the things Ryo mentioned. Moreover, the jerky they made with its meat would sustain them on their journey, so it really was killing two birds with one stone.

“I didn’t know what you would do if I had told you my idea in advance, Abel. I’m glad I didn’t.”

“What the heck would I have even done though...”

“Well, you could have stabbed it repeatedly on purpose and ruined its hide to spite me! That was totally a possibility!”

“Are you freaking kidding me, Ryo?! What the hell kind of savage do you think I am?”

“Because I can definitely imagine you saying something like, ‘I want you to raise your tanning skills to the next level, Ryo, so that’s why I made all these holes on purpose.’”

Then Ryo pressed his lips together tightly and nodded his head vigorously numerous times.

“That goes beyond mean-spirited... I would seriously worry about someone’s humanity at that point.”

“Exactly! And that’s how I feel about you, Abel!”

Ryo thrust his finger at Abel in triumph, like he’d been waiting on pins and needles for him to say just those exact words.

“...”

Abel only blinked in response as Ryo continued to point at him. “Right,” Abel eventually said. “So the first thing we need to do is drain the blood.”

He paid no attention to Ryo’s aggressive finger-pointing.

“Ugh... I won’t lose! Don’t think this is over!”

Abel ignored Ryo’s grumbling.



“I’ll strip the hide from its flesh,” Abel said after they had finished draining the greater boar’s blood. As an adventurer, he’d carved up plenty of boar-type monsters, so he volunteered out of pride in his ability.

“A-Are you saying that because you’re confident you’re better than me at it?!”

“No, because *you*’re the one who told me to do it in the first place, Ryo...”

“Well...maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. I don’t really remember.”

“No, you definitely did.” Abel exhaled softly in frustration.

Ryo’s lips fell into a frown as he sulked. “Sometimes I think you’re really mean, Abel.”

“Not this again!”

“Correction—I often think about how mean you are, Abel.”

“Again, why?!”

“Another correction—I *always* think you’re a mean person, Abel.”

“Yeah, well, I think you’re the mean one, Ryo.” Abel had grown tired of fighting Ryo after the third insult. “Look, I’m working on the hide seriously, just like you asked me to, okay?”

“Okay... I think that the serious part of you is amazing, Abel. Absolutely wonderful. I’m being a hundred percent honest when I praise that side of you.”

“Th-Thanks, I guess.” Abel felt a bit shy after Ryo’s sudden compliment.

“When I see your swordsmanship, I realize how you haven’t allowed yourself to lose your head to the idea that your talents are innate. Instead, your diligent day-to-day efforts have led you to achieve such unsurpassable heights of mastery. That’s how I feel.”

“O-Oh, yeah?” Abel replied, flushing even more.

“I don’t think just anyone can keep working hard. It’s one thing if you know you’ll always be rewarded for your efforts, that your success will always be guaranteed, but the way of the sword isn’t like that. While it’s only natural to keep training, success is never a sure thing. Despite this, you continue to work hard... That’s just the kind of guy you are. So I think you’re amazing for sticking to it for so long like that, Abel.”

“I-I think you’re exaggerating...” Abel’s face was scarlet now, though he continued skinning the greater boar.

“Well, despite your earnestness, there’s not much we can do about your meanness, huh?”

“I really don’t know how the hell you come to these conclusions!”

Despite their ongoing pointless conversation, their hands remained busy. Abel concentrated on skinning and butchering the boar while Ryo arranged everything on the ice table.

Once Abel stripped the hide clean, they could finally begin the tanning process. The first step was washing it carefully and thoroughly.

“Abel, please stop fooling around and start washing.”

The water magician poured water into a huge bucket made of ice and pointed at it, commanding Abel to wash the hide inside it.

“Why do I have to do this...”



“Because it’s a long-held tradition that the vanguard does manual labor!”

“I’m pretty sure there’s no such thing...”

Though he grumbled, the swordsman—because he was a fundamentally nice guy—rolled up the hem of his trousers and stepped inside the tub, where he diligently scrubbed the hide clean.

The next step was to peel the dermis off.

“Okay, Abel, tear the dermis off with your fingers.”

The water magician pointed at the hide spread out on the ice table and commanded him.

“Why me again...”

“I know you can do it, that’s why!”

“That’s not a good reason...”

Though he grumbled, the swordsman—because he was still a fundamentally nice guy—started peeling off the dermis from the relatively large piece of cut hide.

After, it was time to burn grass and leaves to cover the hide in smoke...a process known as smoke tanning.

“Abel, you need to gather more leaves and branches.”

With the clothesline made of ice behind him, the water magician pointed, commanding Abel to collect more fuel.

“Why am I not surprised you’re dumping the work on me again...”

“You’re the only one who can, Abel, so I assigned the task to you.”

“That’s a complete load of crock and you know it! You could do it just as easily yourself, Ryo.”

Though he grumbled, the swordsman picked up dried branches and leaves to burn.

Abel was, again, just an incredibly nice guy.

After smoking the hide for half a day, the final phase of the process involved washing it with water and then stretching the leather out to a uniform thinness with an ice roller.

“Since I’m the only one who can use the ice roller, I’ll do this part. See, I’m not just goofing off.”

“R-Right.”

Abel was so fed up by this point that he didn’t even bother objecting. In fact, he didn’t say much at all.

Then a few minutes later, Abel lifted his head and spoke.

“Ryo.”

“Yes, I sense the monsters approaching too. A normal boar and a kite snake. The normal boar is almost on us while the kite snake’s about a minute behind.”

“Kite snakes are dangerous. They move fast and their tail attacks are deadly, but the worst thing is their poison mist.”

“I killed one when I used to live in the Forest of Rondo and it really was an aggravating experience.”

Recalling his struggle against that first kite snake, Ryo remembered how it had smashed his Ice Wall countless times... But!

“I’ll show you just how different I am now from back then!” Ryo said.

“Y-You sure are fired up, huh?”

“Yup, because we have plenty of leather now. We don’t need the snakeskin, so you can kill it however you want!”

“Of course I’m doing all the work again,” Abel said, shaking his head.

“As you can see, I have my hands full using the ice roller on the leather, so I’ll help you coordinate the attack with my Ice Wall.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll incapacitate the kite snake so you’re not overwhelmed by both of them, Abel.”

“Oh ho, I appreciate it. Then that means I’ll handle...”

“The normal boar, yes.”

“Got it.”

With that, Abel headed off to confront the normal boar.



The kite snake still hadn’t appeared, but Passive Sonar allowed Ryo to detect its location and movements.

“I can’t let it get near us, not only because it’s dangerous but because of the havoc it’ll wreak on all the leather goods I’ve made. I especially need to make sure the latter doesn’t happen,” he muttered. Then he cast a spell: *“Ice Wall Package.”*

His intention was to stop the kite snake by trapping it in an ice box he’d drop from above it, but...

“Darn, it moves so fast!”

It took Ryo only 0.X seconds to create his Ice Wall Package, but even that was too slow to capture the monster. Perhaps it had senses unavailable to humans that let it detect changes in its environment. Normal snakes possess pit organs that allow them to sense infrared thermal radiation, and if Ryo applied the same principle to a kite snake, then it was entirely possible that it would be sensitive to something as cold as ice...

Be that as it may, Ryo had promised Abel he’d capture the kite snake, and by gosh he would!

“What did I do last time I fought one... Oh, yeah, I soaked it using Squall and basically boiled it alive... I’ll end up killing it if I do the same thing this time, huh?”

He was determined to catch it and leave the actual killing to Abel because that was what he had promised. Ryo intended to fulfill his promise to a T even though he knew Abel would be just fine with him finishing it off.

“Okay, let me try the reverse process,” he mumbled, then cast a spell. *“5-layer Ice Wall, Full Package.”*

With the kite snake now in the center, he created a 5-layer ice Wall with a radius of twenty meters enclosing the monster. He constructed an ice roof on top as well to prevent it from leaping out and escaping, like the first one had a long time ago.

“Ice Wall, Shrink.”

The 5-layer Ice Wall contracted in a concentric pattern, its radius shrinking from twenty meters to fifteen, then ten, then finally to five.

Krash. Krash.

Having realized it was trapped, the kite snake whipped its tail repeatedly, trying to smash through the barrier made of ice.

“Let’s add on. 5-layer Ice Wall.”

He generated another one around it just in case.

“Now from above. Squall.”

Ryo drenched the captured kite snake in water.

“Ice Casket.”

The water soaking the monster and the vapor surrounding it began crystallizing, and then...the kite snake was completely frozen within the box of ice.

“Whoo hoo! Success!”

Upon returning from defeating the normal boar, Abel stared at the frozen kite snake. “I don’t think there’s any need for me to deal the killing blow.”



Five lesser rabbits, four lesser boars, and one greater boar meant plenty of dried meat for the two of them. Salt was one thing Ryo definitely couldn’t neglect in the process of creating the jerky, and he had plenty of it.

He would have loved to pickle some of the jerky in soy sauce, but unfortunately for him...he didn’t have any on hand. Instead, he smothered the strips of meat in salt and black pepper and would then let the portions dry for

three days.

The end.

“Well, that was easy.”

“Yeah, it’s a relatively straightforward method for adventurers to make jerky when they’re out in the field. When conditions are extremely harsh, we can get by with just salt, so I’m feeling really lucky that we have black pepper.”

“Then I’m glad the vine grew in the Forest of Rondo.”

Ryo nodded enthusiastically. He had skewered the meat on a pole of ice he’d generated and carried it with him so it could dry as they walked ever north toward the mountain range.

Incidentally, the greater boar leather had survived the earlier monster attacks, allowing Ryo to create the things he wanted—Abel’s cloak, Ryo’s own clothes, and two satchels, one for each of them. The cloak would go quite far in warding off the cold for Abel. As for the “clothes” he made for himself...well...it was pretty simple: just a large piece of leather with a hole in the middle big enough for him to put his head through so it could cover him snugly. In short, a leather poncho.

He didn’t need a cloak because wearing the poncho underneath the robe that the Dullahan gave him doubled the warmth enveloping his body.

And that was how they both dramatically improved their cold weather protection.

“Hey, Ryo. Just to be clear, the satchels you made...”

“Yes, they’re for carrying the dried meat.”

The leather shoulder bags were of a standard size.

“If the bag was any bigger, it would get in your way during combat. Right, Abel?”

“Yeah, that’s a fair point, but...it doesn’t look like the bags combined will be able to hold all the meat.”

“Yes, which can’t be helped. So the meat we can’t store in them...”

“Yeah, I figured. It’s too bad.” Abel hated the idea of throwing food away, but they didn’t have a choice.

“...we’ll hold in our hands.”

“...Beg your pardon?”

“We’ll be eating every day, so we’ll go through the amount we’re holding in our hands before you know it.”

Abel looked stunned. “But...I can’t fight like that...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll do the fighting then.”

Ryo nodded gravely, emanating a grim but resolute aura.

In the end, after packing the jerky into their bags, they only had to carry a single day’s worth of leftover jerky in their hands. Needless to say, Abel’s relief knew no bounds.

Mountain Crossing

The massive mountain range soared high overhead in front of Ryo and Abel. Ryo had thought of the Himalayas, the mountain range that divided the Indian subcontinent and Eurasia, the first time he'd seen it. Mount Everest, called Qomolangma in the Tibetan language, rested in the Himalayas as the highest peak on Earth, the summit of the gods.

In these mountains before them, the two of them would attempt an oxygen-free ascent, which would have been terribly difficult on Earth. Without any proper equipment, to boot. Back on Earth, there had been a high priest from Nepal who lasted on Everest for thirty-two hours, eleven of them without an oxygen cylinder.

In that case then...those trained on Phi should be able to reach the summit without much difficulty...probably.

Something bothered Abel.

That something was Ryo's physical strength. As a B-rank adventurer, Abel possessed physical strength, including endurance, which was undoubtedly one of the highest among all humans.

Then there was Ryo, a magician, who kept pace with him easily. Though not a hard-and-fast rule, magicians in general weren't known for their physical strength. Magicians who worked as adventurers certainly were stronger than the general public, but were still incredibly weak when compared to swordsmen.

Lyn, the air magician in Abel's party, lacked physical strength to the extreme. Her stamina was particularly low, even compared to the priestess in their party. And yet...

And yet Ryo was able to maintain Abel's speed without breaking a single sweat. The same could be said whenever they found themselves in combat. In a

way, one might say this was unusual for a magician.

“Hey, Ryo.”

“What is it, Abel?”

They were still at the base of the mountains, so they didn’t bother avoiding conversation to conserve oxygen.

“You’re pretty strong for a magician, y’know. Physically, that is.”

Ryo chortled fearlessly. “So you noticed, Abel. Very good. I worked quite hard to build up my stamina, especially when I lived alone. I should be just fine even if a battle lasts five hours.”

“No, your magic will run out,” Abel said—though what he really wanted to say was “No magician could last that long.”

“Well, I’m confident in my physical abilities, so you don’t have to worry about me, Abel. You certainly don’t have to slow down on my account.”

“Oh ho, you’re that sure of yourself, huh?”

“I am. None of the B-rank adventurers in the vicinity are a match for me,” Ryo replied, issuing a challenge for no apparent reason.

“Hey, if it’s a fight you’re lookin’ for, I’m happy to oblige!” Abel said, willingly accepting.

“Heh heh. Do you think I’d be scared of someone threatening me with jerky in their hands?”

“Right back at you!”

The two continued walking while holding such a silly conversation.

When the sun reached its zenith, they sensed an abnormal pressure in the air.

“What is it?” Ryo asked.

Abel surveyed the area around them, looking left and right, but soon realized the pressure was coming from something swooping down toward them from the sky above.

“A gryphon...” Abel said, too shocked to move or say anything else.

Ryo was also too struck by the gryphon’s stunning aura to move.

Gryphons. Conquerors of the heavens. Reapers of the firmament. Those who commanded the wide open sky... Boasting a variety of nicknames, they ruled the air. If behemoths reigned over the land, then it was said that gryphons governed the air. Fearsome monsters whose upper half resembled an eagle while their lower resembled a lion, they measured around ten meters tall, though numbers meant nothing in the face of their overpowering presence.

And right now one such monster had just alighted in front of them, where it now stood staring intently at the two.

It took Ryo twenty seconds to come to his senses. Then he suddenly had an idea. He carefully tossed the dried meat in his right hand toward the gryphon.

Snap. It snatched the jerky out of the air and gobbled it up.

That was when Abel stirred from his frozen state as well. Ryo tossed the dried meat in his left hand at the gryphon too. This time it caught it with its mouth open and swallowed it all in one go. Then it turned its gaze deliberately toward the jerky in Abel’s hands.

“Abel, the meat,” Ryo said, whispering just loud enough for Abel to hear.

Abel flung the meat in both of his hands at the gryphon. The monster seemed satisfied after finishing those portions, so it flapped its wings in a powerful motion and leaped into the sky, flying away.

The two of them remained motionless for a while. Only five minutes after the gryphon left did they manage to find their voices.

“Abel, I’m glad we’re still alive.”

“Absolutely no argument from me.”

They planted themselves down at the roots of a huge tree nearby and exhaled in relief.

“But you had a stroke of genius there, Ryo, with the meat,” Abel said,

commending his decision to toss his first handful of jerky at the gryphon.

“When I thought about how we could convey to it that we’re not enemies, I remembered the dried meat in my hands. I was almost positive gryphons don’t hate meat.”

“Yeah, great call.”

Ryo blushed at Abel’s unreserved praise.

“Still...it had such an amazing presence.”

“Yes, that was incredibly intense. BeheBehe was awe-inspiring too, but it was pretty far from us, so to see something similar right in front of my eyes was...”

“I’m glad it didn’t brand us as enemies.”

Ryo nodded emphatically. “I agree. I don’t think we’d have won if we had to fight it.”

“Yeah, that’s not something a human stands a chance against...”

“If push comes to shove, I’d rather deal with six wyverns than one gryphon.”

“I’d rather not deal with either, thanks.”

In any case, since it was lunchtime, they dug into their respective satchels for some dried meat to eat. Naturally, they made sure to inspect their surroundings before they did. They sure would be in a bind if another gryphon suddenly appeared out of nowhere...

Relieved at surviving the encounter, Ryo began murmuring absentmindedly. “Anyway, we’ve seen such a variety of monsters on our journey so far. There was BeheBehe and now a gryphon of all things.”

“Just like with the behemoth, the last report of a gryphon sighting was centuries ago. I really think there’s something very strange about this region.”

“Well, it’s rude to call it that. Isn’t it just a lack of human effort?”

“What effort?!”

Their nerves had finally recovered to the point that they could joke with each other.

“I guess you could say the mountain range prevents monsters like behemoths and gryphons from entering human domains, huh?”

“I suppose, especially since they’re not hurting for food on this side of the mountains. There’s no reason for them to cross over.”

“I bet even a gryphon would have a tough time crossing over to the other side.”

Ryo sighed dramatically. “And yet a certain swordsman is trying to do just that...”

“Well, excuse me! Not like I have a choice, okay? I have zero desire to return by boat considering how far off course the sea carried me in the first place.”

Plus, there was the issue of the kraken.

“BeheBehe on land, kraken in the sea, gryphon in the air... All three geographical bases covered. Like a monster army, navy, and air force, hm?”

“Bully for them, but I’ll be fine, thanks!”

Later that same afternoon, the two of them ran into trouble again. Hiding behind a giant boulder, they poked their out over the top just enough to get a glimpse of what lay ahead: two wyverns that were pecking away at what looked to be some kind of boar.

“The wyverns found their way here because of what you wished for, Abel.”

“That wasn’t even me!”

They argued in whispers.

“Since we can’t even go around them, you wanna just wait here until they finish eating?”

“I feel like they’ll notice us before they do though. Plus, there’s no guarantee a third one won’t show up.”

“Ryo...don’t tell me you’re suggesting we fight them?”

Abel stared at him with an expression that said, “What the hell are you thinking?” It was only natural he’d feel that way because a wyvern hunt

normally required at least twenty adventurers C-rank or higher along with a few powerful fire magicians. The more the better, in fact.

So...for a swordsman and water magician to face off against not one...but *two* wyverns? That was just suicidal.

“It’s very likely there are more wyverns up ahead. A *lot* more. So I don’t think we can avoid combat. If that’s the case, wouldn’t it be better to start gaining experience now, when we only have two to deal with?”

“Ryo, you don’t get it. There are *two* of them. You say ‘only’ like it’s a walk in the park...”

Despite his objection, Abel understood what Ryo was saying. Six wyverns had attacked the behemoth. Compared to six, two were... When Abel realized where his thoughts were going, he vehemently shook his head.

“One is plenty dangerous on its own.” He deliberately said the words out loud to stop himself from entertaining Ryo’s idea. “Then again...”

Abel had a good reason for hesitating. He knew fighting wyverns would be inevitable because he was determined to return to his city by crossing over this mountain range. They had seen them attack the behemoth and two were right in front of them. Both of these incidents clearly indicated that these mountains were host to a high population of wyverns.

“I guess we don’t have a choice, huh?”

Abel steeled himself.

“All right, how are we taking those two down?”

“Are they still dangerous after they’re staked to the ground?” Ryo asked.

“No, not as much. They can still unleash air slashes by using their wings, but they can’t execute sonic blades. Their talons would still pose a threat and their air magic protects their bodies from swords, but there’s no air-magic defense around their eyes, so that’s where we aim when they’re on land. I guess you could say they make much easier opponents like that, compared to when they’re in the air where our blades don’t reach.”

Ryo mulled things over for a bit after hearing Abel’s explanation. Then he

noded firmly.

“In that case, I have the perfect water magic spell.”

Abel unsheathed his sword and got into position, ready to leap out at a moment's notice.

“Here I go, Abel.”

He nodded in response, his eyes on the two wyverns. They hadn't yet noticed them as they continued devouring the boar.

“Spear of ice which pierces all. Descend from the heavens and impale my enemies. Icicle Lance 4.”

Four Icicle Lances appeared silently high above. Of course, Ryo didn't need to chant all that. He only did because it sounded cool.

The spears fell as soon as he generated them. Each one pierced one of the wyverns' four wings, staking the monsters to the ground.

“Giiiiiii!!!”

The wyverns' shrieks echoed.

Abel leaped out from behind the boulder at the same time as Ryo chanted his spell. He emerged just in time to see incredibly thick spears of ice penetrating through the wyverns' wings. The lances remained solid, showing no signs of melting.

With their wings immobilized, the monsters couldn't unleash any air slashes or use their talons to swipe at Abel as he approached them. All he had to do was jump and his target, their eyes, would be within reach.

“I'll end this in one strike. *Combat Skill: Total Impalement.*”

He stabbed the wyvern closest to him through its left eye, the blade of his magic sword glowing red. It plunged through its eyeball and straight into its brain. The wyvern collapsed, dead, without a single scream. Abel paid no attention to it and stabbed the second wyvern through its right eye.

“Gugiii!”

It let out a last strangled shriek before dying. In the end, it was a complete victory.

“Icicle Lance plus your Impalement, Abel. Yes, I think this combo will work very well.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised how quick that was.”

“Hm, so you’re dissatisfied by how this went? That means you actually do wish for a thrilling battle that makes your blood sing, one where your soul clashes against your opponent’s.” Ryo pretended to jot down a note in his nonexistent notebook. “I’ll keep that in mind for next time.”

Panicking, Abel grasped Ryo by the shoulders. “Hey, stop right there. I do *not* need a fight like that. What we just did was perfect. Sublime.” He nodded vigorously. “Let’s do the same thing next time.”

“Well, if that’s what you *really* want, Abel, then we’ll stick to this.”

“Phew. Oh, yeah, I just remembered. All of the monsters we’ve killed so far weren’t important, so I ignored their magic stones. But I definitely think we should collect the wyverns’. You’ll be shocked at how much we can sell them for.”

With that, Abel thrust a knife into one of the wyverns’ chest cavities, near where the heart was.

“I see. Then I’ll extract the stone from the other one.”

Ryo turned toward the second wyvern. *Time to unleash the fire in Fake Michael’s knife for the first time in a long time!* He kept the unbidden thought a secret from Abel, of course.

Speaking of Fake Michael, The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition didn’t have an entry on wyverns... I’m not surprised that BeheBehe and gryphons weren’t in, but I guess this means wyverns don’t fall into the beginner category either, huh?

Those thoughts ran through his mind as he cut the magic stone out of the wyvern.

“Wow, this is pretty big, isn’t it?”

The beautiful deep-green magic stone wasn't as huge as a golem's, but still a decent fist-sized.

If this were an emerald, it would probably cost millions of yen.

It went without saying that Ryo was just randomly guessing.

"Yeah, these are pretty nice," Abel said. "The size and hue of the color will fetch a surprising price."

"But only if we reach civilization, hm?"

"Urk." Ryo's comment pierced sharply through Abel's heart.

"We'll each take one since we have our own bags."

Thus the two of them had discovered a safe, speedy method of hunting wyverns.



Though these mountains fell in the 7,000-meter category, it didn't necessarily mean Abel and Ryo needed to climb that high to cross the range. Snowmelt flowing through mountains could chisel away at the peaks, gradually eroding them. This occurred even at the foot of the mountains, but even then, these summits reached heights of at least 4,000 meters and Ryo thought they would have to climb some of those.

Four thousand meters...that was just below the point at which they'd suffer from altitude sickness...or at least he felt like he remembered reading something like that at some point.

As Ryo and Abel fought their way up the range, monsters attacked them one after another, and they weren't just any monsters.

Wyverns. So many of them inhabited this range that Abel and Ryo were sure a nest was nearby.

After killing the two wyverns at the base of the mountain, Abel had lost all inhibition. It was safe to say that he now annihilated each and every wyvern they encountered.

"I knew it, Abel. You actually *are* a battle maniac..."

“Shut it! They’re gonna get in our way no matter what, so it doesn’t make a difference if we kill them now or later. Besides, even if we take down all the ones that attack us, they’re probably all over this mountain range, so they can stand to lose a few. We’ll hunt them while moving forward!”

Ryo pinned the attacking wyverns to the ground with his Icicle Lances and Abel stabbed them in the head through their eyes with his sword. They slaughtered many wyverns through their teamwork. Extracting the magic stones from their corpses wound up taking more time than defeating them. The rate at which the jerky disappeared from their bags was matched only by the speed with which they filled them with the wyverns’ magic stones.

Around the 3,000-meter mark, the wyvern attacks stopped. Instead, the frigid cold began assaulting them. Thanks to their boar-leather cloak and poncho though, the two of them didn’t sustain much damage. They made it safely to one of the lower ridgelines. There, they finally glimpsed the land that lay to the north of the mountain range. Exactly one week had passed since they killed their first two wyverns.

“We managed to make it this far, hm?”

“Yeah. I’m glad it’s sunny. Makes for a great view, huh?”

Just like Abel said, the scenery before them was spectacular. A gorgeous, clear, and blue sky stretched endlessly above them. This majestic blue sky met the verdant plains below at the horizon.

Something suddenly moved at the periphery of their vision. Ryo turned his head to the right and saw...a woman, naked from the waist up, flying. Instead of arms, she had wings, and her legs looked like an eagle’s or hawk’s...

“Abel...a weird woman is coming this way.”

“What?”

Ryo pointed to the right.

Abel’s gaze followed in that direction. “That’s...a harpy...”

Indeed, what flew toward them wasn't a woman, but a full-fledged monster called a harpy. And harpies traveled in flocks...

"Abel, I see them on the other side too..."

When Ryo pointed to the left, they saw a group of harpies there as well.

"Ryo, do you see them ahead? Behind too?" Abel asked, surveying the landscape around them.

"I do..."

In the blink of an eye, they found themselves surrounded. One of them lunged at Abel. His sword flashed as he drew it from its sheath and slew the harpy in one slash. He moved quickly to Ryo's side after cutting it down.

"5-layer Ice Wall Package."

Ryo immediately enclosed the two of them in his ice barrier. Abel had rushed back to Ryo's side because he'd anticipated Ryo doing just that. Their teamwork had improved a great deal during this month of traveling.

"They're kicking at the wall really aggressively..."

Hovering all around, the harpies smashed at the ice wall with the razor-sharp, birds-of-prey talons on their feet... It seemed to Ryo that these talons were their primary offensive measure.

Something else caught Abel's gaze: the remains of the harpy he'd slain.

"Are they...eating her...?"

"Yes...and they aren't holding back."

He would have preferred to avoid staring at the sight, but it nevertheless gave Ryo inspiration for a way out.

"Icicle Lance 8."

Eight ice spears formed outside the ice wall. Each pierced a harpy and pinned them to the ground. The rest of the harpies pounced on their eight comrades and began devouring them. Evidently, they were hungry.

"What an awfully hair-raising spectacle."

“True, but the real mystery here is why the magician who set it in motion is acting like it has nothing to do with him.”

“I believe it’s just your imagination.”

Abel was exasperated by Ryo, who spoke as if he were just some sort of random bystander. Still, Abel couldn’t help but watch the harpies cannibalize each other from the corner of his eye. It was the only way he could stomach the sight. No way he would stare head-on.

“Do you think this method will work long enough for us to escape?”

The moment Abel murmured those words, an ear-shattering shriek echoed throughout the area. The harpies immediately moved in unison away from the dead comrades they were devouring. A few beats later, they landed on the ground and formed a circle around Ryo and Abel, who were still within the protection of the ice wall. There were about forty of them remaining.

One harpy broke through the line of her comrades and stepped forward. She was black from head to toe. Only her eyes were red. What stood out even more were her golden wings. They glittered, as if sprinkled with gold itself.

“A true boss character,” Ryo muttered quietly.

Abel remained utterly silent, his eyes wide.

“Abel?”

“Huh? O-Oh, yeah, I’m here. That’s probably the harpy queen. I’ve never actually seen one, only heard rumors, so...”

The moment Abel spoke, the harpy queen moved her right wing. Both Ryo and Abel immediately dropped flat on the ground. It wasn’t logic but intuition that drove them.

Krak. An invisible magical attack resembling an air slash tore through the Ice Wall and rushed past them.

“She destroyed my 5-layer Ice Wall in one shot?”

Ryo glared at the harpy queen, his expression a mixture of surprise and frustration.

“Ryo...”

Abel stared worriedly at him. It was only natural considering they were surrounded by forty harpies and their queen. Moreover, the harpy queen had just destroyed the barrier of ice in a single attack. How were they supposed to counter that?

“But the moment your opponent attacks means a chance to counter. *5-layer Ice Wall Package*.”

The harpy queen looked suspicious as Ryo recreated the wall of ice around them given she had just destroyed an identical wall just seconds ago.

“Checkmate, queen.”

The instant Ryo muttered those words, two hundred fifty-six Icicle Lances rained down over the area directly around them.

“Giiiiiaaaaaa!!!”

The harpies’ final screams reverberated around them as they twisted in their death throes, creating a veritable hell of agony. At the same time as he had avoided the harpy queen’s pseudo-air slash attack, Ryo generated his Icicles Lances high in the air. Then let them fall. The new 5-layer Ice Wall Package hadn’t been to protect them from the harpy’s attack but from the falling spears of ice.

All of the harpies had collapsed to the ground except one: the jet-black harpy queen. The queen’s golden wings were damaged, however, making it difficult for her to take flight again.

Hatred twisted her face.

“I’ll finish her off,” Abel said, his eyes never straying from the queen. He was saying that he would confront her hatred.

Ryo nodded in acknowledgment and deactivated the Ice Wall.

Sword in hand, Abel moved slowly toward the queen...ever so slowly. To any normal person, it looked like he was walking casually, but he didn’t drop his guard at all.

Because...

When Abel reached the halfway point exactly between her and Ryo, he noticed the most minute movement she made, which he wouldn't have had he relaxed for even a moment.

"Sword Skill: Perfect Shadow," he murmured softly.

Then his body seemingly blurred from sight as he swiftly evaded her pseudo-air slash. After dodging, he closed the distance between them at once, his blade flashing through the air as he swung.

The queen's head flew off.

"Bravo," Ryo said, nodding emphatically.

They didn't encounter any more problems after that and began their descent down the mountain. Though the battle itself hadn't taken long, even a short fight taxed the body. When your life is in danger, that alone is enough to exhaust you.

"Why don't we rest near that tree?" Ryo said.

Even two people with an inexhaustible supply of energy need to take breaks.

"Okay, so I think we'll probably finish our descent tomorrow. The question is...which direction to go once we reach the bottom..."

"That is indeed the question. We need to verify our location at the nearest village or town before we can figure out how to get to Lune."

"Yeah. I hope we're in the Kingdom of Knightley, but it's possible we might not be."

"No! Don't tell me we might end up in the Debuhi Empire!" Ryo said, utter loathing on his face.

"No, I doubt it. The Empire is north of the Kingdom."

Ryo sighed in relief at Abel's answer and drank from his cup of water. "I'm glad to hear that."

"I really don't get why you hate the Empire so much..."

"Abel, let me be clear because I don't want you to misunderstand. It isn't the

Empire I hate, but its name!”

“O-Oh, yeah, right, you did mention that...” Abel said, staring at him with pity and disappointment.

“Anyway, let’s just keep going north after we reach the bottom of the mountain. Even if we don’t stumble across a village or town, we should eventually find a highway that will lead us to somewhere at the very least.”

With their general plan of action set for the next day, the two of them took turns resting and keeping watch throughout the night.

They began their descent down the mountain early in the morning. They scanned the horizon at the halfway point but didn’t see any settlements, so, just like they had planned yesterday, they decided to continue north until they happened across a highway or main road. They didn’t encounter any monsters at all during their descent.

“Abel, you look bored.”

“I guess I am since I haven’t seen a single monster so far. It’s completely different from the other side of the mountain, huh?”

“That was normal. This is not.”

“Pretty sure you’re wrong, Ryo...” Abel said with a small shake of his head.

“Back there, we took one step, and boom—wyverns attack. Then there’s BeheBehe living its best life far off in the distance. The moment we let our guard down, a gryphon suddenly swoops down. Exciting times, don’t you think?”

“Jeez, the other side of the mountain really is an ominous place where no human would dare live... I still can’t believe I lived to tell the tale.”

“Abel, don’t forget that we’re on an expedition until you get home. So you mustn’t relax yet.”

“O-Oh... Huh. An expedition, huh... So we’re on an expedition...”

A faraway look entered Abel’s eyes. When he thought about it, going undercover in a smuggling ring had been the start of all this. He felt like a

considerable amount of time had passed since then, but...in reality, only about a month had.

“Abel, is that a road?”

Abel flinched in surprise at Ryo’s voice. When he looked in the direction Ryo indicated, there was indeed a road. In this era, major roads in the Central Provinces weren’t paved. At best, they were packed with dirt so that horse-drawn carriages could travel over them. Regardless, a road was clear proof he’d returned to civilization.

“Yeah, it sure is.”

Abel couldn’t help the tremor in his voice. The feeling finally hit him—he was back in the land of humans.

Return to Civilization

“All right, so which way should we go on this road...? Right? Left?”

“Left, to the west,” Abel replied with some degree of conviction. Upon coming across this east-to-west highway after descending the mountain, he had to guess which specific mountain range they had traversed.

It’s probably the Malefic Mountains. Monsters like orcs and ogres inhabit the foothills in some places too. Even adventurers refuse to go near them unless absolutely necessary. Basically, I managed to come back by crossing over those very same mountains... I really can’t believe we survived that trek.

This mountain range, which people of the Central Provinces called the Malefic Mountains, towered over them to the south. It was said that no one had ever crossed these mountains, so ordinary folks always stayed away. Even adventurers only went there on jobs, and hardly anyone answered the calls for those jobs anyway.

Although apparently people used to call it by another name in the past, no one knew the old name anymore. Everyone just called the range the Malefic Mountains now.

“Oh, Abel. You’re a B-rank adventurer, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I wanted to know if there are any advantages to registering with the adventurers’ guild,” Ryo said, finally voicing the question that had been plaguing his mind. Had he been enjoying a slow life on his own, he would have no need whatsoever for any information about the adventurers’ guild. However, since they’d soon be entering a town, he figured it wouldn’t hurt to learn something about it—especially since the adventurers’ guild was the ultimate isekai fixture. Whether or not he would register was a separate matter entirely.

“If you do, you’re exempt from paying tolls in the country. It’s basically a free

pass to enter any city or town 'cause your guild card doubles as your ID. Plus, if you want to sell things like magic stones and monster parts, the guild branches offer much better prices than independent merchants.”

“Oh ho, that’s what I want to hear.”

“They also hold on to your surplus funds.”

“What do you mean?”

“The money you don’t normally spend. When someone first becomes an adventurer, any income pretty much disappears in a flash. The more you rank up, the better you get paid, so it’s not so easy to go through your earnings as quickly. So the guild holds on to your extra money for you. I mean, it’d be dangerous to go off on a job with everything you own on you, right?”

Oh, a bank. They act like banks. I’m a bit surprised to learn they do that...

“Can you withdraw your money from any branch?”

“Yeah, you can, as long as they’re domestic.”

“Wow, that’s pretty amazing.”

Ryo was surprised to hear this. He thought whoever came up with this system must be a genius. He had no doubt that the guild invested the funds it held on behalf of adventurers in a variety of spheres. No world existed where organizations entrusted with capital just let the money sit there. Banks, insurance companies, and similar entities primarily accepted responsibility for cash so they could use it as investment funds.

When he considered that one of Europe’s oldest banks, the Bank of Saint George, was founded in 1148, it wasn’t all that strange for a bank-like organization to exist here on Phi...

“Abel, you said that adventurers can withdraw funds from any guild branch in the country. So does that mean the adventurers’ guild is an organization affiliated with the government? Or is it an independent organization that extends across many nations and therefore isn’t subject to government oversight?”

Ryo felt like many isekai stories established adventurers’ guilds as the latter,

with branches all over the world.

“All right, so, my knowledge is limited to the Central Provinces, but the adventurers’ guild is technically an independent organization. That’s just the official stance though. In reality, the guild and the nations coexist peacefully. Regardless of which country issued it, a guild card allows you freedom of movement across borders within the Central Provinces. Oh, yeah, one more thing. During times of war, countries employ adventurers as mercenaries by commissioning the guild.”

“War... Well, I suppose that’s cheaper than deploying knights,” Ryo remarked with a shrug.

“Your phrasing sucks, Ryo... Besides, that kind of commission is on the up and up, so adventurers are free to accept or decline. Though I’m not sure what would happen to all those surplus funds if my country ended up occupied... When I consider the possibility of the enemy absconding with it all... Well, no choice but to fight, huh?”

“Grr, money being held hostage like that... How could the guild and the governments allow it?! How could you, Abel?!”

“Hey, why are you dragging my name into it?!”

Ryo lumped Abel into his rant for some reason. Suffering this kind of treatment from him had become inevitable for the swordsman the moment he had become Ryo’s brother in arms...

They continued walking for the rest of the day. Around the time dusk fell, they spotted a settlement far off in the distance.

“Abel, I see something.”

“About time, huh? I’m pretty sure that’s the town of Kailadi.”

Ryo looked at Abel, his eyes widening in surprise. “But how do you know that?” he blurted.

Ryo’s surprise made sense. There hadn’t been any signs or markers on the road they took to indicate they were approaching any nearby settlements. They

hadn't even passed by other travelers. The area they'd found themselves in after descending the mountain was also far from any human settlements, so Ryo couldn't figure out how Abel knew which town it was.

"Well, as an adventurer, I've been to a bunch of places, y'know? I'm especially familiar with most towns and cities in the Kingdom," Abel said almost bashfully.

"Which means that's a town in the Kingdom of Knightley..."

"Yeah."

"Phew. I'm glad it's not the Debuhi Empire."

"How many times do I have to tell you the Empire is much farther north?! Anyway... Kailadi is the southeasternmost town in the Kingdom. It isn't very big though. If we walk northwest from there for about a day, we'll reach Lune."

A somewhat faraway look entered Abel's eyes as he stared at something only he could see beyond Kailadi.

"Lune...your final destination, huh, Abel?"

"You got that right. Ryo, if you're serious about registering as an adventurer, I suggest you do it in Lune instead of Kailadi."

"Really? Why?"

"Lune is the largest frontier city, which means lots of folks and resources. One reason it attracts so many goods and people is because it has the only dungeon in the Central Provinces. If you set Lune as your home base, you'll find the city very accommodating. Here's the thing... Officially, towns and cities are supposed to treat all adventurers equally, but they can't help giving special treatment to the local adventurers."

Ryo nodded after listening to Abel's explanation. "That makes sense. But wait—I don't have any sort of identification to show when we enter Kailadi..."

"No problem. I'll just act as your sponsor. I *am* a B-rank adventurer, after all. The toll is one silver coin, but I'll pay it for you."

"Oh, Abel, you're ever so wonderful! You *must* know I've always thought that, right? It's true, trust me."

Abel stared suspiciously at Ryo for a moment. “Right. So anyway, Ryo, we’re only spending a night in Kailadi, but you definitely have to try a local dish that’s a favorite of mine.”

They arrived at Kailadi’s eastern gate just as the sun had finished setting.

Following Abel’s advice, Ryo wore his robe over the bag he carried slung across his shoulders to conceal it from others’ view. Abel’s cloak covered his own bag too. Both of their bags contained a huge quantity of wyvern magic stones. If people realized what they had in their possession, they worried the situation could become...complicated.

In fact, a ruckus at the gate caused the arrogant sentinels to stand at the ready. Then, the commanding officer stormed out... At least this is what Ryo had been anticipating. None of this actually happened, and Ryo felt the slightest bit disappointed. But only the slightest bit, all right?

Instead, thanks to their foresight, they managed to enter the town without encountering any trouble. Since he was a B-rank adventurer, Abel vouched for Ryo and paid the entry toll of one silver coin. It was as easy as that for them to walk into Kailadi.

They stayed at an inn Abel always used when he came to Kailadi on business.

“This place has a restaurant on the first floor, and that’s where we can eat my favorite dish.”

Once they finished making the arrangements for their room, they headed straight to the restaurant and sat down at a table.

A plain-looking but amiable young woman came to take their order. “Welcome!” she said. “What can I get for you?”

“Kari for us both. Thanks.”

Abel’s pronunciation of the word *kari* sounded extremely cool.

“Right away.” The waitress headed back toward the kitchen then.

“If you’re still hungry after, feel free to order something else. Tonight’s dinner

is on me too.”

“Abel! Abel, what a wonderfully good person you are.”

Those who treated others to food are good people. At the very least, they were leagues better than those who didn’t, wouldn’t you say?

Around two minutes or so later, a nostalgic, savory, alluring aroma drifted toward Ryo from the direction of the kitchen. It stirred his appetite in a dramatic way.

This scent... It can’t be...

As the thought flashed through his mind, the same young woman appeared, carrying two large plates in her hands.

“Here you are! Your curry.”

The plates boasted...a viscous yellow sauce...full of spices...smothered over white rice...

“No. No way. Is this really curry rice...?”

Indeed it was curry rice, one of the foods universally loved by the Japanese people.

Curry, another reincarnation trope... But one that shows up only after the main character endures countless trials and tribulations over a long period of time wandering the world before he finally succeeds in recreating it... Except it already exists here on Phi...

“Ryo, I remembered kari when you served me rice during our time in the Forest of Rondo. Let’s dig in, shall we?”

“O-Okay...”

His lips quivering so minutely that nobody would even notice, Ryo tentatively lifted a spoonful of the curry to his mouth. Just a spoonful, but that was enough to know it was unmistakably curry rice. It was so fantastically similar to the kind he used to eat in his old life that it would be perfectly at home on a Japanese dining table.

Ryo’s first taste of curry rice in twenty years (by his estimate, anyway). He

savored it slowly and thoroughly, his spoon never stopping as he made inroads into his plate.

“Ryo, you can order more if you like it.”

Abel’s words truly were music to Ryo’s ears. “Excuse me, miss!” he called. “Another plate, please!”

“W-Well, I’m glad you like it then.”

Abel seemed a bit put off by Ryo’s intensity. Not long after, he too requested seconds and the two of them enjoyed an incredibly satisfying dinner.



“Abel, you know the curry we just ate? Can you find it in Lune too?”

It was vitally important that Ryo confirm the answer to his question. If it turned out he could only eat the curry here in Kailadi, then this is where he’d make his home base instead of Lune...

“Yeah, you can. The yellow soup on top is a bit expensive in certain restaurants since some of the spices used in it can only be found near Kailadi. That said, Lune is the largest frontier city, so many of the restaurants compete ruthlessly with each other, which means the quality of food is pretty high. Plus, kari’s a staple in many of the Kingdom’s southern cities.”

“Wow, that’s fantastic news!”

“I guess you *really* enjoyed it, huh, Ryo?”

Ryo nodded emphatically in response. “Yes, it was very delicious.” He swore to himself that he would recreate the dish someday if he ever returned to the Forest of Rondo.

Early the next morning, the two of them left the town of Kailadi.

“Abel, yesterday’s curry really, truly was amazing. A fine play on your part.”

“R-Right... Well, I’m happy it made you happy...”

“Is there any other important information you’re hiding from me like you did with curry?”

“I wasn’t hiding anything...”

“Abel, I know for a fact—a *fact*—that you must be keeping lots of secrets from me!”

“Uhhh...”

Adjusting his nonexistent eyeglasses as if he were a ruthless public prosecutor, Ryo turned to face Abel... On the receiving end of that relentless stare, Abel suddenly felt cold sweat slide down his back as he thought of some things that could validate Ryo’s accusation.

“The truth is that you actually like sweets, don’t you?!” Ryo said, jabbing a

finger toward Abel's face so aggressively his right hand *whooshed* through the air. "Go ahead and tell me what you know of sweet things people make!"

"Oh, uh, let me think about it for a bit first..."

"Boooooo..."

Abel felt slightly exasperated *and* relieved. Ryo, on the other hand, hung his head in disappointment.

The two of them walked while chatting about trivial things. Normally, the distance from Kailadi to Lune would have taken a full day to walk, but they were both very good walkers. Just after midday, they reached a small hill from where they could see Lune and the area around it.

"This is..." Ryo began.

The view went beyond anything he could have imagined. A golden landscape of wheat sprawled from the bottom of the hill to as far as the eye could see. It was almost harvest season.

A massive city lay enshrined in the midst of all those fields. There was no way it, with its enormous ramparts, could ever be mistaken for a town. Several hundred thousand people must have lived within its walls alone. That wasn't even counting the residents, farmers and the like living in the houses outside of the city's gates.

"So people live outside the city too, Abel?"

"Yeah. All the farmland is located outside the city grounds. In the past, the farmers lived within the city walls too, but they were too far from the fields, which is why now they live in houses built outside the city. It's one of the reasons Lune doesn't close the city gates even at night."

This last bit of information shocked Ryo. It was common practice in the Middle Ages on Earth, as well as in many isekai stories, for city gates to be closed at night.

"What about security then?"

"Lune has a lot more patrols than other cities. Taking into account its history

and size, I think the city does a decent job of keeping the peace.”

For a while, the two of them stared at Lune, taking in the sight. Then they started walking down the hill toward the south gate. There, they saw only the city guards given the afternoon was such a random time to enter or leave a city.

“Wait, Abel, is that you?” one of the guards called out, a startled expression on his face.

“It sure is, Nimur. Been a while, eh?”

“Understatement of the century considering you went missing...”

“Yeah, well, as you can see, I managed to make it back alive,” Abel replied, grinning.

“R-Right. Who’s that with you then?” Nimur asked, looking at Abel’s companion.

“My savior.”

“Ya don’t say! Thanks for saving Abel. Really appreciate it, man.”

Then he grabbed one of Ryo’s hands and shook it vigorously.

“Having said that, you’ll still need to pay the entry toll...”

“I’ll take care of it,” Abel said. He withdrew his guild card and gave Nimur a silver coin for Ryo’s fee.

“Great, thanks.”

After confirming he received the correct amount, Nimur grinned broadly, looking fit to burst, and beamed at Abel. “Welcome back, man.”

Ryo had been watching the exchange silently the whole time. He now felt a bit envious of Abel because his comrade had a place he could call home, a place where people would warmly welcome him back.

The whole concept was foreign to Ryo, who had spent so long in the Forest of Rondo by himself. While his life on Phi until now hadn’t bothered him at all, he couldn’t help but feel a hint of loneliness as he watched Abel and Nimur.

I’m happy for you, Abel.

This scene marked the end of their journey. Abel had commissioned Ryo to escort him to Lune, and here they were. The job ended the moment they stepped through the gate. Mission accomplished.

“Ryo, let’s head straight to the guild. You still wanna register, right?”

“Yes, I want to try out the adventurer’s life, so I might as well register now.”

“You can even apply for a rank-up since I’m with you.”

Ryo cocked his head curiously. “What’s a rank-up?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you? Okay, normally you apply as an F-rank when you first register but if you have a recommendation from an adventurer B-rank or higher, you can start off at E or D. With me, you should be able to get D.”

“What are the pros of being a D-rank?”

“You can take higher rank commissions. The higher a job is ranked, the greater the bounty, so I recommend applying for the rank-up. Although I don’t think you’ll be hurting for money, Ryo,” Abel said, glancing pointedly at Ryo’s bag.

“Ah, are you talking about the wyvern magic stones? Are they really that valuable?”

Clearly, Ryo had no understanding of their worth. It only took two Icicle Lances to take one wyvern down, meaning there’d been no real effort on his part to gather the magic stones. So it honestly didn’t make sense to him how they could be so valuable.

But Abel nodded emphatically in response to his question.

“You *do* realize it takes twenty people to slay one, right? And you managed to collect that many from such dangerous monsters... So yeah, they are. You can’t even find those magic stones on the market, making them technically priceless.”

“I see... But won’t this quantity crash the market price once I sell them?”

Scarcity was an important metric.

“The guild knows how to handle that too, so don’t worry about it.”

They arrived at their destination just as Abel finished speaking. Because Lune hosted the Central Provinces’s sole dungeon, its adventures’ guild attracted people from other countries too, making its guild the largest on the frontier.

The three-story stone building presented an exceedingly majestic sight. Ryo and Abel walked through its huge entrance and stepped inside. Considering the awkward time of day at which they’d arrived, afternoon, the interior was largely deserted. In the mornings and evenings, the foyer, crowded with adventurers vying for jobs, making reports, and haggling for money, resembled a battlefield.

Suddenly, a voice echoed throughout the space, breaking the silence.

“Abel, is that really you?!” the woman manning the counter exclaimed when she saw Abel. A head shorter than Ryo, she had light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and looked to be around twenty years old. Tasteful clothing covered her slender figure.

“Hey, Nina.”

In response to Nina’s shout, a few adventurers poked their heads out from the adjoining tavern.

“Whoa, it’s Abel in the flesh.”

“Welcoome back, Aaabeeel!”

“So you aren’t dead after all, eh?”

More than ten shocked adventurers crowded around Abel to celebrate his safe return. Everyone belonging to Lune’s adventures’ guild knew about his disappearance and had been extremely worried for him. Even in a city as big as Lune, B-rank adventurers numbered few and far between, and among them was the super popular party led by Abel, the Crimson Sword.

Abel, the sword prodigy whose skills were already being labeled those of an A-rank.

Rihya, a priestess of the Goddess of Light, who was rumored to use Absolute Defense.

Warren the Unyielding, the ultimate shield-user in the Kingdom.

And Rin. Though young compared to the other three, her abilities rivaled those of the royal magicians.

Safe to say, many adventurers admired these four. With their leader's return, it was only natural that adventurers would swarm him excitedly.

Just like the scene he'd seen play out at the city gate, this one too blinded Ryo a bit with its brilliance as he observed in silence.

Wow... Abel is really well-liked, huh? Being friends with him might work to my advantage...

Ryo could be calculating sometimes.

Abel allowed himself to be surrounded for a while before he found a good time to extricate himself from the group and approach Ryo.

"This is Ryo," he said. "He saved my life. I wouldn't have made it back here without him. And now he's going to register as an adventurer in this city. He'll be one of us. So make sure you guys get along with him too, okay?"

This surprised Ryo. He scowled at Abel, displeased that the swordsman hadn't given him a heads-up before he made his impromptu speech. Then he turned back to face everyone else. They were waiting for him to say something.

"Oh, I'm Ryo. Looking forward to getting to know you all." He bowed his head.

"Same here, Ryo."

"Thanks for saving Abel."

Two of the adventurers clapped Ryo on the shoulder as they spoke, expressing both their welcome and gratitude for aiding Abel's safe return.

"Nina, can you take care of his paperwork?"

Abel accompanied Ryo to the reception area. The other adventurers took the opportunity to return to the adjoining eatery to resume their meals. The only three remaining at the counter were Nina the receptionist, Abel, and Ryo.

"I want to recommend him as a D-rank. Is that possible?"

His request surprised Nina. Of course, the guild had a recommendation-based rank-up system in place that was used around once a year. However, until now, no member of the Crimson Sword, including Abel, had ever been a sponsor.

“Of course, but we require proof that he deserves the recommendation. Do you have anything attesting to his abilities?”

“Yeah, figured as much. I know how the system works. I’d like to discuss that and some other things with the guild master. Can you set up a meeting now?”

“Yes, I believe so. He’s been holed up in his office all day struggling with paperwork, moaning and groaning the whole time. I’ll let him know. You two can wait in the parlor.”

Nina smiled, then guided them to the parlor before heading to the guild master’s office.

A few moments later, they heard a gravelly voice booming so loudly that it reached even their ears.

“What did you say?!”

The shout was followed by the sound of footsteps pounding on the floorboards. Then the door slammed open forcefully and a giant of a man with a fierce look to him entered.

“Abel... Thank god...”

Then the giant’s knees gave out and he collapsed.

“I’m sorry for worrying you, GuilMas. As you can see, though, I made it back alive.”

“Good grief... Ya know, I lost the will to live when I heard ya up and vanished, Abel.”

The giant stood up and sat down in a fairly large, sturdy chair clearly meant for his frame.

“Ope, where’re my manners? Who,” the giant said, glancing at Ryo, “is this magician?”

“This is Ryo, my savior.”

“That right? Well, I’m Hugh McGlass and I’m the guildmaster here in Lune. ‘Preciate ya saving Abel.” Hugh stood up and bowed his head at Ryo.

Abel had called him “GuilMas” as an abbreviation for “Guild Master.”

“Oh, no, please. I just stumbled on him by chance, so don’t mention it.”

Without thinking about it, Ryo too stood up and bowed his head.

“Right then, GuilMas. Ryo wants to register as an adventurer in Lune, and I’m recommending him for a rank-up.”

Upon hearing those words, Hugh turned to stare at Nina, who remained standing by the door. She nodded affirmatively.

“That’s precisely what Abel wishes to discuss with you, Guild Master.”

Hugh had bolted out of his office before Nina could tell him the reason for Abel’s request for a private meeting.

“Oh, yeah? Well, ya know we need proof of his abilities to make it happen...” Hugh looked at Nina again. His expression this time was a silent signal to leave him alone with the other two, which she understood.

“I’ll excuse myself now. You can find me at the reception desk if you need me.” Nina bowed then left.

Abel spoke first.

“First things first: Ryo’s stronger than me.”

His words shocked both Hugh and Ryo.

“Whoa, whoa...”

“Abel, what... Did the jerky we ate for lunch upset your stomach or something?”

Abel sighed.

“Well, he’s a clown, but I’m not kidding about his abilities. These are our spoils from the monsters Ryo and I defeated on the way here.”

Abel pulled out the wyvern magic stones from his bag and arranged them on top of the table. Twenty-five of them.

“God almighty, what a haul... I know these magic stones are air-attributed since they’re green, but... Not only are they massive, the color’s mighty deep too... Don’t tell me...ya got these from wyverns?”

“We sure did. Ryo pretty much has the same amount too.”

In response, Ryo placed his own bag on top of the table.

“Ya yankin’ my chain here? Where the heck did ya even slay so many wyverns? That many would be enough to...destroy the whole country. Ya’d need every last man and woman to fight ’em off...” Hugh murmured so quietly it seemed like the words were being wrung out of him.

“Don’t worry about that. We hunted them in the southern parts of the Malefic Mountains.”

“The Malefic Mountains? Well, I’ll be damned. How the hell did ya even wind up there?”

“The ship got blown off course,” Abel said with a shrug, “all the way south of the range. I landed on a huge landmass there. From there, we crossed over the Malefic Mountains and then we ran into an entire flock of wyverns. That’s the long and short of it.”

Abel gave Hugh an extremely abridged version of events. For now, the important thing was to be able to explain that there was no danger of these particular wyverns attacking humanity right now, and that it wouldn’t be so easy to obtain this many wyvern magic stones so easily in the future.

“Ah, I hear ya. So let me see if I got this right. Ya want me to use the guild’s network to sell these off to avoid crashing the market price. That about sum it up?”

“That’s what I like about you, GuilMas. You don’t waste time getting to the heart of things.”

If Hugh sold off the stones in Lune, the market value would crash right away. Not to mention some folks would immediately try to investigate the source of such a prodigious quantity. If Hugh utilized the guild’s network and sold them off piecemeal to other towns, cities, the royal capital, or even other countries as trade goods, he could avoid raising suspicions. There you have it.

“Understood. It’ll take a while, but ya can trust me. I’ll parcel ’em off to a variety of buyers. I’ll have the royal family buy some too.”

Abel grimaced just the slightest bit when he heard that last part.

“I’m certain the lord mayor will wanna buy one right away. So I can have those funds to ya in two or three days. Should I split the profits fifty-fifty ’atween ya two?”

“No, forty-sixty. Forty for me, sixty for Ryo.”

“Abel, no. We go half and half.”

Abel shook his head. “Look, Ryo, I still haven’t been able to return the favor after you saved me. Think of it as your reward for bringing me safely all the way here.” Still seated, he bowed his head. “Just take it and let me save face.”

“Abel...”

“Ryo, ya wouldn’t insult Abel’s honor by turning him down after he said all that, eh?” Hugh said.

“Fine... Then, thank you very much.”

After confirming the size and quantity of the magic stones, Hugh placed them all in the office’s strongbox for safekeeping.

Then all three heard the sound of footsteps in the hallway outside.

“Everyone, please stop!” Nina called. “He’s still in the middle of a meeting!”

While these footsteps weren’t nearly as heavy as Hugh’s had been when he stormed into the parlor, the door nevertheless crashed open.

A short woman stood in the doorframe. By the looks of her black robe and the large staff in her left hand, she was clearly a magician.

“Abel... Thank goodness...”

Then her knees buckled and she slumped to the floor.

This again? Ryo wondered rudely.

“Hey, Lyn. Sorry I made you worry.”

It was Lyn, the air magician in Abel's party, the Crimson Sword. Two others entered Hugh's office behind her: a woman clad in white priestly garments and a giant man with a massive shield on his back.

"Abel..." the priestess said, her lovely voice ringing clearly across the room.

"Rihya, Warren. I'm back."

"I can see that... Welcome back, Abel."

Tears swam in Rihya's eyes while Lyn sobbed openly. Though Warren said nothing, his relieved expression told them more than enough. Abel smiled ruefully at the three of them. It seemed like Ryo wasn't the only one who didn't know how to react to the sight.

"Abel, I'm sure there's a lot ya all need to talk about, so use this room. Ryo, Nina, we'll fill out the paperwork in my office."

With that, Hugh left the parlor with Ryo and Nina.

In the guild master's office, Hugh plunked himself down on one of the sofas.

"An atmosphere like that don't sit right with me, ya know? Ryo, take a seat over there. Nina, Ryo's gonna register as a D-Rank, so do ya mind bringin' me a full set of the relevant documents?"

"Yes, sir."

Nina left the room to make the necessary preparations, which left Ryo alone in the office with the fierce-looking giant of a guild master.

"Are you sure about the D-rank?"

"Yeah, don't ya fret. I mean, who wouldn't be convinced after being shown so many wyvern magic stones?" Hugh said with a hearty laugh.

"Well, Abel was the one who dealt the killing blows."

"There ain't no doubt he's a prodigy, *but*... I sure as hell know a lone swordsman, no matter how talented, can't take down a wyvern. That means yer quite powerful yerself. Strong enough of a magician for Abel to slay wyverns with your help. In that case, yer clearly good enough to register as a D-rank."

With that, he slapped Ryo so vigorously on the back that he worried about the integrity of his bones...

“Oh ho? Ryo, yer pretty fit for a magician, eh?” Hugh asked, clearly having noticed Ryo’s muscular build.

“I hunted alone, you see. I had to build up my stamina or risk dying if I ran out of energy in the middle of combat.”

“Preach, boy, preach.” Hugh nodded emphatically. “Don’t matter what amazing tricks or magic ya got. If yer body fails, it’s the end of the line for ya. I just wish more o’ today’s young whelps understood that though.”

For a while after that, Hugh talked Ryo’s ears off, first grumbling at length about the youth then relating to him the guild’s course of action on how to expand its reach to those very youth. Despite his grumbling, Hugh was only in his late thirties.

Some time later, a knock interrupted his tirade.

“Come in.”

“Beg your pardon,” Nina said. She entered with a tray bearing some sort of large crystal and other documents. “Guild Master, I brought the registration tool.”

“Ah, thanks. I’ll leave the formalities to ya then. Ryo, just do what Nina tells ya to and ya’ll be fine. I still have a war to wage against these documents...”

With that, Hugh walked toward his own desk.

“Let me formally introduce myself. My name is Nina and I work here in the Lune guild. Lovely to meet you.”

“I appreciate your hospitality. I’m Ryo and it’s a pleasure to meet you as well.”

The two of them greeted each other. It was very important to introduce yourself properly.

“Right, then. Allow me to establish some facts. Please answer my questions.”

“Understood.”

I’m pretty sure the usual pattern is to fill out forms handed to you... Then they

say something like, “Do you need someone to write on your behalf?” And the main character replies, “No, I’m fine.” Something like that. But...I guess things are different here, with the guild staff filling out the data from the start instead.

This was evidently different from the isekai stories Ryo knew...

“Your name is Ryo and your occupation is magician, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Your attribute?”

“Water.”

“Residence...? Oh, you don’t have one yet, do you?”

“Yes, since I only just arrived.”

“You can stay in the guild’s lodging annex for up to 300 days from registration. Long enough to help you sort things out and get you on your feet. It also affords young, freshly anointed adventurers the chance to make friends with each other.”

Nina placed the paper explaining the lodging terms in front of Ryo.

“You’re free to stay there or leave anytime within those 300 days, so please consider it as a candidate for your residence.”

“I will, thank you.”

This paper... I would have assumed letterpress printing doesn’t exist here, but... The fact that there’s a bunch of guides with the exact same content indicates otherwise... Another Phi mystery added to the list.

“Next question, Ryo. Have you ever ventured into a dungeon?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“The guild hosts a seminar for dungeon novices every month. We cover topics such as tips and warnings, things that can be collected and sold, and the like. We also offer a similar seminar to novice adventurers. All of our courses are free of charge. I recommend the dungeon one to you if you’re interested in that.”

“Yes, please!” Ryo said eagerly.

“This month’s seminar takes place the day after tomorrow. It lasts for five days. Different topics are covered each day, so I recommend attending all five days.” Nina beamed at him. Her smile was so captivating that even Hugh, observing the proceedings from his desk, nodded along—but don’t tell anyone he did so.

“I’ll fill out the seminar application for you. Please arrive at the guild’s third-floor lecture room by nine in the morning the day after tomorrow.”

“Nine?”

Ryo wondered if it was the same nine o’clock as Earth.

“Yes. You can check the time on the clock tower in the square. The bell in Lune’s clock tower rings at nine, twelve, fifteen, and eighteen o’clock.”

Time was indeed the same here as on Earth.

“This concludes our interview. All that’s left is for you to register yourself, Ryo.”

“What do you mean?”

“Would you please place your hand on this crystal ball?”

As Nina instructed, Ryo placed his right hand on the crystal ball she’d brought back with her.

“Register.”

At her command, the crystal ball began to glow. Then Ryo felt just the tiniest bit, a smidgen really, of magic leave his body. The light in the crystal ball coalesced, entered the card in Nina’s hand, then shot out and disappeared.

“You can take your hand off now, Ryo. Thank you very much.”

He did as she bid. No changes had occurred in Ryo himself. Meanwhile, Nina appraised the card that had briefly absorbed the crystal ball’s light. Once she was satisfied that everything was in order, she handed it over to Ryo.

“Here you go. This is your guild card, Ryo. It acts as your identification card, so please notify the guild immediately if you damage or lose it. It costs 10,000 florins or one gold coin to reissue it, so please be careful.”

Ryo took the card from her and verified the information on it. His name, his adventurer rank of D, and his affiliation with the city of Lune in the Kingdom of Knightley. That was all it noted.

“Do you have any questions?”

“Yes, one, if you don’t mind. Abel told me that the guild holds on to funds for its adventurers and that they can withdraw them at any time through any guild branch in the country?”

“That’s correct. If you tell us at the counter, you can complete the procedure in a separate room. You’ll be asked to verify your identity with this same crystal ball.”

“Then that crystal ball is connected to the whole country...?”

Incredible. Astounding. Unbelievable. Truly fantastical. Truly magical. The online system that had only just reached full maturity on modern Earth already existed on Phi!

“Yes, I’d say that’s an excellent way to think of it.”

Nina nodded. At that exact moment, someone knocked on the door. She looked to Hugh for direction.

“Come in,” Hugh said without looking up from his documents. The members of the Crimson Sword, Abel’s party, entered.

“GuilMas, thanks for letting us use the parlor. We’re heading out now,” Abel informed Hugh.

“Sure thing.”

“Guild Master, Nina,” Lyn, the party’s air magician, said. “We’re hosting a party tonight at eighteen o’clock at the Golden Wave to celebrate Abel’s return. Hope to see you there!”

“Your attendance is mandatory, Ryo.” Abel grinned cheerfully. “After all, you’re the guest of honor.”

“Huh...?”

Ryo froze.

“The Golden Wave is the inn we regularly stay in. I’ll reserve a room for you too, Ryo, so don’t worry, you can get as drunk as you want.”

“I am actually worried now though...”

“Anyway, you can’t say no, Ryo. But before that, there’s somewhere I wanna take you.”

Abel glanced inquiringly at Nina then.

“Thus concludes your adventurer registration. If you have no further questions, the process is now complete.”

“Yeah, I’ll just answer any questions you have, Ryo, so let’s get outta here.”

With that, Abel forced Ryo to his feet.

“We’ll head back to the inn first to get everything ready,” said Rihya the priestess. Then she, Lynn, and Warren left the office.

“All right, GuilMas, I’m stealing Ryo from you.”

Ryo bowed his head politely at them. “Guild Master, Nina, thank you very much for all your help.”

“Think nothing o’ it. Lookin’ forward to seein’ what ya get up to now that yer an adventurer of Lune.”

Hugh raised a hand in farewell. Nina too bowed to him. Then Abel led him out.

“I shall head back to reception then.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Nina.”

She headed back to her post at the counter.

Hugh McGlass was now alone in his office.

“Gaaah! I’m so happy I could cry!”

Though he kept his voice low to avoid others outside hearing him, a flood of emotions nevertheless filled his words.

“The instant gloom when we all found out Abel vanished... I never wanna go

through that again. I'm so glad he made it back alive... Still can't believe he ended up shipwrecked beyond the Malefic Mountains... That's the definition of no way out, eh... For me and him."

Then he slumped on top of his desk.

"The fool boy really didn't need to take on that job investigating the smuggling ring. He should have just stayed on land, safe and sound. He's unmatched as long as the job involves solving things with a sword... I think he'd be just fine in a dungeon pinch too. The water's no good for him though. No good at all. Well... I'm beyond grateful to Ryo for bringin' him back. Did us a huge favor, eh... I'd be deader'n a doornail myself if Abel hadn't come back. Oh, yeah, I should let 'em know he's safe..."

With that, Hugh activated the alchemical communication device installed inside his cabinet.

"Abel, where are you taking me?"

Abel had turned north on the main street when they exited the guild building.

"Well, it's about your reward for escorting me..."

"Hm? I thought we decided the magic stones covered that?"

"No, that's different. I'm gonna be honest with you. When I asked you to go with me, I decided I'd buy you clothes and a staff once we made it to Lune." Abel covertly gauged Ryo's reaction to his disclosure before continuing. "Oh, just to be clear, I know you're probably attached to the leather loincloth and sandals. I'm not trying to insult your fashion sense or anything..."

"You don't have to walk on eggshells with me," Ryo replied, smiling wryly. Though he'd been largely alone since arriving on Phi, he had after all spent nineteen years on Earth as a normal person. "I know what you mean. Sandals aside, I know I can't walk around town with basically nothing underneath. Also, I'm not attached to either of those things. There wasn't any thread in the Forest so I couldn't make any proper clothing... If you're buying me clothes, I'm more than happy to tag along, Abel."

“Phew, good to know!” Abel said, relieved. He’d worried Ryo would misinterpret his offer as a slight to Ryo’s homemade clothes, which could have led to trouble he didn’t want. “In that case, you can choose a few casual and fancy sets.”

“I understand the clothes, Abel, but why a staff too?”

“Cause you don’t have one even though you’re a magician, right, Ryo?”

“That’s right,” Ryo said, tilting his head curiously, “but I can use magic without one.”

“Well,” Abel replied, pausing to recall Ryo’s magic. “I heard that a staff increases the power of magic...”

Wait, a staff could make him even more powerful...? Abel thought. I feel like he’s strong enough now...

“Oh, really? I don’t think I’ll use it though. Plus, I have my sword for melee combat.”

“Sword?” Abel asked, shocked. “You know how to use a sword, Ryo? We’re not talking about your knives, right?”

“Huh? Did I not mention it? Do you remember when I told you what I’d do if I were an air magician? How I’d split myself into three to shoot sonic blades, then execute a rush attack? Well, if I can’t use a sword, then I can’t rush attack, right?”

“R-Right. What did you call it? A breakdown rush? I thought you were joking though.”

“You’re so mean...”

They arrived at the clothes shop while carrying on their conversation. It wasn’t luxurious by any means, but it did carry a range of tasteful apparel.

“This isn’t a particularly high-end shop, but the tailoring is excellent and so are their styles, which makes it very popular with folks. I order my clothes here too.”

“Yours are very durable, hm, Abel? No wear or tear despite the journey from

the Forest of Rondo to Lune.”

“D-Durable, huh... Well, they’re designed for everyday activities, so yeah, I suppose they are pretty tough.”

In the end, they spent two hours in the store. Ryo walked out wearing a ready-made outfit with three more custom sets to be delivered at a later date.

After they left the clothes shop, the two of them headed for the Golden Wave establishment.

“Hey, Ryo. You sure you don’t need a staff?”

“Positive. I would have no idea how to use it anyway. Besides, I told you earlier, didn’t I? If I’m going to use a weapon, it will be a sword.”

“Okay, if you’re absolutely sure then...”

Abel suddenly stopped in the middle of the street.

“Abel, what are you doing? I’ll leave you behind, you know.”

“As if. You don’t even know where the Golden Wave is. Wait, no, that’s not what I wanna discuss. Ryo, you don’t *actually* have a sword, do you?” he asked as he scrutinized Ryo’s waist and back.

“Yes, I do. This is it.” Ryo withdrew Murasame, the sword he’d received from the Dullahan—or at least the knife on which he could generate the sword’s blade.

“You call that a *sword*? Huh? Isn’t that the knife you always carry at your waist?” Abel asked, flustered. “Now I’m even more confused. What’re you talking about?”

No matter how Abel looked at it, Ryo’s ‘sword’ was a knife. Yes, the handle was extremely long and the design was foreign to him, but it was still a knife. No one but Ryo would call it a sword.

“Never mind that, Abel, because I have a question for you. You told Nina you’d answer any questions I have in her stead, right?”

“Ah, yeah... I did, didn’t I? Then ask away.”

“Well, the truth is, I realized I don’t know much about the basics.”

“What do you mean?”

“For example, how long a day is or other units of measurement. Things like that.”

Abel’s expression stiffened.

“Abel, I know you thought of me as a guy with lots of common sense. I’m sorry to betray your expectations.”

“Uh, I never actually did, so no worries. But I didn’t imagine you’d be *this* far gone in common sense either...”

“How rude! ‘Knowing you know nothing.’ A famous phrase that states it’s a good thing to acknowledge your own ignorance. And I know nothing!”

“Uhhh, whatever you say...” Abel said. “But I feel like you’re more along the lines of—well, just plain ignorant...”

Despite his comments, Abel—who, as always, was a nice guy—nevertheless began explaining things to Ryo.

Basically, many things on Phi were the same as they were on Earth. Twenty-four hours in a day, seven days in a week, thirty days in a month, give or take a day or two... Ryo had been shocked to learn that February had twenty-eight days here, with leap years existing on top of that too.

Length was also measured in meters and kilometers, the un-American standard used by most countries on Earth. What surprised Ryo was how weight was measured on Phi. They used gallons instead.

Nevertheless, considering what he’d learned about these basics—not to mention the very existence of curry rice—Ryo could only assume that all of these things were the result of tampering by someone or a few someones who’d been reincarnated or transferred to Phi in the past. His secret hunch was now turning into certainty.

“You don’t have to force yourself to memorize everything all at once, so just take your time,” Abel said.

“No need. I jotted it all down perfectly in my head.”

“You a genius now...?”

It was only natural he'd learned these units effortlessly given most of them were essentially the same as they were on Earth.

“Nina also mentioned I could stay in the guild's lodgings anytime within the first three hundred days after registration.”

“Oh, yeah, it's very convenient. We took advantage of that offer when we were starting out too,” Abel said, looking up at the sky like he was recalling nostalgic memories.

“Really? I had no idea. Then I'll bunk down there starting tomorrow as well. It'll make things easier since the dungeon seminar for beginners starts the day after tomorrow.”

“Ah, yeah, that one. They created it within the last three years or so. Thanks to the practical info taught in the course, far fewer new adventurers have died. Your magical talent aside, Ryo, I think it'll be really good for you since you don't have much technical or general knowledge.”

“Abel,” Ryo started with a sigh, “just because *you* lack common sense doesn't mean I do too. Please don't project your failings on me.” He shrugged and sighed, his attitude screaming, “Good grief, man.”

“Hold it right there. I *literally* just taught you the basics, so the fact is I definitely have more common sense than you. Even you can't deny reality.”

“Only people who aren't drunk say, ‘I'm not drunk.’ That's what you're doing right now, Abel. It's the same principle. You need help, my friend.”

“Now I'm just getting pissed off listening to you spout that load of crock...” Abel shook his head in frustration, his expression unconvinced.

“A long time ago, someone said, ‘To define is to limit.’”

“Yeah, and?”

“Letting common sense tie you down means limiting the power of your imagination.”

“Oookaaay...”

“In short, lacking common sense isn’t necessarily always a bad thing. That should make you feel better about yourself, right, Abel?”

“Damn it, will you cut it out?! You should be saying that to *yourself*, Ryo! One hundred percent!” Abel shook his head. “Cripes, never knew it could be this exhausting to be with someone who lacks common sense.” He glared at Ryo.

“Why are you staring at me while saying that? Because I’ll have you know, I have *tons* of common sense!”

“What was it again you said? Oh, yeah. Only people who aren’t drunk say, ‘I’m not drunk.’”

“Grrr... I see you learned how to fight back too, Abel...”

Ryo’s expression wasn’t one of praise but of chagrin as he spat those words out. Then he suddenly changed the subject completely.

“Ah, I have a few other questions for you. Is there a library in this city?”

The abrupt change in topic gave Abel a bit of whiplash, but he nevertheless afforded Ryo’s question his full attention. Because he was just that nice of a guy.

“There are two large libraries. The one in the southern part of the city is geared toward the general population. It has a lot of easy-to-understand books on a wide range of subjects. So the southern library is good for learning the fundamentals. It’s one block south of the guild. As for the library in the north of the city, it pretty much only has technical books, meaning it’s not for the general public. But if you’re looking for something in an area where you have some specialized knowledge, that might be a good place to go.”

“Do you need to pay a fee or have some sort of qualifications to use the southern library?”

“Anyone can use it. You pay two thousand florins, or two large silver coins, as a deposit at the front desk when you enter. When you leave, you get back half the deposit as long as there aren’t any issues. If you damage the books, they keep the deposit and might even charge you more depending on the book and the damage.”

They reached the Golden Wave while they were talking.

The next morning, Ryo woke up when the clock tower struck nine. He was in one of the guest rooms that Abel's party, the Crimson Sword, had reserved at the Golden Wave. He vaguely remembered Abel helping him inside. Ryo had been leaning heavily on Abel's shoulder on account of being ridiculously drunk.

"I'm hungover... My head hurts..."

A hangover... He'd never experienced one during his life on Earth—which made sense since he'd been underage and hadn't ever tried alcohol. That said, he knew enough to know what a hangover was.

Last night, Ryo had drunk his first sip of alcohol on Phi. His first ever alcoholic drink had been a mug of ale, a beer-like substance. After that, though, everyone had plied him with a variety of liquors, and his memory became hazy from that point on, so he couldn't exactly recall what the other drinks had been.

At Abel's welcome back party, a great many people had filtered in and out of the establishment over the course of the night, each and every one of them there to celebrate Abel's safe return. Their presence only emphasized how popular Abel really was.

Though he'd been the star of the show, Abel had decreed Ryo the guest of honor since he'd saved his life, so a lot of people had welcomed him. He had been almost overwhelmed by their good cheer... Ryo had been so popular that the rest of Abel's party—Rihya, Lyn, and Warren—hadn't been able to approach him in the crush. They'd left without getting a chance to talk to him.

He drank the water he produced using his magic and got ready for the day. When he finished, he left the room carrying his belongings with him. Just like he'd told Abel yesterday, he would be moving into the guild's housing today.

Upon descending to the first floor, he found a pile of drunk corpses everywhere—or at least he *should* have. In reality, the plastered adventurers who had passed out last night had been forcibly removed from the inn's dining hall to make room for the overnight guests and diners stopping in for breakfast. They hadn't been tossed out though. No, they'd been shoved into seats in a corner of the dining hall, where they now slept face down on a table.

“I’m reminded of that famous poem. ‘Summer grasses *all that remain* of great warriors’ dreams’...” Ryo murmured before heading to the proprietress stationed at the counter.

“Breakfast will be ready soon, so sit anywhere you like.”

“Oh, thank you so much. Might I ask for the bill as well? I’ll be moving into guild housing after this, so...”

“You have nothing to worry about since Abel already paid.” She smiled cheerfully at him before walking in the direction of the kitchen.

Abel... What a good person.

Anyone who treats others was a good person. Well, they were at least better than the ones who didn’t.

Breakfast consisted of white bread, stew, and cheese. Though the fare was simple, it was incredibly delicious and included seconds, or even thirds if he wanted. Hunger satisfied, Ryo set out for the guild.

When he arrived, he found a very chaotic atmosphere there, like a storm had just blown through. There was a sense of relief mixed into the air too, like the feeling after crossing a mountain pass. This was the usual scene after the morning’s scramble for commissions ended and those lucky enough to snatch a few up had left. Of course, because of Lune’s dungeon, there were also many adventurers who went straight there instead of stopping by the guild first for work.

For Ryo though, chaotic was the only way he could describe the sight since this was his first time experiencing the aftermath of the guild’s morning carnage. The women working the counters were naturally exhausted. Despite their fatigue, they demonstrated their professionalism when Ryo approached by squaring their shoulders and smiling at him. He headed toward Nina.

“Good morning, Ryo. How can I help you today?”

He didn’t really care who he talked to, but he’d chosen Nina because he preferred dealing with someone he already knew versus complete strangers.

“Good morning. I’d like to take you up on yesterday’s offer, the one about guild housing.”

“Understood. We currently have thirty people in residence. Some are off in the dungeon... But no one really goes every day, so you’ll see folks around. Each bedroom fits six people. You’re free to use the common room whenever you like. I’ll give you a tour since I don’t have any others to wait on.”

With that, Nina stepped out from behind the counter.

Nina passed through the guild building entrance and turned, heading in the opposite direction. Ryo followed her.

“Oh, I hope you enjoyed the celebration last night. I saw Rah forcing you to drink the whole time once he caught you, hm?” she said with a chuckle, recalling the events of the previous night.

“Rah idolizes Abel like an older brother, which is why he was extremely grateful to have him back.”

Rah was a swordsman and the leader of the C-rank party Switchback. He practically worshiped Abel, so he had gone overboard in expressing his gratitude to Ryo, his hero’s savior. The whole. Entire. Party. There had been plenty of others who had poured Ryo drinks and brought him food, but even then, Rah had remained steadfastly by his side, thanking him profusely over and over.

“I’m happy he’s happy. But to be honest...I drank way too much,” Ryo replied with a wry smile.

“The guild store has a variety of detoxifying potions in stock, so I recommend you try one for your hangover.”

“Oh, wow. I had no idea a potion could even do that...”

Every day, Ryo’s knowledge of this world increased.

“Indeed. I myself have never tried one, but it’s a popular remedy among adventurers.”

The guild’s housing was located behind the main building. Just like the

headquarters, it too was a magnificent structure made of stone, with two floors.

“What are the lodge’s rules? For example, is there a curfew?”

“No, you can come and go as you please. The building is equipped with several bedrooms, common toilets and showers, and the common room includes a kitchen. There’s no caretaker on-site, which means all the residents are responsible for themselves.”

“That’s, uh...pretty drastic, isn’t it?”

“Well, there used to be a caretaker, but it’s a long story, so... Cleaning is the only thing we outsource to a third party. A former adventurer runs a cleaning company with contracts all over the city.”

I see. So that’s the kind of work adventurers do after they retire. It makes sense. While they’re as active as adventurers, they can make all kinds of connections with people, and they can rely on that network for work after they leave adventuring behind.

“Ryo, you’ll be sharing Room 10 with two others, Nils and Eto. They partied up with each other and are currently in the dungeon. Here we are.”

Nina motioned to the door. There were two nameplates next to it, one with “Nils” on it and the other with “Eto.”

“This is where residents hang their nameplates. I’ll hang yours up since I have it ready,” she said, mounting his own nameplate on the wall. Her deft movements indicated that she was a woman who could do her job well. Then she knocked on the door.

“Come in,” a voice called out from inside the room.

“Oh, they’re both here.”

She opened the door and stepped inside.

“Excuse me, it’s Nina from the guild. Nils, Eto, I see you’re both in residence today, hm?”

There were two men in the room: a brawny one with light brown hair, about twenty years old, who was doing push-ups on the ground and another whose

frame was so slender it was clear even under his white priestly garb.

“M-Miss Nina! H-H-H-H-Hello!” the brawny young man stuttered.

“Excellent timing. This is your new roommate, Ryo. He’ll be living here starting today. I hope you both look after him.”

“My name is Ryo. Pleasure to meet you,” Ryo said, bowing.

“Hey, I’m Nils and that’s Eto. Good meeting you too, Ryo.”

Nils stood up and held his hand out to Ryo for a handshake. Eto remained seated in his chair, but he lifted a hand and nodded in greeting at Ryo.

Nina nodded and continued speaking. “I’ll be returning to reception now. Ryo, please make sure you aren’t late to tomorrow’s seminar... Oh, I suppose that won’t be a problem since you’ll be coming from here, hm?”

She smiled cheerfully at them then walked out, heading back to the guild’s main building.

“Ahhh, Miss Nina really is beautiful,” Nils mumbled after she left.

“Give it a rest, Nils. You know how many are vying for the hearts of those lovely receptionists and you’re very much not in the running,” Eto noted with a snicker.

“Y-You think I don’t know that?! But every man’s dream is to settle down with a good woman after he makes a name for himself!”

Back on modern-day Earth, where gender equality existed, he might have been lambasted from all sides for saying something like that, but his words weren’t at all problematic on Phi.

“Well, a few of them are already betrothed to nobles. They won’t deign to engage with ordinary adventurers like us.”

In fact, this world might not be all that far from equality between the sexes, considering that the women who worked as receptionists seemed to hold an overwhelmingly higher social status than adventurers...

“Anyway, never mind all that. Ryo, was it? No need for formalities since we’re all roommates now. Does that sound good to you?”

“Yes, I’m fine with that.”

“Great! I was honestly a bit worried about who else we’d get in this six-person room since it’s just the two of us right now. I knew newbies would show up eventually, so I’m glad it’s you, Ryo. You seem like a responsible sort.”

“For real. I’d have hated it if we got someone like Dan in Room 1.”

Both Eto and Nils nodded vigorously a few times in agreement.

“Oh, right... Things can get tricky with personality clashes, huh...”

No matter which age or world, this is something that would never change. It held true on Earth and apparently on Phi.

“Yup. By the way, I’m a swordsman and Eto is a priest. What about you, Ryo? I’m guessing magician?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Your looks gave it away,” Nils said, grinning. “Miss Nina mentioned something about a seminar earlier. You taking the dungeon one, Ryo?”

“Yes, the 5-day one for beginners.”

“Oooh, yeah, that’s a great one. I’m super grateful for it ’cause it’s the only reason we’re still alive.” His smile broadened even more now.

After that, the two of them told Ryo about the city and other things.

Thirty minutes later, a knock sounded on their door again.

“Come on in,” Nils called out. When he did, Nina entered once more.

“My apologies, everyone. A new adventurer who just registered with the guild would like to stay here in the lodge as well.”

A moment later, a boy stepped out from behind her. He looked to be in his late teens.

“I’m Amon,” he said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Nils. That’s Eto and this is Ryo.”

“Amon, Ryo is also taking tomorrow’s seminar, so why don’t you two attend

together?”

Nina left with that remark, heading back to her duties at the main building.

“Mmm, Miss Nina really *is* beautiful...”

Eto glanced pointedly at Ryo, like he was saying, “See? What did I tell you?” Ryo nodded in silent understanding. Nils sulked at their nonverbal exchange.

“Hey, I’m not hurting anyone, okay? Get off my back. Anyway... Amon, you’re still pretty young, huh? You’re not even officially an adult yet, are you?”

The age of majority in the Central Provinces was eighteen.

“That’s right. I recently turned sixteen. My family passed away, so I decided to become an adventurer in order to survive. That’s why I came to Lune.”

“Guess we’re all in the same boat, huh?” Eto chimed in.

The priest is broke too? I’m kinda curious now about his story...

Even Ryo wasn’t rude enough to ask him though. He knew it was too soon, so he kept his mouth shut.

“Ryo actually just moved in not long before you. Pretty neat you’ll be in the same class too, huh?”

“Yes, let’s learn a lot over the next five days, Amon.”

“Sounds wonderful!”

“All right, we’re off to the dungeon then. Good luck with the seminar, you two.”

And with that, Nils and Eto set off to explore the dungeon.

They all ate breakfast together at the eatery attached to the guild’s headquarters. The food there was just as good as the Golden Wave’s. Not only was it cheap, they could get free refills as well. Whether breakfast at the Golden Wave or the guild’s canteen, Ryo was extremely grateful for the unlimited seconds. It was just like the breakfast buffets at business hotels back on Earth. After all, breakfast was *very* important.

Once they filled up their stomachs, Ryo and Amon headed to the lecture hall

on the third floor of the guild's main building. The space resembled lecture halls in university, with stairs leading to higher levels of seating. Though it was five minutes to nine, there were already ten people in the room. The two of them sat in the second row from the front.

I really thought there'd be more people here.

Just before the tower bell tolled nine o'clock, twenty more people entered, bringing the total number of participants to thirty, give or take a few. So began the five-day dungeon seminar geared toward beginners.

"No way! You're lying! That's impossible!"

While Ryo and his roommate, Amon, were attending the course for novices, the Crimson Sword gathered in the guild's adjoining dining hall. The original purpose for their meeting had been to discuss their schedule moving forward, but talk turned to Abel's return, and from there, to Ryo's water magic.

"I hate to break it to you, but it's very possible."

"I know an Ice Wall spell exists under the water magic umbrella," Lyn, the air magician, said, trying once again to refute Abel's explanation of Ryo's magic. "But it's so thin that an air slash would tear right through it. And you're telling me he made an Ice Wall in *midair* then let it *drop*? Impossible is the only option here, Abel." She emphasized her argument with a jab of her fork. "Okay, mister? Magic can only be conjured around the user. Whether water magic, air, or fire. It's true for all of them. So no one can create magic or magical phenomena from a distance."

"Uhhh, yes, ma'am..." Overwhelmed by her intensity, Abel couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Now, Lyn, you're getting too worked up. If Abel said he saw it, then I for one, believe him," Rihya said, trying to placate the agitated Lyn with a smile.

"But you know I'm right, Rihya. It's common sense. You've always had a blind spot when it comes to Abel..."

"Hmm. Well, even light magicians can only heal their targets when they're right next to them. It would be incredibly convenient if they could heal from a

distance though... But you're right, Lyn, it *is* impossible to do so." Rihya tilted her head, deep in thought.

"Oh, really...? I'm just telling you what happened though. That's how we got this yellow stone from the golem," Abel explained, showing them the yellow, palm-sized magic stone.

"It *is* indeed quite large. What will you do with it?" Rihya asked.

"Ryo told me I can do whatever I want with it since I took the golem down..."

It was the golem Abel had incapacitated with his kick, so it was true that he'd been the one to defeat it.

"Abel, I know you feel bad about keeping it all to yourself instead of sharing it with Ryo, but the royal family will certainly desire a stone that size. Can't you just sell it and split the profits equally with him, hm?"

"Yeah, that's the problem," he said, his head drooping.

"I don't understand. Why can't he do that?" Lyn interjected, confused as to what the issue actually was.

"I can get money for it, but you know I'll have to inform them who I split the proceeds with. Meaning things'll get sticky if I give up Ryo's name... Just 'cause he registered at Lune's guild doesn't mean he swore fealty to the Kingdom of Knightley. The king aside, others around him will try to win Ryo over as a political ally for the Kingdom once they find out how gifted he is."

"Okay. I can see that happening, even if they only believe half of what you say, Abel," Lyn said, nodding thoughtfully. "Would it really be so bad though?"

"Only half, huh? Now I gotta wonder how much faith you have in me... Well, I suppose Ryo might turn them down anyway if he's not interested. Although in that case, it's possible he'll leave Lune and wind up in another country..."

"Oh, I understand now. In that case, Lune would lose a vital asset. And by extension, so would the Kingdom of Knightley. It would be awful if he wound up in the Empire, right?"

"Nah, the Empire's a no go for him," Abel asserted with confidence.

"What do you mean?"

“Yeah! The Empire’s the only one who can face off against the Kingdom.”

Rihya and Lyn both questioned him.

“Cause its official name is the Debuhi Empire.”

The two women’s nods encouraged Abel to elaborate.

“Ryo thinks it’s incredibly uncool. So he said he hates the Empire. Which is why he won’t end up there.”

“...What?”

Neither Rihya nor Lyn understood. He wouldn’t end up in the Empire because its name was uncool?

I don’t really get it either, but I do understand it’s a deal-breaker for him, so...

Abel’s gut told him he was right.

“Right, then, on to other topics. Abel, while you were gone, we chose not to venture into the dungeon. Instead, we accepted a number of regular commissions, but only the ones we absolutely couldn’t refuse.”

“Got it. Thanks, guys, seriously.” Abel, still seated, bowed his head in gratitude.

“I’m just so glad you made it back safely to us. We already divvied up the rewards into four, so feel free to verify your amount later.”

“I wasn’t even here though. I’d have been just fine with you three splitting the pot, y’know.”

“Absolutely not. That’s not how we do things.”

“She’s right,” Lyn piped up.

Warren, who had yet to say a word so far, nodded silently as well.

“Oh wait,” Abel said. “I just remembered I made money too. Mind you, I couldn’t take all the magic stones or parts from the monsters I defeated on the way back here, but I did get my hands on wyvern magic stones. I asked the GuilMas to sell ’em off for me, so once I get the money, I’ll split it with you all.”

“You what...?”

“Wy...verns?”

“...”

His three party members struggled to make sense of his words. It was only natural they did. A wyvern required at *least* twenty C-rank adventurers for a hunt to have even a chance of succeeding. So the fact that he'd slain not one but many was unbelievable...

“Did you help a party or something with wyverns?” Rihya asked the obvious question.

“No. I told you earlier, right? There was a wyvern nest on the south side of the Malefic Mountains. We had to take them down as we made our way to Lune. It'd have been such a waste to leave wyvern magic stones behind, so those are the only ones we actually picked up.”

“So... What you're saying is... You and Ryo took them down? Just the two of you?”

Both Rihya and Lyn's complexions paled as they imagined the scene.

“Yeah. He shot ice spears through their wings and then once they fell, I got them in the eyes with Total Impalement.”

“He speared their wings...? But wyverns cloak their entire bodies with a defensive air membrane that repels magic...” Lyn asked, dubious. Her voice grew hushed by the last word, almost like she was talking to herself by that point.

“Huh?” Abel tilted his head thoughtfully. “Oh, you're right. They do. I'd forgotten. Hmmm, except he definitely *did* just that.”

“How though...? Even Master Hilarion can't use magic that powerful.” Lyn shook her head empathetically.

“She's right, Abel. I only know of one person who can... The Empire's Inferno Magician. But even then those are just rumors.”

“I agree on both points.”

Both Rihya and Lin knew only the rumors about the Empire's Inferno Magician.

One tale says he burned a thousand of the Kingdom's soldiers to death with a single attack.

In another, he blew up a wyvern with a single strike.

A third tells of how he annihilated a rebel army that barricaded itself in a town with a single assault.

Frankly speaking, neither woman was sure if such a magician actually existed. At the very least, the first tale was true, so there was no denying his fearsome powers.

"The Inferno Magician, huh... Definitely don't wanna meet him on the battlefield."

After having teamed up with Ryo, Abel knew one thing for certain—he didn't want to make an enemy of magicians. Before now, he'd honestly never thought about it much. For one, there was Lyn in his party. She was considered a high-level magician in the Kingdom, but even if he were to make an enemy of her, Abel was confident he could defeat her without much difficulty. Then there was the Kingdom's most powerful magician, Hilarion, the one he called "old man." Though a fight with him would surely test his mettle, Abel had always thought he'd be the last one standing.

But Ryo was dangerous. First off, he could execute magic without chanting a spell. Though there *were* a few times he deliberately said them aloud.

I don't know why he did on those occasions, but even I know he was just making them up as he went along. He probably just thought they sounded cool. Yeah, some random reason like that makes sense for him.

Incidentally, Abel was absolutely correct about this.

On top of Ryo's silent magic, the speed at which he cast his spells was anything but ordinary. If Abel had to face off against Ryo's Ice Wall, he honestly wasn't sure whether he could penetrate it even with Total Impalement. Plus, he was able to attack with his ice spears while behind the Ice Wall. That alone should be considered foul play!

At this point, he couldn't come up with a single strategy that would defeat Ryo.

Not to mention that Ryo had admitted to being capable of melee combat when they arrived in Lune.

Jeez, this really isn't funny. His magic alone makes me feel like I can't win, but to add fighting to his list of talents is just too much... Yeah, it's not natural. He's not natural. Ryo's very existence is an aberration.

And then there was the Empire's supposed aberration. The Inferno Magician.

Yeah...definitely not a good idea to make an enemy of a magician.

To the Dungeon

On the fifth and final day of the dungeon seminar for beginners, a Q&A session filled the morning portion of the class. In the afternoon, all the students would explore the first layer of the dungeon.

The first four days had involved learning the necessary basics of dungeon adventuring, such as the dungeon's structure, tips on enemies and traps, required tools, and more.

Incidentally, the guild provides the minimum equipment needed for their hands-on training sessions. This included things like potions and antidotes. Dungeon novices were extremely grateful for this consideration, since most of them were also newly minted adventurers.

In general, dungeon novices were new to adventuring as well. Setting aside the matter of adventures from other cities and countries, the ones registered in Lune would polish their skills in the dungeon's upper layer. They would acquire magic stones and various materials to sell to the guild, all the while gaining experience. They were also expected to accept regular commissions. Performing these tasks would allow them to raise their adventurer rank. This was the typical way adventurers did things in Lune.

For example, Nils and Eto, two of Ryo's roommates, would explore the dungeon on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Meanwhile, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, they took on normal commissions. They were off on Saturdays and Sundays.

Stepping inside the dungeon inevitably meant gaining combat experience, so Lune's adventurers were considered more skilled than other cities' because they started their training so early.

As they rose through the ranks, adventurers received more lucrative commissions, making it less and less necessary to venture into the dungeon as time went on. Once they reached sufficiently high ranks, they no longer needed to challenge the deepest parts of the dungeon and risk their lives to make good

money.

As a result, the depths of the dungeon remained unexplored. The deepest documented layer was the 38th. Even B-rank parties struggled after Layer 30, so it wasn't surprising that not much progress had been made in investigating the deeper dungeon levels.

"I can't believe we're finally heading into the dungeon this afternoon," Amon said to Ryo in a soft voice. "I'm a little nervous now."

"The morning isn't even over yet, Amon. If you get nervous now, you'll be exhausted by this afternoon," Ryo replied with a wry smile.

"I know. I know that, but..."

The Q&A session continued as they conversed in whispers. The seminar participants were asking questions about topics that hadn't been covered in the last four days and the instructor, a former adventurer who was now staff at the guild, answered them.

No one asked questions about the information Ryo wanted to know.

Uuugh. Should I just ask? It's so embarrassing though... Better to ask and be embarrassed than not ask and never know.

"Any more questions?"

Ryo raised his hand.

"Go ahead, Ryo."

"Thank you. This might not be relevant to Lune's dungeon, but is there some sort of teleportation device installed throughout a dungeon you can access once you clear up to a certain layer?"

Except for the instructor, everyone else's jaws dropped open at his question. Including Amon, who sat next to Ryo. He wasn't bothered though since he'd expected this reaction.

"Oh ho, Ryo, you're well-informed, eh? Dungeons like that do indeed exist. Allow me to expand on this point. For example, if you make it to the tenth layer of a dungeon, the next time you go on an expedition in that dungeon, you can continue from where you left off."

The explanation shocked all the students. Of course it did. Because with a feature like that, they could go home every day and freshen up before continuing their explorations. There was nothing more convenient than a feature like this for dungeon adventurers.

However...

“Unfortunately, Lune’s dungeon lacks this function. Supposedly, it does exist in dungeons in the Western Provinces. Though I don’t know the details of the mechanism since I myself have only heard rumors.”

“No worries and thank you very much.”

Like I thought, Lune’s dungeon doesn’t have this feature. It’s fine though. I just want a peek inside. Not like I plan on beating it, so it doesn’t really matter at the end of the day.

Amon whispered to him while those thoughts ran through his mind.

“Ryo, I think it’s amazing you knew that! Exactly what I’d expect from a D-rank adventurer.”

He had told his three roommates—Nils, Eto, and Amon—about his registration as a D-rank adventurer on the day he moved into the guild’s housing annex. Of course he didn’t do anything to discredit Nils and Eto since they were his seniors as adventurers.

“No, not at all. I was just curious, so I bit the bullet and asked...”

The admiration shining in Amon’s eyes only served to put pressure on Ryo.

In the afternoon, the seminar participants all headed to the dungeon in a big group.

Lune’s dungeon was located in the center of the city. To put it accurately, the city itself had been built around the dungeon. While the city itself was surrounded by a defensive wall, the entrance to the dungeon was also enclosed by a huge double wall.

“I believe I already explained it in class, but a monster outbreak occurs once every few years in the dungeon and they often find their way to the surface.

This double wall was constructed to intercept them here and prevent them from storming the city.”

So while the city’s defensive wall was to protect it from external attacks, the dungeon’s double ramparts were to contain the monsters within.

The guild had a small office next to the dungeon’s entrance where staff recorded names, dates, and time at point of entry. If someone didn’t come out for a long time, the guild presumed them missing. Those who *did* return could sell off magic stones and other resources at this office.

“The seminar’s students have already been noted, so we can head directly inside.”

Tension rocketed among the group upon hearing the instructor’s words. Ryo and Amon weren’t immune either, especially Amon, who visibly quaked in terror.

“Amon... I think you should relax a little. Here, take a deep breath.”

Inhale. Exhale.

“I-I feel a bit better now.”

But he didn’t look it... Ryo wisely kept his mouth shut.

“Uh, well, that’s good then. We’re all together, so we’ll be fine.”

“Right.”

Then they followed the last group of students, passed through the dungeon’s double doors, and walked inside.

“It’s huge, isn’t it, Ryo?”

They descended roughly a hundred steps to the dungeon’s first layer. There, they found a room so spacious they couldn’t see the wall on the other side.

“Like you all learned in class, only weak monsters appear on Layer 1. You’re free to explore on your own, but make sure you don’t lose sight of this area. We’ll go back outside in two hours. If you don’t return by then, I’ll leave you behind and submit a rescue request to the guild. If that happens, know that

you'll be temporarily banned from entering the dungeon again!"

Ryo and Amon paired up to explore the room. Though Amon was technically a swordsman, the reality was he was far from skilled since he'd only recently arrived in the city from his village. He had practiced with a retired swordsman back home, but for less than six months. This was why they moved in a side-by-side formation instead of having him lead.

"Hm? I think I see something," Ryo whispered to Amon.

"Huh? Where?" Amon glanced around.

"Up ahead, still far away though. We'll run into it in a minute or so. I'll use my water magic to immobilize it so you can attack with your sword, Amon."

"O-Okay! Will do!"

Anyone could tell how nervous Amon was from the way he trembled.

Well, we should be fine as long as I manage to stop the enemy completely.

Then, a minute later, they finally sighted the monster.

"A soldier ant. Unlike other ant-type monsters, it doesn't spit formic acid. The easiest way to defeat it is to decapitate it at the base of the neck."

A novice-level monster with an entry in the book Fake Michael had given him, *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition*. It measured a meter long and could be found in dungeons too.

"Understood." Still tense, Amon jerked his head in a semblance of a nod.

"All right, I'm going to immobilize it. *Ice, pierce your foe with your cold power. Icicle Lance 8.*"

Eight spears of ice shot out from Ryo's left hand, following a trajectory that pierced the soldier ant from above.

"Giiiiiiii!!!"

The monster's screech echoed. The eight spears stabbed through its six legs, thorax, and abdomen, pinning it to the ground.

"Amon, get close to it from the side, then cut its head off."

“Okay!”

Sword drawn, Amon walked in a counter-clockwise arc toward the soldier ant. When he was within arm’s reach, he swung his sword down vigorously from above.

“Hah!”

Shing. Its head rolled cleanly off its body and the monster breathed its last.

“Bravo!”

Ryo walked toward Amon as he clapped enthusiastically.

“Haaa. Haaa. Haaaaaa.”

Adrenaline still surged through Amon, but he gradually calmed himself with a few deep breaths. “I did it, Ryo.”

“Yes, a job well done, indeed. It’s too tough to dissect for parts, but we’ll take the magic stone back to commemorate your first dungeon kill, Amon.” Ryo smiled cheerfully at him.

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“We’re adventurers. And this is how we earn our keep,” Ryo said, plunging his Michael-made knife into the soldier ant’s decapitated head. Though stones were located near the heart in animal-type monsters, most insect-type ones had them in the head. *The Monster Compendium* had noted the soldier ant was one such monster.

A short time later, Ryo dug out a small magic stone the size of a pinky finger tip.

“*Water, come forth.*”

After Ryo washed the magic stone off with water, it revealed its pale yellow color. It was evidently earth-attributed. Ryo gave it to Amon.

“Think of it as a memento.”

“I will.”

Amon looked like he was about to cry. Though he didn’t have any kind of emotional attachment to the monster and the battle hadn’t even been hard-

fought, he was nevertheless moved to tears despite his best efforts.

“All right, let’s take our time going back to the rendezvous point. Inside a dungeon, slimes clean up carcasses and this one won’t be any different. Aren’t dungeons convenient?” Ryo asked Amon, who stared happily down at the magic stone as they walked.

The best way to gain confidence is to experience success.

Though Amon had trembled uncontrollably when they first entered the dungeon, not a trace remained of his fear.

“Here’s to Ryo and Amon finishing their seminar! Cheers, everyone!”

In the pub attached to the guild, the four residents of Room 10 were holding a celebration. Having said that, the eatery didn’t serve alcohol and bringing your own was also banned. Not to mention Amon was still underage, so he couldn’t drink it anyway. This is all to explain why they’d gone with juice for their celebration. Nils and Ryo drank juice made from abbles, the fruit that bore an uncanny resemblance to apples, while Eto and Amon drank orange juice. Both juices were popular among adventurers, men and women, because they were good for the body.

“But, wow, to think you managed to defeat a soldier ant on your first dungeon dive as part of your class field trip... Nice work, you two.” Eto smiled cheerfully at them.

“No, all I did was deal the killing blow and that’s only because Ryo stopped it,” Amon said bashfully, clutching a piece of bandit fried chicken in one hand.

“Amon, your bladework was very nice,” Ryo said while enjoying a piece of steak made from what seemed to be beef. “There’s no need at all to be so humble.”

Nils, holding a bone-in chicken thigh in each hand, cackled boisterously. “Doesn’t matter who did what. What matters is that you guys got a magic stone out of it.”

The food in the guild’s restaurant was delicious. Though Lune’s residents also frequented the eatery, most of the patrons were adventurers, so the restaurant’s portion sizes were accordingly large.

“Our party is off tomorrow and the day after. What are the two of you up to?” Eto, sipping on the last of his juice, asked Ryo and Amon after they’d finished their meals. It was Friday night. Nils and Eto were off on Saturdays and Sundays.

“I want to explore the dungeon a bit more, but...not on my own, you know...? Is it easy to party with a pickup group?”

Not wanting to forget today’s experience, Amon remained motivated to keep going.

“That’s the spirit, Amon! Gotta be proactive when leading a party, huh?!” As a swordsman and vanguard himself, Nils had apparently been worried about Amon, the apprentice swordsman.

“I understand how you feel, but pickup groups can be hit or miss...” Eto said, advising Amon not to party with random adventurers.

“How about we go together then? I was thinking I’d like to explore to the third level or so.”

Amon didn’t need to think twice. “Really?! Yes, please!”

“Great. I’ve been wondering what else is in there after encountering the ant, you see.”

“Oh, wait. I thought there was only supposed to be bats on the first layer. Eto, we ran into ants down there too, didn’t we?”

“You’re right, we did. According to the guild, for the past six months or so, there have been reports of soldier ant sightings on the first and second layers.”

Eto had apparently sought confirmation with the guild after his and Nils’s own experience.

“Now I’m even more curious about ants being somewhere they shouldn’t be.”

“That’s ’cause the ants dig shafts that let them travel up to the first layer,” a new voice said.

Nils, Eto, and Amon all jerked in surprise.

Unruffled, Ryo looked at the swordsman. He’d sensed his approach. “Abel, you know it’s not nice for a veteran to harass novices.”

“Harass... Except I’m not doing that. All I did was give the right answer to a newbie’s question.” Abel frowned, sighing in exasperation. “You three must be Ryo’s roommates, right? I’m Abel. He’s not half-bad in the power department, but he has personality issues, so take it easy on him, okay?”

“Abel, if that’s a challenge, I gladly accept.”

Abel had tossed the bait and Ryo gladly took it. Of course, they were simply joking.

“Abel, Abel... Oh, Abel of the Crimson Sword! I’m a swordsman as well. My name is Nils. I came to Lune not long ago, so I’m still an F-rank adventurer, but I idolize you! If you don’t mind, would you shake my hand...”

Nils stood up from his seat, his spine ramrod straight. Nerves tinged his stiff self-introduction.

“Yeah, sure.”

With those words, Abel gripped Nils’s hand.

“Do your best. But remember this—never overdo it. Survival is the most important thing for an adventurer, especially in a dungeon.”

Abel can say stuff like that so easily and shake hands with strangers like it’s nothing. I bet that’s why he’s so popular, Ryo thought.

“Anyway, why are you at the guild at this time of night, Abel?”

By Ryo’s estimate, it was nearing eight o’clock. Most adventurers made their reports to the guild by six, after which they either went home or out for drinks. Besides food, Ryo couldn’t think of any other reason for Abel’s presence in the guild this late at night.

“Well, a job I took on dragged on for a while, so I only just got back not too long ago.”

When Abel finished speaking, a voice from behind him rang out.

“Ahhh! So *this* is where you were, Abel!”

It was Lyn, the magician in his party.

“Abel, I told you we still need to report to the guild master. Don’t you dare

run away,” the priestess Rihya said from behind Lyn.

“Hey, no one’s running away. Just figured I should do my job as a veteran and coach the newbies...”

“Sorry about this, Ryo and friends, but we’re going to steal Abel from you. Warren, pick him up.”

Upon Lyn’s request, Warren the shield bearer casually tossed Abel over his shoulder. Though Abel himself was roughly one hundred and ninety centimeters in height, Warren was easily over two meters tall. He was a true giant who made carrying Abel look like child’s play.



“No, stop it. Damn it, Warren, I can walk on my own two feet. Hey! Put me down already!”

Laughter erupted in the dining hall at the sight.

“Forgive us, Ryo. We still have matters to discuss with the guild master, so we’ll be borrowing him,” Rihya said as melodiously as ever.

“Not a problem at all. Do as you wish with him since he’s your party’s leader.”

“Ryo, you traitor! And damn it, Warren, when are you gonna put me down?!”

The Crimson Sword had descended like a storm and departed in the same manner.

“Well, that was certainly an interesting spectacle...” Amon said, sounding surprisingly calm.

“Ahhh, Miss Rihya, truly an angel...” Eto muttered almost absentmindedly.

“Abel really *is* cool,” Nils mumbled to himself.

Where exactly did his cool factor come from though...?

Ryo and Amon were on the second layer of Lune’s dungeon, where wolf-type monsters like the lesser wolf could be found.

“Ice, pierce through. Icicle Lance 4.”

Spears of ice plunged through the hind legs of two lesser wolves, making them unable to leap into the air. Amon attacked one of them and the monster retaliated with its snapping jaws and forelegs. He attacked and backstepped, repeating the pattern to avoid taking any damage from his opponent while inflicting his own.

That’s a very effective method against enemies who can’t move. Though now it makes me wonder how he’s going to deal with enemies that are mobile...

After several strikes, Amon rendered both of the lesser wolf’s forelegs useless.

“Hah.”

Then he stabbed it through the neck, dealing the finishing blow. He turned toward the remaining monster and defeated it in the same way.

“Well done.”

“Thank you very much,” Amon replied, his face flushed from exertion. Though his spirits weren’t high as yesterday, he was still excited after the kill.

Ryo collected the magic stone from the first lesser wolf Amon had killed. These two latest brought their total up to six lesser wolves they’d encountered since entering the dungeon’s second layer. Ryo and Amon killed the first four in the same manner as the ant yesterday—Ryo pinned all four legs to the ground and Amon finished them off. For the last two, Ryo pinned only their hind legs.

“Amon, I have an idea for your next fight. How about this? An unwounded opponent is dangerous, so why don’t you fight a wolf with damage to one of its forelegs?”

Their trip into the dungeon had completely changed from an exploration to a training session for Amon.

“Yes, please!”

“Good answer.”

Everyone likes driven, honest, young people. Ryo was no exception, especially since he was technically a young person too, considering he looked to be in his late teens...

“Are you absolutely positive about this, Ryo?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m extremely grateful you’re here with me to explore the dungeon and help me train as well, but maybe this isn’t enough for you...?”

Amon posed the question while washing off the magic stone he’d gathered. Water was an incredibly precious resource in a dungeon, but Amon had unlimited access thanks to the water magician by his side.

“You don’t have to worry about that at all. It’s only natural I would help my roommate become stronger. Oh, that reminds me. Amon, your swordsmanship and your movements in general are very similar to Abel’s. You said you learned

from a former adventurer in your village, right?”

“Really...?! You really think so?! Oh, um, yes, that’s right. I used to call him Grandpa Keero... He might be an old man, but he has a very sturdy constitution, so he’s always hard at work on his farm. He learned swordsmanship at a huge dojo in the capital. I believe it’s a very famous school of swordsmanship too... The Hume School, I think.”

Amon looked apologetic for his vague memory.

“I see. You’ll get a lot stronger if you drill the fundamentals into your bones. That’s how Abel is. Let’s keep moving, shall we?”

They started walking forward side by side, the same formation as yesterday.

“Ryo, do you know a lot about swordsmanship too even though you’re a magician?”

“Well, I had a teacher who instructed me in the art, but...he had his own style, so I can’t really say I’m all that knowledgeable on the topic.”

A distant look entered Ryo’s eyes as he thought about the Dullahan, formally known as the Fairy King, for the first time in a long time.

“That’s incredible! You’re a magician *and* a swordsman... But wait. You don’t normally carry a sword, do you?”

I swear I’ve had this same conversation before, and not too long ago either...
“This is my sword,” Ryo said as he took Murasame out of his belt and created its blade.

“Wh-Wh-What *is* that...”

He was amused by the sight of Amon’s wide eyes. Nevertheless, the boy’s reaction didn’t surprise him in the least. Anyone would respond in the same way when they saw a sword with an ice blade for the first time, or more accurately, a weapon with a curved blade like his.

“My master gave it to me. It’s specifically designed for water magicians.”

“An ice blade... Yes, I suppose it makes sense. After all, if you can’t use water magic, you can’t make an ice blade. I’ve never seen anything like it before now though.”

“Two lesser wolves up ahead,” Ryo said, reacting suddenly.

“Yes, sir!”

Amon had fallen into a bit of a daze staring at Murasame, but he quickly pulled himself together and unsheathed his sword, bracing himself for a fight.

“Right, as we discussed earlier, I’ll damage one of the wolves’ forelegs before you fight it.”

“Understood!”

“Icicle Lance 2. Water Jet.”

The spears of ice pierced through both hind legs of one of the lesser wolves, pinning it to the ground.

His Water Jet raced then toward the left foreleg of the other wolf. It howled in pain at the impact and held itself upright on its other three legs as Amon attacked.

A lesser wolf’s magic stone was small and green, the color marking it as a wind-attributed monster even though it couldn’t use ranged attack magic like air slashes. Even its rush assaults were nothing like its fellow wind-attributed monster, the assassin hawk, which used magic to execute its charges at the speed of sound.

It was after all only a *lesser* monster that appeared on the second layer of the dungeon, so it wasn’t very strong. Nevertheless, it posed a serious threat to Amon in a one-on-one battle because the boy had only recently registered as an F-rank adventurer. For protection, Ryo had created an ultrathin layer of Ice Armor for each of them. It had no effect whatsoever on their movements, so Amon had long since stopped being aware of it. Ryo had thought that would be better for training.

Amon’s fighting style remained unchanged despite the new circumstances. He rushed in and then retreated in a hit-and-run. However, there were moments when this latest opponent would charge at him despite its left foreleg being shot through, so he often had to dodge backward diagonally.

I see. It’s a fighting style that makes it hard for his opponent to inflict damage.

What I'm worried about is him running out of stamina. Well, stamina is something that anyone can acquire if they take running seriously, so it's something he can work on... Now I just realized I haven't been running lately...

When he was living in the Forest of Rondo, Ryo had run every morning... It hadn't been leisurely jogging either. He practiced magical control while doing his exercise. Unfortunately, he hadn't done a lick of his usual routine since he left the Forest with Abel. While Ryo worried about waking up his roommates if he tried to restart his regimen and other possibilities, Amon slew the lesser wolf.

"Well done."

Amon had evidently exerted a great deal of effort on the battle judging by the way he was now leaning on his sword.

"Amon, sit down. We'll rest here for a while."

Using Murasame, Ryo decapitated the remaining lesser wolf, the one whose hind legs were immobilized, in one slash. Then he dug out its magic stone with the Michael-made knife. After collecting the magic stone from the lesser wolf Amon defeated, he walked back to the boy.

"Omni-Directional Ice Wall."

The Ice Wall extended in all four directions plus above them, creating a safe space in the shape of a cube five meters around them.

"It's not so easy to break through this wall of ice, so we can take it easy in here."

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

With that, Amon collapsed on the ground, arms and legs splayed wide. He still panted heavily.

In order to create a complete barrier, I should probably make an Ice Wall on the ground too... But the terrain is too uneven, so that won't work... Ice Bahn could work though, since it's more durable... Except it would be cold, huh... What if I made it five millimeters below the ground? Then it wouldn't be cold, right... Wait, can I even create an Ice Bahn in the earth... I'll have to experiment

once we're out of here and back up on the surface.

While Ryo contemplated the issue of Ice Bahn, Amon managed to catch his breath enough to sit up.

"Apologies for the wait. I can move now, more or less."

Even Ryo could tell Amon was forcing himself.

"No, there's no need to rush or overdo it, so really, take your time resting. First, drink some water."

Amon did as instructed and drank from his flask. In case things took a bad turn, each of them had come prepared with their own equipment for the dungeon dive. For example, flasks, potions, antidotes, and such.

"Aaaah," Amon sighed.

"This ice wall really is amazing. It's so transparent. I've never seen ice this clear. Isn't ice supposed to be white and clouded?"

"That happens because of impurities and air in water. If you completely eliminate all of those, you can make clear ice even without magic. So *this* is totally transparent *because* of magic."

Ryo smiled at him.

Almost completely transparent ice is produced even on modern Earth. Though household refrigerators and commercial ice machines aren't capable of the task, pros are. With enough effort and time, usually over forty-eight hours, they can make clear ice. For example, pros are the ones who make the ice used in ice sculptures. To think Ryo could make such ice in an instant here on Phi... Magic is truly magnificent!

"Water magic is amazing, isn't it?!" Ryo said.

Respect for both Ryo and the ice wall shone in Amon's eyes.

Good, good. It's not much, but I'm doing my part in elevating water magic's status.

Ryo nodded enthusiastically in his mind.

"Still, I can't believe how draining it is to fight an opponent that can move

freely..." Amon said, sounding slightly depressed.

"You didn't fight any monsters when you lived in your village?"

"My only experience is fighting one monster with a group of us."

Fighting one-on-one versus fighting with a group had a completely different effect on your nerves.

"That's because your fighting style easily tires you out, Amon."

A "hit-and-run" style of attacking might *sound* good, but it required the combatant to be moving *constantly*, which inevitably led to exhaustion.

"Oh, I didn't realize..."

Amon's depression seemed to worsen just a bit more.

"*But* if you master your style, I do think you'll be less likely to sustain serious injuries. Basically, it should work as long as you build up your stamina, and anyone can do that."

"Do you really think so?!" Amon asked, staring at Ryo with sparkling eyes.

"Focus single-mindedly on running. Just by doing that, anyone can build up stamina. That's how you can make your body less susceptible to fatigue. The ultimate power, useful in any situation."

"That makes sense!"

"Another thing I recommend is practice-swinging to build up your upper body strength, especially in your arms and shoulders. You must have learned it back home, right?"

You can search all over the world and you won't find a style of swordsmanship that doesn't require practicing swings and forms.

"Yes. My teacher taught me forms and other exercises I should do every day."

"I think doing all that diligently will help you improve. On my journey with Abel, he'd wake up early every morning to practice various forms."

"So he does as well?!"

"Abel may be a prodigy, but even prodigies need to put in effort."

“I...I don’t think I have a talent for the sword,” Amon said in a strangely quiet tone. He had fallen into negative thinking again.

“Amon, the strongest *champion* I know had this to say when he was asked what he thought talent means: ‘Talent is the ability to keep going.’ Perseverance makes you stronger.”

The boy raised his head determinedly and stared intently at Ryo.

“So, Amon, answer me this. Can you keep trying? Or will you give up?”

“No... No, I won’t! I’ll keep going!”

Next to Amon, Ryo nodded firmly, like he was saying, “You’re darn right you will!”

Sheesh, it’s so hard being a motivator... I’d really like to acquire the power to fire people up...

Though Ryo excelled at goading Abel, it seemed that there were still some things in this world that eluded him.

The next day, Sunday. Amon decided it wouldn’t be wise to explore the dungeon two days in a row, so he started training instead. Before breakfast, he practiced his swings. Afterward, he ran as much as he could on the guild’s outdoor training range. Of course, he ran slowly because he still lacked stamina, but he didn’t stop at all, though there were times he slowed to a walk. Regardless, he kept moving. This was the same as Ryo’s early efforts during his life in the Forest of Rondo.

As the youngest in their room, the boy’s enthusiasm had an effect on his older roommates too. Nils and Eto began running as well after watching Amon do so, although it didn’t take long for Eto the priest to fall behind on account of his meager reserves of stamina...

Incidentally, Ryo didn’t join them. Seeing his bottomless well of stamina would destroy his new pupils’ motivation! No, that actually wasn’t the reason. Consideration for his friends had nothing to do with it. He simply had something else he wanted to do.

What was this other thing? Researching alchemy!

Leonore

The city of Lune boasted two huge libraries, one in the north and one in the south. The southern library was closest to the adventurers' guild and it contained many books suited for both the general public and novices. Or so Ryo had heard, which was why he decided to visit it first.

In front of the library was a big plaza with a fairly large bookstore next to it.

So the bookstore's there because you can't check books out of the library. Look for a book in the library then buy it in the adjacent bookstore... A style of commerce unheard of on Earth.

Ryo nodded in agreement, impressed by the concept.

From the outside, the southern library looked immense. The magnificent five-story building was made of stone. The stately, wooden door to its entrance was three times taller than the average person. The library's entry fee was two thousand florins. As long as you didn't cause any issues, you would receive half the deposit back upon leaving.

Inside, it was shockingly spacious. Maybe as big as a domed stadium he'd been taken to once back in his previous life. In the vast space one step below the entrance, there were so many open bookshelves that it would be ridiculous to count them.

"Wow, I feel like it'll be impossible to search for anything on my own."

He turned around and walked back to the counter to ask about books on alchemy for beginners.

"Please follow me."

The woman working near the counter turned out to be a librarian who guided him to the correct section. It was apparently quite a far walk. Well over five minutes later, they finally arrived at their destination.

"If you have no knowledge whatsoever on the topic, I recommend you read

this book and this one to start. As for beginner-level recipes,” she said, “I think this should work.”

The librarian hunted down the three books and handed them to him.

The Absolute Basics of Alchemy.

My First Alchemy.

Alchemy, A Collection of Recipes I.

They were all penned by Neal Andersen.

Ryo thanked her, then took the volumes with him to one of the many empty seats. A thousand florins was by no means cheap for common folk, so the library wasn't very populated.

- *The goal of alchemy is to manufacture alchemical tools capable of manifesting magical phenomena by means of a magic circle or magic formula.*

- *This means that either is always used in all types of alchemy.*

- *There are no restrictions on the materials used to draw both magic circles and formulas.*

- *The magic circle is activated only when magical energy is infused into the drawn circle. At that time, regardless of the magical attribute, the magical phenomenon noted in the magic circle will manifest.*

- *Magic stones are extremely compatible with magic circles and formulas. When connected, magical phenomena may manifest without the infusion of magical energy from humans.*

- *In theory, once alchemy is mastered, it is possible to manifest all kinds of magical phenomena through alchemical tools.*

Et cetera, et cetera.

On Earth, alchemy was used in a variety of ways: turning base metals into precious metals, becoming an immortal wizard, creating the almost all-powerful philosopher's stone. Those kinds of goals were common there. However, Phi's

alchemy was somewhat different. Though there might be some similarities if the philosopher's stone was considered an alchemical tool...

On Phi, the aim of alchemy was to create alchemical tools. For example, if you think of potions as alchemical tools, it might be easier to understand alchemy as a concept.

Learning how to use a magic circle seemed to be a good place to start.

"Whether on Earth or Phi, alchemists aspire to create something that doesn't yet exist," Ryo read. Exaltation flooded Ryo's heart, the same as it had when he first learned he could use magic.

The Absolute Basics of Alchemy and *My First Alchemy* were geared toward beginners, so it explained various concepts, such as what makes alchemy possible, its strengths and weaknesses, and more from a theoretical perspective.

Alchemy, A Collection of Recipes I contained not just recipes, but also simple magic circles that could be used in alchemical experiments. The back of the book also included recipes and magic circles specifically for a few potions. However, the author had written a caveat for this section.

Only experienced magicians should attempt to make these recipes as there is a high possibility of exhausting your stores of magical energy.

Ahhh, so is that why very few people make their own potions...?

Ryo had no idea how much magic experienced magicians possessed, but if you needed a ton of it just to create one bottle of a potion, then it was no wonder buying potions was the more expedient option for adventurers.

Well, when it comes to practicing alchemy, it's better to make something I'll need for an adventure instead of something I don't, right?

It made him happy to see recipes for antidotes as well. The book also described various different methods to manufacture normal potions in addition to recipes with ingredients that could easily be gathered in a dungeon.

A bunch of this stuff is hard to find up here, but simple through the first five layers of Lune's dungeon. I think I'm in luck.

In his mind, Ryo had already decided to buy *Alchemy, A Collection of Recipes* in the bookstore next door once he left the library, but he wanted to spend a little more time here doing research. After all, he didn't want to waste the two thousand florins he'd paid to enter.

In the end, Ryo left the library two hours later. He headed straight for the book shop next door, where he found the collection of recipes for sale. Unfortunately, the price was a steep hundred thousand floors—or ten gold coins...

Ugh, that's expensive. I mean, I guess it makes sense because it's a book... But I don't have enough money on me to buy it.

He stewed over the problem when suddenly an idea came to him.

The guild master said that the lord mayor would buy one of the wyvern magic stones and he'd deposit the funds right away into our accounts... I wonder if he already did.

With that thought in mind, Ryo started walking toward the adventurers' guild only a block to the north.

As it turns out, his cut of the profit from the wyvern magic stone surprised Ryo more than a little when he checked his account. It was so much that he'd not have to worry about earning money for a while... The words were music to his ears!

That meant he could live his life doing whatever he wanted... Three cheers for wyverns!

In the meantime, he withdrew fifteen gold coins and headed back to the bookstore. However, he realized something when he exited the guild headquarters.

Huh? Isn't it sort of dark?

The sun was still out, but he felt like darkness encroached little by little.

A solar eclipse...?

People on the streets of Lune looked anxiously up at the sky just like him.

By the time Ryo arrived at the plaza in front of the library, the moon had completely hidden the sun, and the landscape transformed.

The world inverted. It was the only way Ryo could describe it. He couldn't sense the people around him at all now, but the scenery remained unchanged. For example, his feet were still planted on Lune's cobblestones.

Was I dropped into subspace or something? Just like a fantasy setting, huh...

A feeling of danger overwhelmed his senses. Something other than Ryo was here. He could sense it, but he didn't know what it was.

I need to move to find whatever it is. But if I do, it or they will notice me... I guess I don't have a choice...

He took a deep breath then visualized.

Active Sonar.

At that moment, with Ryo in the center, the Pulse he sent out spread through the water vapor drifting in the air surrounding him.

Gotcha. Approximately two hundred meters ahead, almost the same size as a person, but...the feedback response is abnormal...

Just as he was about to continue his analysis, he detected something strange coming from that direction.

10-layer Ice Wall.

Like a sonic blade attack, the fire magic rushed at him and split right before impact. It hit his wall of ice and rebounded.

Such incredible force...

His Ice Wall had borne the brunt of numerous monster attacks, but this one possessed the most destructive power by far.

“Hm? Did I accidentally capture a human in here?”

The voice came from relatively nearby. While Active Sonar told him the being should have been two hundred meters away, the voice sounded much, much closer. And it was getting closer... It wasn't long before Ryo finally laid eyes on it.

A height of one hundred and seventy-five centimeters, basically the same as him. Bipedal. Two arms. At first glance, it looked like a human wearing clothes, but a closer inspection revealed a thin tail and—what seemed to be horns!

From a human frame of reference, the body was a woman's on account of the breasts. The face was beautiful, no doubt about it, but Ryo wasn't the least bit attracted to her. No, after verifying her presence, his very first thought was...

An akuma?!

In *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition*, Fake Michael had deliberately added two hand-written entries. One was on akuma. Ryo recalled the warning for the entry:

Notes: Pray you never encounter one.

Yeah, so, I might have just met one... And in a totally abnormal space too...

This (provisional) akuma's sense of presence was nothing to sneeze at. Definitely on the level of BeheBehe or a gryphon. If this encounter had occurred in the normal dimension, he would have bolted without a second thought. He wouldn't have even turned around to check. Just fled like a hare running for its life.

Unfortunately for him, this space didn't seem like one he could escape from. A cold sweat ran continually down his back.

“Eh, whatever. The problem will disappear once I make it disappear.”

The (provisional) akuma murmured to herself. An enormous amount of magical energy began coalescing in her hand.



Crap, crap, crap! Laminated 10-layer Ice Wall.

In front of Ryo, stacks of 10-layer Ice Walls generated one after another, as if piling up on top of each other. A multitude of them to protect himself against the (provisional) akuma. The hellfire she unleashed hardly lost its raging momentum as it smashed steadily through the stacks of Ice Walls he built.

Can I even stop it?

Sweat gushed down his body as Ryo pushed more of his magic into the layers of Ice Walls in an effort to strengthen them. Half of them had been devoured already, but he *had* managed to slow down the hellfire just a bit. Half of the remaining walls were destroyed. The hellfire moved even slower now.

At the last 10-layer Ice Wall, the (provisional) akuma's hellfire finally extinguished.

I stopped it...

In his relief, Ryo dropped his guard. At that moment...

In just a moment, the last Ice Wall cracked. He obeyed his instincts then and desperately twisted his body to evade the air spear flying straight at his heart.

But he moved too late. Though he evaded a direct hit to his heart, the spear stabbed through his left shoulder... Or it would have if it didn't shatter into nothingness the moment it struck him. Still, the force of the air spear spun him around, blasting him backward.

"My air spear didn't pierce through..." the (provisional) akuma murmured in surprise. "I was amazed when you defended yourself against my hellfire, but my air spear too...? Impossible... Wait a moment. That robe...that's the Fairy King's robe!"

Eyes narrowed, the (provisional) akuma stared intently at Ryo's robe.

"Well, I certainly didn't expect to chance upon the Fairy King's robe... No wonder my air spear didn't work. Then I suppose I have no choice but to cut you down myself."

Despite having been blown backward, Ryo suffered little damage because he twisted his body to land safely.

Ice Armor.

He didn't know how effective it would be, but it was better than nothing.

"In any case, time for you to die."

A sword suddenly appeared in the (provisional) akuma's hand. She closed the distance between them in a flash, charging at him. Ryo took up Murasame and intercepted her.

A diagonal slash down, a sweep sideways, then a slash upward... Without a moment's delay, she unleashed a variety of attacks, one after another.

He deflected, dodged, and parried each of them carefully. Then, he counterattacked with mainly cleaves from the side and thrusts. However, his counterattack just barely kept her in check.

The issue of power aside, there was a huge difference in their speed. The speed of their swords wasn't that far apart, but the (provisional) akuma moved unexpectedly fast.

It isn't just her footwork either. Is she using air magic to move?

Ryo analyzed her movement while defending. He didn't dwell too deeply on it though. Thinking too hard right now would only slow him down. He needed to keep his analysis to an absolute minimum and commit the majority of his mental resources to evading her attacks.

Committed as she was, Ryo wouldn't break so easily. He had won against the evolved one-eyed assassin hawk even though he'd been on the receiving end then too. Putting everything he had into defense had worked against the Dullahan as well. As long as he focused, even the Fairy King had a hard time pushing through his defense. That's how impenetrable Ryo's defense was when it came to swordplay.

Then there was his inexhaustible supply of stamina. The endless back-and-forth of the (provisional) akuma's attack and Ryo's defense continued. No matter how she attacked, she couldn't pierce through his defense and she became unable to conceal her frustration.

"That sword is the Fairy King's too... What in damnation *are* you...?" she

muttered in irritation.

While she continued attacking him with the sword in her right hand, she gathered a small amount of magical energy in her left. But...

Icicle Lance.

Before she could complete her magical attack, he generated an Icicle Lance in midair and flung it at the ball of energy. His magical attack canceled hers out.

“I’ve never seen magic generate that fast... You’re a monstrosity.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, thanks,” he retorted.

“Hm, you can understand me? You are indeed a danger. I’ll kill you.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t that exactly what you’ve been *trying* to do for a while now...?”

Their clash became even more violent. Fortunately for Ryo, he no longer felt as overwhelmed as he had at the start because he’d gotten used to the (provisional) akuma’s swordsmanship. Unfortunately for him, she’d also noticed that.

She suddenly distanced herself from him in an attempt to regroup.

Now’s my chance! Icicle Lance 32.

He matched his timing to her retreat and unleashed thirty-two spears of ice at her from the front. Then he kept chanting in his mind.

Icicle Lance 64. Icicle Lance 256.

The (provisional) akuma obliterated the first thirty-two by simply waving her hand to the side. The second wave of sixty-four spread initially like a fan, then rapidly converged toward her halfway on their flight, but those met the same fate as the first.

“Is that all you’re capable of?”

As soon as she spoke, his main attack of two hundred and fifty-six ice spears rained down on her from above. He had distracted her by keeping her focused on him while his primary attack fell silently from her blind spot. Even a (provisional) akuma reacted too late.

“Ngh—”

But he hadn't expected the attack to finish her off anyway.

Icicle Lance 32.

With her attention drawn toward the sky, he launched this latest salvo directly from the front. She generated an earth barrier to protect herself against it.

Abrasive Jet 256.

Then he executed his favorite trick *behind* her earthen wall—two hundred fifty-six jets of water with ice abrasives mixed in all moving around in random trajectories. The boisterous streams made mincemeat out of both the (provisional) akuma and the barrier, which rapidly crumbled under the assault of his Abrasive Jets.

That's when Ryo charged with Murasame in hand.

But... He was just a beat too late. A second, no—a fraction of a second.

His opponent had definitely sustained some degree of damage from his Abrasive Jets, but by the time he was within melee distance, she had almost finished repairing herself.

“Jeez, how fast can you regenerate?!”

“That should teach you to underestimate me, human!”

He struck hard and fast, as fast as he could, from the front. The (provisional) akuma raised her sword and parried his attacks. He chose not to pursue her further. Instead, he stepped back and repositioned himself, readying his sword.

The surface of her body was sizzling.

Are those the parts she regenerated? I couldn't take her down with a frontal strike, but...she's sizzling? In that case.

“Icicle Lance 32. Squall.”

He launched thirty-two ice lances to distract her, then created a localized downpour around her. The (provisional) akuma waved her arm and shattered the spears, thinking nothing of the torrential rain, which wet her body.

Naturally, the ice spears had been a diversion. The real winner here was the squall!

“Boiling Water.”

It was the same Squall+Boiling Water combo he’d used to basically boil the kite snake alive way back when. The water clinging to her body began boiling all at once.

“Gaaaaaahhhhhh!!!”

The scream erupted from her mouth. Her skin looked hideously raw from the burns. But...

“You...! Earth, heed me!”

Instantly, soil covered every inch of her body. It absorbed all the water clinging to her, breaking his Boiling Water spell. Her flesh started regenerating immediately. And then...

“Perish, human!”

The soil which had sucked up the water hardened into a wall and flew straight at Ryo. Simultaneously, she generated an earth wall behind him. A moment later...

Boom. The two walls crashed into each other, the heavy sound echoing all around them. A cloud of dust flew up on impact.

Moments later, ice spears rained down. However, the (provisional) akuma must have anticipated it because she immediately retreated more than twenty meters, thereby avoiding his assault.

Then Ryo hurtled down from the sky like he was making a crash landing. He had blasted Water Jets from the soles of his feet and launched himself upward to dodge the earth walls then unleashed the Icicle Lances while in the air. But the (provisional) akuma hadn’t dropped her guard, which had allowed her to evade his attack. She was no longer underestimating him, it seemed.

More than twenty meters separated the two of them. He had no way of closing that distance instantly, but she did.

I feel like this has turned into a magical battle again. Her magic is way more

powerful than mine...which puts me at a disadvantage, doesn't it?

Then he heard her voice.

“Aaah... Regrettably, I’ve run out of time. I can’t recall the last time I endured such a difficult battle. I enjoyed myself, human.”

“Please leave. The sooner, the better...”

She cackled devilishly at his response. “Come now, you looked like you were enjoying yourself too. As much as I would like to continue fighting, this particular cloister is a special space. I have no control over the restrictions, so there is nothing I can do. My name is Leonore Urraca Albuquerque. And you are?”

Ryo hesitated, unsure about answering her. As the saying goes, names and nature do often agree... And as someone raised in a country that believes in the power of language... He was afraid he’d be trapped if he gave the (provisional) akuma his name.

“Speak, human. Or do you not even know your own name?” She—no, *Leonore*—smiled in amusement.

“My name is Ryo, akuma.”

Her eyes widened in surprise at his reply. “Akuma... So you know our true form... Then I should have killed you even if it cost me my last breath...” She shook her head. “I don’t have enough time, and you aren’t an opponent I can slay easily regardless. It cannot be helped. Well, then, Ryo, I’m certain we’ll meet again.”

“No, thank you. I’d rather not.”

Leonore snickered again. “Now, now, don’t say that. With so much power within you, ’tis inevitable we’ll meet again. Either me or another like me. Make sure not to die at anyone else’s hands before then. For I will be the one who kills you, Ryo. I’ll be much stronger myself when next we meet. Farewell.”

With that, she disappeared.

And then color returned to the world.

“I survived... Somehow...”

When was the last time he'd found himself on the verge of death...? Not since the one-eyed assassin hawk at least.

He realized standing motionless in the middle of the plaza in front of the library would draw too much attention, so he sat down on one of the benches in the square.

Not since the one-eyed assassin hawk, huh... Oh, yeah, speaking of, it used magical nullification on me. And BeheBehe created a magical nullification zone. As for Leonore the akuma, she swatted away my Icicle Lances like they were nothing... Thirty-two or sixty-four, all obliterated in an instant...

"Ow."

Pain lanced through his left shoulder. He rubbed the spot that Leonore's air spear had struck. No broken bones. Probably just a bruise then. It was proof that his battle against her hadn't been a dream.

But what surprised him more was how pristine the robe remained. Not a single scratch on it.

Without it, I'd probably have a massive hole in my shoulder... I'm grateful to my master.

He pictured the Dullahan in his mind and bowed his head in thanks.

Leonore's magic... That was magic, right? It was ridiculously powerful... But it wasn't even the craziest thing. No, the honor goes to how fast she moved... She can attack and then retreat in less than a second... I don't think she's actually warping so much as using air magic to move around... Breakdown Rush... Damn you, air magicians!

For some reason, Ryo's reflections might lead to reputational risk for wind magic.

Oh, yeah, she mentioned running out of time...

The solar eclipse was already over. Without any evidence, he decided that it had something to do with what just happened. Despite all the people around him, only he and Leonore had been in that weird subspace.

There's just too much here I don't know, but I won't think about any of that

right now! Because what I need to do is buy the book on alchemy and go home, then once I get back, gather more information on akuma... Not sure I'll be able to though, since even Abel didn't know about them.

When Ryo asked Abel about akuma on their journey to Lune, he'd said that he knew of devils but not akuma.

I'm pretty sure Abel is the third son or something of some noble... So if even someone from the intelligentsia doesn't know about akuma, it won't be so easy to find out more about them.

He sighed heavily before standing up.

"Let me buy the book first and go back to the dorm."

Room 10 of the housing annex was empty. He glanced out into the guild's outdoor training range that the room's window overlooked.

"Huh? Are they *still* training?"

Three of Room 10's occupants were among the people using the training range.

"If I weren't so freaking exhausted, I'd pound all of you into the dirt..." Nils said, frustration in his voice.

He, Eto, and Amon lay defeated on the ground surrounded by five men.

"Ha! Ya know, for some reason, the whines of a beaten dog sound p'ticularly nice."

The five men were also adventurers and they resided in Room 1. They must have defeated the Room 10 trio in some sort of mock battle.

"That's certainly rich, coming from someone who ambushed us..." Eto said bitterly.

"You serious, man? Then you tellin' me you're gonna ask monsters in the dungeon to give you a heads up before they attack? Or how about now? You gonna ask us to stop 'cause you're sooo tired? Get the hell outta here. Whaddya take me for?"

His name was Dan and he had been ridiculing them incessantly.

“You’re absolutely right. Those who let down their guard are the ones at fault,” a voice said from behind them.

A second later, ice spears slammed into the solar plexuses of the four people in Room 1, except for Dan. Of course, the tips were rounded, so they weren’t actually dead—just in so much agony that they passed out.

“Wha—”

“Oh, would you like to know what happened to them? Simple. I hit them with ice spears to their stomachs.”

With those words, Ryo appeared.

“Ryo!”

Still lying on the ground, the three other occupants of Room 10 cried out his name in unison.

“You son of a...”

“Never let your guard down, right? You said something good earlier. What was it again? Something about asking the monsters for a heads up before the attack...? Of course, they wouldn’t. Good grief,” Ryo said with a sigh, “this is what you three get for slacking off.”

The first thing Ryo did was help Eto guzzle down a potion. Healing the priest meant he could help the other two recover.

“This sucks...” Nils muttered.

“Well, you *were* running all morning, so the outcome was inevitable since you ran out of energy. From now on, you just have to dedicate yourself to stamina strengthening on Saturdays and Sundays.”

“You’re right...” Eto mumbled as the weakest, physically, among the three. As the one who had only recently arrived in Lune from the sticks, that dubious honor *should* have gone to Amon, but he was the type who could will himself to continue when he needed to.

“Now, then. You there. The one lording himself over them...”

“That’s Dan, from Room 1,” Nils offered.

“Ahhh, so *you’re* Dan. Why don’t you tell us your next move? Will you tuck your tail between your legs and run after I took your friends by surprise?”

“The hell I will!” Dan said, brandishing his sword as he broke into a charge.

You’re way too slow...

Dan swung his sword vertically, intending to cleave him in two. Ryo smoothly stepped forward and angled his body to the side, dodging the attack. He seized Murasame’s unbladed hilt in an underhand grip in his left hand, pulled it from his belt, then slammed it hard into Dan’s right side.

In boxing parlance, it would be called a liver shot... What made it even more powerful was the twist in his leg and hips below. Dan’s leather armor couldn’t cushion the blow.

“Ngh!”

He collapsed to the ground and passed out.

I thought it would hurt if I hit him bare-handed because of the armor, so I went with Murasame’s hilt instead... But that was still different from boxing, huh... I had no idea a difference in the snap of my wrist could change the power so much.

Indifferent to the unconscious Dan, Ryo analyzed the effect of his punch.

“That must have been real painful...” Nils murmured as he stared in pity at Dan.

“I was on the verge of death earlier, so maybe all that adrenaline is still coursing through my veins, hm?”

His words shocked not only his three roommates but the four other residents of Room 1. Dan, of course, registered nothing at all...

“Oh, which reminds me. Eto, do you mind healing me as well?” Ryo asked, showing the priest his left shoulder.

“This is awful! The bones aren’t broken, but I can tell the impact must have been tremendous... If this had gotten you in the heart, you’d probably be dead

right now.”

After having said his piece, Eto performed healing magic on Ryo.

“Mother Goddess, lend me your healing hand. Lesser Heal.”

In the blink of an eye, the bruise started fading, the pain with it.

“Well, this is the result of avoiding the attack to my heart by the skin of my teeth... I’m glad I survived.”

“What did you even fight?!”

Nils, Eto, and Amon all shouted the same question at him. Despite being a magician, Ryo’s taijutsu was strong enough to overwhelm swordsmen. They couldn’t even fathom what sort of opponent brought him to the brink of death...

“I’ll tell you later,” Ryo deflected, smiling.

Driven into a corner by Leonore, then showing off my power to F-rank adventurers... How much more lame can I get...

Four of Room 1’s residents continued writhing in agony on the ground while Dan remained unconscious.

Due to various factors, Nils, Eto, Amon, and Ryo were filthy, so the four of them headed to the public bathhouse. Though not every private residence had its own bath, dozens of public bathhouses existed all across the city, similar to the private sento operated in Japan. This was made possible by the presence of a large river to the north of the city and a waterworks system that drew from said river, as well as a sewer system that ran under the sidewalks. Ryo thought of historical classification back on Earth and decided that Lune was more akin to a city from the early modern period rather than the Middle Ages.

“Thanks, Ryo,” Nils said with a wry smile. “If you hadn’t shown up when you did, Dan and his mates would have made complete fools of us.”

“You moved so quickly, Ryo!” Amon exclaimed, admiration in his voice. “Even though you’re a magician.”

“Amon, let me tell you something. Magicians these days are capable of that

much.”

“No way. Stop pulling his leg, Ryo,” Nils said.

Watching the exchange, Eto stifled his laughter.

Sunday afternoon passed so peacefully that Ryo almost thought he’d hallucinated his encounter with the akuma in the plaza in front of the library.

Epilogue

A white world lay before Michael. As usual, he was in charge of managing several worlds. He held the usual stone tablet in his hands.

“Dominus Ryo Mihara, I see your slow life is already at an end. Only time will tell if that’s a good thing or a bad thing... Ahhh... This is the so-called path of Asura... I do believe there was a world that used such words. According to the prediction, this human might pose a danger... Oscar Luska, the Inferno Magician. Fire and water, ever incompatible, hm? Dominus Mihara, it’s all good and well if you don’t die, but let’s see what’s in store for you... Oh? Distorted predictions? What in the world...? Oh, my... *This* is certainly an issue... Oscar Luska is bad enough, but... Well! Well, well.”

Fake Michael moved his fingers on the stone tablet, reading about Oscar Luska’s past.

“Though Dominus Mihara’s future will be difficult, Dominus Luska’s past is something fierce too... It will be quite an ordeal having a person like him as an enemy... Yes, I understand now.”

He nodded several times before placing the tablet on top of his desk.

“Predictions are just that: predictions. The future is not yet set. Nevertheless...I wish Dominus Mihara all the best.”

Afterword

Nice to meet you. I'm Tadashi Kubou. Thank you very much for picking up *The Water Magician*.

This story is about Ryo, who reincarnates in another world as a water magician. I would describe volume one as a prologue within a prologue. I hope you enjoy reading about how his world expands and changes little by little.

We have Ryo the main protagonist, Abel the secondary protagonist, their friends, their enemies, and others whose camps we don't yet know they've fallen into... In any case, lots of characters will appear throughout this story. But this is just volume one, which was initially planned to be about 160,000 characters, even with the bonus stories.

A lot's happened since, and now it exceeds 230,000 characters!

What an incredibly dense volume, wouldn't you agree? For that reason, I'm reasonably confident I'll be able to provide you, the reader, with a fuller and richer experience.

Right then. As you know, this story is an isekai reincarnation one. You might be wondering why I wrote it. I sometimes see this question get asked. The true meaning of the question is probably, "Is reincarnation *really* necessary? Why not just have an isekai fantasy?"

I won't deny there are many isekai fantasy stories all around the world. They have been created by many authors, read and spread by many readers, and have even established themselves in a genre that shines brilliantly in human history.

So, compared to such isekai fantasy stories, you might wonder what the advantage, or *raison d'être*, is of an isekai reincarnation fantasy.

Well, I believe that novels become more interesting by weaving together fiction and nonfiction. Incorporating knowledge and culture from modern Earth as the nonfiction part and fusing it with the fantasy that is fiction...I think

therein lies the strength of an isekai reincarnation story.

As for whether or not this particular work managed to create a successful fusion—I honestly don't know. Only the readers can answer that question. If you ultimately find it interesting or entertaining, then I can say I succeeded.

“It was really good!” Those words are always the best reward for an author, no matter the era or the world.





Bonus Short Stories

The Fire Magician I

The Village of Fost

This is the story of Oscar, a man who would later be called the Inferno Magician.

Oscar was a boy with flaming red hair born in a village so small it would be better to call it a hamlet, since it had only eight houses. The residents called their home the village of Fost. Oscar lived a peaceful and unencumbered life there until the age of six. Of course, it was a poor village, which meant the people had to be self-sufficient. Though they lacked a great many material things, their hearts and minds were full.

“Oscar, I’m going to shape the molten iron tomorrow,” the blacksmith Rasan said to Oscar. “Will you help me?”

“Yup. I will.”

“Great. Make sure you tell your papa, okay? We’ll start in the morning.”

“Okay.”

Because the village was a self-sufficient one, Rasan, its sole blacksmith, made everything from knives to agricultural equipment.

The village of Fost prided itself on its production of halite and iron ore from the nearby mountains. These two things, plus the presence of a bountiful river, were the reasons it was built here in the first place.

And Rasan’s only apprentice was the six-year-old Oscar. Naturally, Oscar didn’t conduct his smithing work every day. Demand wasn’t very high in a village of only eight houses.

Around once every three months, he extracted the iron from the ores and used it to make iron goods. In that three-month period, he would make tools to replace broken or worn-down ones as well as any new things the villagers requested. Otherwise, he worked together with the other men in the village to plow the fields or hunt in the forest when he wasn't busy with his smithing.

After all, there weren't many villagers in their tiny settlement. They had no time or energy to quarrel, which explained why they got along so well with each other. It was also the reason children naturally helped the adults from a young age, gaining all sorts of experiences as they grew up.

This included hunting as well. Oscar would often participate with his bow. Though small, the weapon was still lethal as long as it hit the mark.

He was presently the village's youngest resident. The year before last, a child had been born to Schulast, the head of the village, and his wife. Oscar had been excited about having a de facto younger brother or sister. Alas, it wasn't meant to be, as Schulast's wife had a stillbirth. Despite being the most devastated by their loss, Headman Schulast hugged Oscar and comforted the sad boy. The villagers truly had a strong relationship with each other.

"Papa! Mama!" Oscar called. "I'm back."

"Oh ho, Oscar. Welcome home."

Sna, Oscar's father, called out to him from the back of their house where he'd been splitting wood.

"Papa, I'm helping Master Rasan with his smithing tomorrow. He said to tell you."

"That right? Guess that means you won't be goin' huntin' with us, eh?"

Oscar was always factored into the village's fighting force on hunts. It made the little boy extremely happy and proud to be included in the adults' calculations.

"Oscar, your mama'll be startin' on dinner soon, so go help her out, will ya?"

"Aye, papa."

He dashed off toward the main room with its dirt floor. There, he found

preparations for dinner underway, and all that remained was to light the hearth.

“I’m home, mama. I’ll start the fire.”

“Welcome back, Oscar, and please, if you would.”

Upon his mother Scottie’s request, he visualized fire in his mind.

“Burn.”

Flames sprang to life in the hearth.

Oscar was the village’s sole magician.

The next morning, Oscar went to Rasan’s smithy. He’d already assembled the brick furnace they’d need to extract the iron from the ore. Flames bellowed out from the top of the chimney, which stretched two meters above the ground.

Simply put, a mixture of crushed charcoal and iron ore was poured into the furnace from the top, after which the fire was lit, then air continuously pumped into the chimney to keep the fire burning at a high temperature. How long the fire burned depended on the materials used, but currently, Rasan had found a way to keep it going for twelve hours.

By nature, pure iron is a soft metal, but heating ore allows charcoal’s carbon molecules to enter the space between iron atoms, hardening the iron on an atomic level. This is known as steel.

Frankly speaking, the amount of iron that could be extracted from the brick furnace wasn’t much. Nevertheless, it was more than enough for the village of eight houses. Sometimes Rasan even had some left to sell on his journeys into town.

Except the closest town to the village of Fost was two days away, one-way, so the villagers went there around three times a year. Since the village was essentially self-sufficient, they only made their trips to buy sewing-related items such as fabrics and threads. When they did visit the town, Fost’s iron goods always sold out because they had such a good reputation.

The raw material to make steel extruded from the bottom of the brick furnace. The many impurities still remaining needed to be hammered out. This was where Oscar came in. Using a fairly large hammer, he gently and lightly struck the metal. Each tap produced a spark, and each spark contained impurities, which was why every strike made the material smaller and smaller, leaving a surprisingly small piece by the end.

While Oscar hammered away, Rasan the blacksmith disassembled the brick furnace and dug out the raw steel that couldn't be extracted from underneath. These remnants would be pounded as well and used to make tools.

Rasan should have been exhausted after stoking the fire continuously for twelve hours, but to Oscar, the blacksmith didn't look tired at all. The man always worked with a smile on his face, like he was truly enjoying himself.

“Making something good requires constant effort.”

It was the blacksmith's favorite phrase and the reason Rasan never cut corners with his creations. Everyone in the village knew this too, which explained their tremendous faith in the things he made.

The villagers hunted animals. Sometimes, they fought monsters too. On very rare occasions, bandits attacked their settlement as well. So, naturally, the weapons they used for all these instances were made by Rasan. The main purpose of his current production run was to construct those weapons.

Every so often, Oscar's fire magic increased the weakened strength of the flames. He would also force the smoke piping from the kiln to change direction and flow away from him and Rasan. The boy was an incredible asset for the blacksmith's workshop.

Hammer out the steel's impurities, pound it flat, place it on top of a previously worked piece and beat them together, heat it in another kiln, take it out, then pound it again... The process is repeated many times in the production of Japanese swords, but the basics remain the same. However, the strength of the strikes is different...

In the Western world back on Earth, the same process was done from the Middle Ages to the modern era. The western armor displayed in museums was, in fact, made not from a single plate of steel but several hammered and welded together.

Forging, the process of beating iron and other metals to make them sturdier, is a technique that already existed on Earth before 4,000 BCE. Around the 18th century BCE, the Hittites conquered vast stretches of the world using their iron weapons. It was such a famous story that it would appear without fail on high school history tests.

People today aren't aware that this technology has been around for so long... Although it wasn't like Oscar would have any way of knowing Earth's history anyway.

He just continued hammering away... Gently, lightly... That was how he helped Rasan make sturdy iron tools.

These were the basic things Oscar learned.

The metal was heated and pounded countless times. Every strike reduced the size of the steel as impurities were beaten out. Nevertheless, it was necessary to harden the steel.

It's like anything else... Only when you put in the time and keep working diligently at it will you create something good.

The last step was tempering the steel to harden it. After metal had been heated to allow additional carbon to enter areas with low concentrations of carbon, it was then rapidly cooled to set that carbon in place.

Except this stage wasn't the end. By this point, they had in their hands something hard but also fragile. So they heated the steel up again, softened it a bit, and made it hard and pliable.

After a few days of effort, they finally made three swords and a knife.

"Sna, if it's all right with you, give this one to Oscar."

Rasan the blacksmith gave Oscar's father one of the three swords.

"You sure?"

"Aye, he's already six years old. His seventh birthday is soon, innit? He's practicing his sword skills anyways, so I think it's a fine idea to give him his own now. It's lighter than an adult's sword since I made it shorter and thinner."

That day, Oscar received his first sword. In the remote northern region of the country where the village of Fost lay, this was one rite of passage that acknowledged a boy as a man. Though he wasn't technically an adult yet, Oscar still felt proud to be recognized as a man by the villagers. He finally felt like he was one of them.

The next day, there was a big hunt with half of the villagers participating. They successfully hunted down a massive boar—the animal, not the monster.

The boars and bears that the villagers hunted in the fall provided a good reserve of protein for the winter. For this reason, men weren't the only ones who went on these big hunts. A third of the women also participated using bows and arrows, with the rest staying behind in the village to prepare for the feast after the hunters returned.

The skilled villagers never miss their targets! Whenever the hunting parties left with promises of bringing something back, they always followed through... And as the leader of these expeditions, Sna, Oscar's father, was a man who made good on his promise.

That night, the villagers held a banquet in the village square.

Oscar had successfully hit his first animal with an arrow. Many of the villagers were praising him, but Headman Schulast and Sna remained on the edges of the celebration conducting a serious conversation.

"Schu, are you serious?"

"Aye. Bassa spotted what seems to be a bandit scout."

Both men grimaced. In remote areas like this one, bandits were just as

dangerous as monsters. Many of them were former soldiers or adventurers who had fallen on hard times or disgraced themselves, so they were better fighters than the local farmers and peasants. This made them a threat to whoever they attacked.

“The last time we were attacked was...” Schulast started, frowning in thought. “Well, it was over five years ago, right?”

“Yeah, not long after Oscar was born.”

Schulast and Sna recalled that incident when bandits raided the village.

“There weren’t that many o’ ’em and they weren’t all that skilled either. We managed to rout them easily enough, but...”

“But considering they sent out a scout this time, it means their leader must be a cautious one. I suppose that makes him all the more dangerous, huh?”

Since most bandits didn’t have the word “plan” in their vocabularies, they conducted their activities haphazardly, which explained why they’d stooped to banditry in the first place...

Unfortunately, the bandits this time were different. They were clever and cautious enough to conduct a preliminary investigation to gather information on the village’s size, defenses, and more.

“Be that as it may, not like we have anywhere to flee or anyone else we can turn to for help... So in the end, we got no choice but to defend ourselves.”

“Same story, different day, eh?”

Nodding, Sna agreed with Schulast.

The two men had been friends all their lives, working side by side together to confront a variety of problems since boyhood. Though this bandit issue wasn’t a small one, the challenges they’d tackled so far hadn’t been easy to solve either.

The same held true for the village as a whole since its establishment. A series of unending difficulties. But they couldn’t give up, not now.

The next day, all the villagers held a meeting to discuss the problem of the bandits and came to a unanimous decision.

They would engage the enemy head-on.

Since their decision to fight the bandits, all the villagers had begun focusing on increasing arrow production. As far as the village's defenses went, the bow and arrow was the most effective weapon system. In the village of Fost in particular, everyone could use it, men and women, old and young. Of course, they didn't hit the bull's-eye one hundred percent of the time, but they were all capable with the bow. Even a child's arrow could take the life of a robust man.

They wouldn't know how large the bandits' forces were until the enemy attacked, so the residents of Fost were determined to avoid hand-to-hand combat at all costs because the likelihood was high they would suffer casualties. If it was impossible to avoid this scenario, they could at least delay the onset of close-quarter fighting. For this reason as well they needed to make sure they didn't run out of arrows.

The most distinctive feature of the village of Fost was the abundance of halite and iron ore in its mountains. The rock salt secured the village's self-reliance while the iron ore secured its defenses. They used the iron to create small arrowheads, a distinct trait of Fost's arrows. This contrasted with the arrows of other remote villages, which were often just sharpened wooden sticks.

These iron arrowheads, which were mass-produced using casts, completely changed the distance and accuracy of the arrows they were attached to. It even took less time and effort to attach the arrowheads than it did to simply sharpen the end of an arrow. All you had to do was strike the shaft into the arrowhead so the arrowhead wouldn't fall off.

This was a tremendous weapon for the people of Fost.

A fence made of joined logs encircled the village of Fost, essentially presenting an obstacle to would-be invaders. The villagers had built it together after the bandits' attack five years prior. Though they had easily trounced their opponents back then, they had determined it was necessary to have a barrier in place to make it possible for them to resist invasions of a larger scale. The surface was coated with an extract from astringent persimmon, otherwise

known as tannin on modern Earth. This provided some protection against decay and also served to demarcate the entry route for intruders.

In turn, it also made it easier to calculate the placement of the shooters. Because the attack would undoubtedly come at night, the villagers needed to place their archers in accessible locations near the archers' houses. If the villagers knew when the raid would occur, they could simply stay up that evening rather than sleeping, but this wasn't the case. As long as they didn't know the time of the bandits' attack, they had no choice but to position their archers close to where they would be sleeping—or so they thought...

"Bassa discovered the bandits. They're probably attacking tonight."

"I can see now why he used to be a scout for his party of adventures."

Headman Schulast and Sna nodded to each other, then set about assigning the villagers their positions. The basic idea was to place them near each house as previously planned. However, now that they had identified the timing of the attack, they decided to place them in more effective locations.

Bassa had gathered another bit of unhappy information as well: there were more than fifty bandits, making their gang quite large—larger than Fost's entire population.

Of course, this information was shared with all the villagers. No one showed any signs of fleeing despite being outnumbered by the enemy, largely because they had nowhere they *could* flee. The sheer number of bandits only strengthened their resolve. The people would fight them off no matter what.

Thus began the longest night in the village of Fost's history.



Poche, the leader of the Wolves of the Night bandit gang, sensed something was wrong. The feeling had first hit him five days ago when he received the report that their scout might have been seen. Even remote areas such as this one boasted retired adventurers, so he always made sure to conduct a thorough reconnaissance. It was no surprise then that the villagers might occasionally spot his scouts.

He'd assumed that to have been the case this time too. Unfortunately though,

his subordinate had told him, “There’s a chance the scout may have been spotted, but we don’t know by who or what kind of person they are.” The bandits’ scout was a fairly experienced one, so the fact that he hadn’t been able to verify the witness’s identity was very unusual.

Is the village’s scout so skilled then? Poche thought to himself, his expression unchanging as he listened calmly to the rest of the report. The thought of calling off the raid crossed his mind for a moment.

But winter was approaching. Even bandits couldn’t raid all year round, since the snow limited their movements in winter. He wanted to stockpile as many supplies as possible before then, especially food and alcohol.

Despite his hesitation, Poche still ordered the night attack five days later.

In the afternoon preceding the raid, his scout once more relayed to him that “someone may have spotted our main force.” It couldn’t be helped. They had already made a variety of preparations for that night’s raid, so the report changed nothing.

But the greatest sense of wrongness struck Poche that night just as they commenced the attack. The village had been completely silent all day, even though there was a chance they’d been spotted. It was almost like they were all asleep.

If they’d seen the bandits preparing during the day, wouldn’t they have installed more guards than usual and lit more bonfires? Or had his scout simply been mistaken when he reported he’d been seen earlier in the day?

His emotions remained an unsettled jumble of unease and suspicion. Ultimately, Poche couldn’t think of a good reason to call off the raid, so the bandits proceeded as planned. They attacked the village on two fronts.



They’re here!

Oscar stood ready. He was so stiff his own body felt alien to him, but he couldn’t focus on that.

“If we lose, we die.”

His father, Sna, had said so bluntly this afternoon, staring directly into his eyes. Though it might have been too soon for a six-year-old child to hear such harsh words, it was never too late in such a remote environment. You could dress up that sentiment as beautifully as you liked, but it didn't change the fact that weakness meant death.

Sna and Scottie each placed a hand on their son's stiff shoulders. Neither spoke, but their simple action was enough for much of the excess tension to seep out of Oscar's body.

They heard the sounds of horses galloping and people running.

Sna nocked an arrow. Scottie and Oscar followed suit. They already knew where to aim.

Without a word, Sna loosed the arrow. The momentum with which it flew forward demonstrated how powerful the bow was. It punched right through the chain mail worn by one of the riding bandits and pierced his heart.

His arrow was the signal for the rest of the villagers to attack. Arrows began flying from all over the settlement. Targets acquired, Scottie and Oscar did the same.

Scottie's arrow plunged into the neck of a lowly bandit on foot who wore no chain mail and instantly ended his life. Oscar had aimed for the grunt next to the one his mother felled, but he missed by the slightest sliver. He had no time to be upset though. Instead, he nocked another arrow.

He didn't even notice the confusion among the bandits. Nock, aim, fire. Nock, aim, fire. Emptying his mind, he let the training instilled into his body take over.

Compared to the first shot, which often caught the opponent off guard, the probability of subsequent shots striking their target dropped rapidly.

No one lit any torches as the battle, now illuminated only by moonlight, continued. The silent, deadly arrows whizzing in the darkness symbolized fear itself to the bandits, but even they eventually began to realize the direction

from which the arrows came as the projectiles found their marks. Once they knew, they could seek cover.

Be that as it may, there were only eight houses in the village, meaning there weren't many places they *could* hide, even with the storehouses and communal buildings.

"Get close and fight!"

The shouted command came from within the bandits' ranks.

Sna clicked his tongue in annoyance when he heard the voice.

Just like we suspected, the one leading 'em is a calm man... I dunno how many we took down with our arrows, but we have no choice now.

He signaled to Scottie and Oscar next to him. Once he saw them nod in acknowledgment, the three of them began to move with Sna in the lead. Now that the enemy knew where the arrows came from, the bandits would head directly for the source.

Depending on the circumstances, it was better to act first than risk being surrounded.

Oscar and his parents moved quickly and joined up with Headman Schulast and his wife at the center of the village. By this time, the sounds of weapons clashing echoed alongside the agonized screams of the dying. To the north of their rendezvous point, they saw Rasan the blacksmith fighting against three bandits.

Sna immediately nocked an arrow and let it fly without hesitation. It pierced through the heart of one of the bandits. Another was shocked by the unexpected attack long enough for Rasan to slice his throat with his sword. The remaining man fled in a panic.

With Rasan, they were now a group of six. The village head and his wife gave Sna and Oscar spears they had stored in their home. The couple also took one each.

Using a spear against a high-ranking swordsman forces you into close range, which can often make the fight difficult. When used against other opponents, however, a spear's long reach gave the wielder a measure of control. In addition, fighting together as a group made them that much stronger. They thought the strategy would prove quite effective in close combat against the bandits.

Although, to be honest, Oscar wanted to use the sword he'd just recently received, but this wasn't the time nor the place to say something so selfish.

"Hm, the sounds of fighting are now only coming from the west?" village headman Schulast murmured.

"These damn bandits might have gathered there. Schu, can you look after them? Rasan and I'll go check things out. Bassa must be there and I think he can hold them off 'til we arrive."

"Understood. Be careful."

Sna and Schulast nodded firmly to each other.

Then Sna looked at Oscar. "Oscar, you take care of everyone too, okay?"

"Aye, papa," Oscar replied, nodding.

"I'll be back soon, Scottie."

"Be careful, darling."

Scottie answered with a nod of her own, her expression understanding.

Nobody noticed the figure lurking in the shadows watching the six of them.

A minute after Sna and Rasan left the others, a powerful arrow rushed toward the four.

"Ngh—"

It hit Schulast with terrifying speed and force. Blood spurted from his mouth as he collapsed.

"Noooooooo!!!" his wife screamed in despair.

Blindsided by the scene, both Oscar and Scottie froze.

Then a giant man appeared in front of the trio. He tossed his bow aside and drew a massive sword. He was roughly one hundred ninety centimeters tall and he must have weighed at least ninety kilos. Muscles rippled all over his body. It was the only way to describe him.

The savage expression on his face was enough to chill anyone's blood, but the huge scar on his right cheek left an even more unpleasant impression. It stretched from right below his ear down to his jaw, clearly made by a sword.

In this world of healing magics and potions, large scars like his were a rare sight indeed. Repairing internal damage might be difficult in some cases with low-grade potions, but at the very least, they were effective for skin repair.

Of course, once a wound closed and time passed, neither magic nor potions could repair it. Situations like that occurred when people had to fight continuously without magic or potions... In short, the man was clearly a powerful one who had endured such circumstances.

"That's what ya get for leaving behind only one man," the scarred man said. "Lucky me that he's outta the picture now."

Then he rushed toward the three of them. His merciless words snapped Scottie back to reality, and she found she could move again. At once, she thrust her spear toward the charging man.

A spear's range provided an advantage against bandits in close combat—or at least it should. This man was different. He batted the spear aside with the tip of his sword, making space for him to close the gap between them.

He only needed a single stroke of his blade to slice her carotid artery. Blood sprayed under the light of the moon. Awash in the red liquid, the scarred man smiled grotesquely. The sight was an incredibly ominous one. He spread both arms apart lightly, taking in the gush of blood like he was enjoying a shower.

The scene before him brought all of Oscar's movements and thoughts to a halt. How much time passed in that state? A minute? Or mere seconds?

He suddenly came to his senses. Mama was dead. No, murdered... His brain finally accepted the truth. And in that moment, something snapped inside

Oscar.

“Burn!”

Flames surged from his hand. Up until now, he’d only ever created fire small enough to light a stove, but now with the limiter in his mind removed, a powerful blaze of fire magic erupted from a distance of less than five meters.

Unfortunately, the man casually deflected the flames with his sword even as he relished the blood spraying over him.

Oscar didn’t stop though. He hurled his spear at him, but the man deflected it with a swing of his sword.

That was when Oscar charged the man with his own sword. He slashed sideways. *Krsssh.*

“Huh...?”

The chain mail under the man’s clothes absorbed the blow.

“Too bad, boy. That’s a right nice sword, but yer just not good enough for it.”

The man sneered at him before lazily swinging his sword.

Oscar leaped back to evade it, but the blade brushed his shoulder. The man’s action had been deliberate to force Oscar to do just that.

The scarred man was becoming careless, however. He knew that the child was wasted on the sword in his hand. Nearby, a woman wept over the lifeless body of the man he’d killed with his bow. It was only natural for his guard to drop in this situation—but this was a battlefield. He knew the people he saw in front of him weren’t his only enemies.

Slash.

His instincts had his body twisting away before his eyes could confirm the threat. He’d felt the killing aura behind him. However, even as he was still turning to evade the blow, the blade not only struck him but sliced straight through his chain mail and cut deep into his flesh.

“Whoa.”

What an astonishing experience. No one would deny it was possible to cut

through chain mail... Possible, yes, but merely that. A *possibility*. Only knights were capable of such a feat. So for this to occur in such a remote village was completely unexpected for the man.

Sna stood in front of him, a furious expression on his face. Both hands gripped a masterpiece of a sword, one even more fantastic than Oscar's. It wasn't a magical or holy weapon, just a genuinely exquisite piece of work forged by a blacksmith.

Despite the danger of confronting that magnificent blade and its enraged owner, the scarred man ran at Sna with no hesitation. He had long since forgotten about Oscar.

As far as swordsmanship went, the scarred man far outstripped Sna in skill. But Sna's resolve was a different matter entirely. Sna, overflowing with fury, was willing to give his life to avenge his wife. Meanwhile, the scarred man only knew how to revel in the pleasure of killing others. He slowly found himself overwhelmed by the frenzied determination of Sna's spirit.

But then he realized something. After a particularly powerful clash, he backstepped to create some distance between himself and Sna. In the next instant, four arrows raced toward Sna. He dodged one and cut through a second with his sword, but the remaining two plunged through his flesh—one in his right leg and the other in his right arm.

The scarred man wouldn't let such a perfect opportunity go to waste. The arrows had stopped Sna for just a moment, but that gave the scarred man the chance to close the distance. He sliced off Sna's right arm then unwaveringly stabbed him in the chest.

"Ngh—"

Sna coughed up blood.

Oscar could do nothing but watch. He couldn't move. Couldn't speak. He could do nothing.

The scarred man picked up Sna's severed right arm, then pulled the sword from the fingers still stiffly clutching it. He stared intently at it. A sharp voice

called out to him.

“Boskona, we’re pulling out.”

“What? But we barely even started, Poche.”

“This isn’t up for discussion. Hurry, they’re coming.”

“Tsk,” the scarred man—Boskona—spared a glance at the boy with the flaming red hair just standing there in a daze before adroitly making his escape.

The bandit gang, Wolves of the Night, left the village of Fost, but only after having inflicted heavy losses to its residents, including Oscar. Unfortunately, Fost’s longest night wasn’t over yet.

Rasan the blacksmith came running to a shocking scene. Headman Schulast had been killed by an arrow, and his wife wept as she clung to his body. Sna and Scottie were on the ground covered in blood, and Oscar stared at them with a blank look on his face.

After he stared at the sight for some time, the reality of the situation finally hit him, and Rasan’s legs gave out. He collapsed then, sitting listlessly on his knees on the ground.

While the bandits had left without taking any of the village’s stockpile of provisions, the magnitude of their losses was still too great.

Headman Schulast was the heart and head of the village.

Sna, his lifelong friend as well as Oscar’s father, was the village’s pillar and the leader of their hunts.

These two, along with Rasan the blacksmith, had founded the village.

When the three of them still lived in town, Schulast and Sna had invited Rasan to establish a settlement with them. He had become an empty shell of a man when his wife passed away not long after their marriage. Schulast chose a location close to somewhere iron ore could be mined. Sna allowed his only son,

Oscar, to become his apprentice, thereby giving Rasan hope and a reason to live.

For Rasan, this village, Schulast, and Sna had been everything. These were the same men who now lay lifeless before his eyes. His legs had refused to hold him any longer after he was confronted with this grim reality. Sitting numbly on the ground, he wished it were some kind of mistake, or even a dream.

He'd thought he would never again experience the sense of loss he had when his wife died, but that was wrong. The same sense of loss struck him brutally now too—no, perhaps this devastation was even greater than what he'd felt back then.

Rasan stared unseeingly at their corpses for some time. Then suddenly his gaze shifted to Oscar, who stood there with a blank look on his face, still holding his drawn sword.

That was when a thought trickled into the blacksmith's mind. A realization. He *hadn't* lost everything, and now he *must* protect Oscar.

The village had lost its head and pillar and half of its residents, but there were survivors. Including himself and Oscar.

Now that they had survived, they needed to keep living... They would do so for the dead.

Unfortunately, he noticed the sound of footsteps coming down the hill too late.

By the time Rasan realized what was coming, the source of the sound was close enough to see.

"A pack of war wolves..."

These wolflike creatures were unmistakably monsters rather than animals. While a single war wolf wasn't especially strong—compared to boar-type monsters like lesser boars, for example, it wasn't an especially strong fighter—but an entire pack of war wolves was incredibly dangerous.

As if they were communicating with senses beyond sight and hearing, the pack worked in unison to ensure the capture of their prey. Naturally, humans counted as prey too...

Rasan knew what he had to do before engaging the dangerous war wolves. He walked quickly to Oscar, who still stood there stunned, faced the boy directly, and grasped his shoulder.

"Oscar! Snap out of it!" he shouted, jostling him.

Oscar didn't react at all. So Rasan raised his right hand and smacked him soundly on the cheek.

"Master...?" Oscar finally said.

"Oscar, listen to me. The smell of blood has drawn monsters. You need to run away."

"I don't wanna..."

"No. I won't let you die."

"Papa and Mama aren't here anymore. I don't wanna live..."

For the first time, tears spilled from Oscar's eyes. Rasan knew only too well how the boy felt, but he couldn't afford to feel sympathy right now.

"Oscar, you *must* live."

"Why?!"

"Because Sna and Scottie would want you to!"

Sna had said the same words to Rasan after the death of his wife had left him a lifeless husk.

"You don't know that..."

"I do! I do. That is why you're going to live, Oscar."

At that moment, the agonized screams of someone's death throes came from another part of the village. Since only villagers remained now, it meant one of them had fallen victim to the war wolves...

Moments later, the war wolves were finally upon Oscar and Rasan.

Rasan pushed Oscar away and swung his sword, cutting through one of the monsters. Its comrades instantly focused their attention on him, which was exactly Rasan's aim.

"Oscar, head to the river. They hate water."

"Master..."

"Go! Now!"

With that shout, Rasan lunged at the war wolves in front of him.

Oscar took one last glance at him before he started running toward the river.

The village of Fost stood on the banks of a wide river. It was just ahead of Oscar, but the war wolves numbered too many. Two of them attacked him just as he reached it. Oscar managed to fend one off from biting him with a swing of his sword, but the other clawed his back with a foreleg.

"Ahhh!" he screamed.

He hadn't felt any pain when the scarred man slashed his shoulder because he'd been so absorbed in the fight. Now, though, the pain emanating from his back was dizzying, far too much for a six-year-old. He felt like he was going to pass out, but he nevertheless endured it. Keeping the two monsters ahead of him in his sight, Oscar slowly inched backward toward the river. There was just a little further until he reached its waters...

And then both of the war wolves lunged at him simultaneously, their jaws snapping violently. One from the left, the other from the right.

Resigning himself to losing his left arm, he parried the war wolf coming from his right with his sword. The one coming from the left sank its teeth into his left arm right as he sprang into the river.

The moment he reached the water, he realized war wolves were indeed wolves by the way the monster latched onto his left arm and flinched in terror. Meanwhile, the one on his right had exposed its neck to him and he had enough sense left to stab it with his sword.

Then he lost consciousness.



“What’s the matter, Cohn?”

“Dad,” Cohn began, squinting at the river as he pushed the wagon. “Is—is that a person?”

“Oh, no... Cohn, hurry to the mansion and call for Berlocke or his lordship. I’m headin’ into the water.”

“Got it.”

His heart beat. Though he was unconscious, the faint rise and fall of his chest indicated he still breathed. He was a little boy of six or seven with flaming red hair who clutched a sword like it was the most important thing in the world.

For the time being, Latatow, Cohn’s father, covered the boy with an empty burlap sack and anything else he had on hand. He thought it best to warm him up with layers since his clothes were wet. Meanwhile, Cohn came running back, accompanied by Berlocke, the butler of the mansion.

“Latatow, how is he?”

“His heart’s beating and he’s breathing a little too,” Latatow replied. He was no expert, but his answer was more than enough for the butler.

“Okay, good. He’s alive, then. Let’s hurry and bring him into the mansion.”

Thus began Oscar’s second life.

The Elder

Oscar opened his eyes. An unfamiliar ceiling in an unfamiliar room in an unfamiliar...berth? It was a bed. Except he didn’t know what a bed was. Born and raised in the village of Fost, the six-year-old had never even been taken into town on shopping trips. So it made sense he didn’t know.

But it felt very, very comfortable to be in this berth. Which was why he fell

asleep again.

When he awoke again, he sensed someone's presence near him. He turned only his head in the person's direction as he remained lying in the bed.

"Oh, are you awake?" the person said. When Oscar looked, he saw an old man with a head full of white hair and a great, bushy white beard. He had kind eyes.

"U-Um..." Oscar started, but he stopped because he didn't know what to say.

"This is the village of Shuk, near the town of Mashuu," the old man said. "One of the villagers found you washed up on the riverbank. Don't worry, you're safe here."

At first, Oscar didn't react at all when he heard the news... But five seconds later, tears started streaming down his face. The old man said nothing, merely letting him cry.

Once he stopped crying, Oscar bowed his head. "Thank you very much for saving me."

"Think nothing of it," the old man said with a smile.

Then a knock sounded on the door before a man entered the room. He looked to be in his late 50s. His hair was starting to turn gray, but he was clean-shaven. He was clearly an individual who took great pride in his well-groomed appearance.

"My lord, preparations are finished for the meal. Everything is set in the dining room, but would you rather I bring it here?"

"Hm... Boy, wh— Actually, why don't you start by telling me your name? I'm Luke Rothko. I'm retired, so folks around here kindly call me the elder. And this is Berlocke, who takes care of me."

"Um, I-I'm Oscar, from the village of Fost," Oscar said, doing his best to introduce himself politely. Headman Schulast had taught him manners just in case. He always said you never knew when you would need them.

“Oh ho, a wonderful greeting. Well done. But the village of Fost... As I recall, it was one of the newly developed villages in the neighboring domain of Hunt, eh...”

“That’s right, my lord,” Berlocke confirmed. “A self-sufficient village, as it was situated far from town. Although I heard its people visited on occasion to sell high-quality tools made by their blacksmith.”

“Ah, I see. Then the sword Oscar clung tightly to must have been one such creation of the blacksmith.”

The elder looked at the sword leaning upright next to the bed.

“Ah!” Oscar started, only now noticing his sword. Fresh tears began to spill down his cheeks. “My master made it for me.”

This time, he didn’t cry as long. Because his master, Rasan the blacksmith, had told him to live, and crying wasn’t living. It only meant he wasn’t dead.

With that thought, Oscar wiped his tears.

“Hm. I see you’ve been through a lot, but there’s plenty of time to talk about it later. How about we eat first? You know what they say about doing anything on an empty stomach.”

“Me too?”

“Of course. The three of us will eat together.”

“Okay.”

It was all food Oscar had never eaten before. The food back in his village hadn’t been bad or unfilling—the opposite, actually. Oscar just truly didn’t know about anything other than the things they’d eaten at home.

So today marked his first experience with food outside the village. It was all very delicious...

He gave his undivided attention to the meal. He didn’t know how many days he’d gone without eating but he *did* know he was starving, so he ate quite a lot. And Oscar was too young and sheltered to realize that Berlocke had made most

of the dishes easy to digest on purpose.

After they finished eating, he retired to the living room with the elder. He sat on the sofa and drank something called coffee for the first time. The first sip tasted bitter. When the retiree saw Oscar's reaction, he recommended a white powder. He tentatively licked some and was shocked at the sweetness!

"That's called 'sugar.' It's made from sugar beets. A long, long time ago, a great king of another nation spread this sweet seasoning far and wide."

Putting a lot of sugar into the coffee made it so much easier to drink. Oscar sipped happily.

"Right, then, Oscar."

"Yes, sir?" Oscar replied obediently.

"Do you have anywhere else you can go?"

"Huh?"

"Well, just an inkling on my part, but if there's no one you can turn to," the elder said, "why don't you stay here with us?"

The retiree had no intentions of forcing the boy, so he couched his words as carefully as possible in case Oscar wanted to go elsewhere. The old man had surmised that his family in the village of Fost was no longer alive.

Oscar remained silent for a minute before he finally spoke.

"Elder, you already know my parents died, don't you?"

"I—" Flustered, Luke tried to refute him, but Oscar shook his head.

"I know I'm right," he said. "Papa and Mama... Right in front of my eyes..."

"Oscar, you were covered in wounds when they carried you here," the old man hesitantly began. The child had gone through such a dreadful experience, one he couldn't even imagine, so he decided in the end not to treat Oscar as a child but someone who had escaped terrible and uncommon circumstances. "A few of them looked to be the work of war wolves claws and fangs... But the one

on your shoulder was surely made by a sword...”

“It was him... The man who killed Papa and Mama...” Oscar’s voice broke then. He looked down at the floor, but no more tears flowed. He had decided to live and crying wasn’t living. He was done with tears.

“Elder, I don’t have anywhere else to go. Please let me stay here. I’ll do anything. I learned blacksmithing from my master. I’m still not good at hammering, but I can sharpen. I can light a stove too.”

“Light a stove? Oscar, do you mean to tell me you’re a fire magician?”

“A fire—fire magician? I don’t really understand what you’re saying...”

“Ah, right, of course. Forgive me. How ’bout you light that fireplace over there then?” the elder said, indicating the nearby hearth.

Berlocke entered the living room just then and immediately added more wood, as if he’d understood his master’s intentions without being told.

Oscar turned to the fireplace and chanted.

“Burn.”

Instantly, a small flame burst from Oscar’s hand, flew to the firewood in the hearth, and began to burn.

“Well, well.”

“Isn’t that something...”

Both Berlocke and the elder were surprised.

“He didn’t even use a spell...”

“I thought as much.”

“What do you mean?” Oscar asked, his head cocked curiously. Berlocke’s stunned comment had seemed to confirm whatever suspicion the old man held.

“No, I just had a feeling when I saw your hair, you see. Brought to mind a legend about red hair.”

“What kind of legend?”

““Beloved are those with blazing crimson locks, for ’tis proof of the fire god’s

love.' Or so I think it goes."

The elder had recited the words in a tone heavy with gravitas.

"Basically, it means those with flaming red hair were born favored by the fire god. It's quite an old legend though... So old it's no longer even passed down in temples..."

At that point, the old man's face grew thoughtful. Only for a few seconds.

"Right then, it's settled. Berlocke, Oscar's stayin' with us here on the estate. Oscar, that means all kinds of learning to bring you up to snuff. Starting tomorrow, you'll be studying reading, writing, and arithmetic every morning."

"Huh..."

Having been born and raised in a village, Oscar only now took his first steps into the thing called "studying."

Berlocke became his instructor on the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic while the elder taught him about the Central Provinces—its history, state of affairs, geography, and more.

He had lectures in the mornings and Berlocke taught him swordsmanship in the afternoons. The latter was what Oscar wanted.

"I want to be stronger," he'd told them.

Oscar had a classmate. It was Cohn, the boy who'd spotted his unconscious body in the river. The elder had made the arrangements to include the other boy because he said, "It's important to have school friends."

Cohn's father, Latatow, was a merchant who ran a shop in the village of Shuk, where the retiree's estate was located. Cohn was the fourth son and his job in the family was to deliver anything the estate needed from his family's store. Every day, the boy insisted that he wanted to be an adventurer when he grew up, a dream his father wholeheartedly agreed with. After all, as the fourth son, he wouldn't be able to take over the business or open a branch of the shop.

The elder had high hopes for Cohn due to his cleverness and potential. So the

old man himself had approached Latatow to strike a deal.

“Will you let Cohn work as Oscar’s school friend?” he’d asked.

If his son was truly determined to become an adventurer in the future, then naturally, he should be able to read, write, and do sums. Moreover, the higher his rank rose, the greater his chances to come into contact with the aristocracy. There was no harm in having an education in his case. Not to mention the boy could train in swordsmanship as well, and since it was “work,” Luke would pay him a stipend as well...

Neither Latatow nor Cohn had any reason to refuse the offer. In fact, the terms were so good the boy’s father could feel nothing but gratitude.

“My time has come!” Cohn crowed excitedly.

A moment later, his father rapped him smartly on the head with his knuckles. But that was a secret.

Cohn was twelve years old at the time. He truly tried his best with his studies. It was the first time in his life he committed himself to something so earnestly. In fact, every day after returning home from the elder’s estate, he would review the day’s lessons. In all likelihood, he was far more superior to most other children his age.

But the fact still stood that Cohn at twelve years old was no different than six-year-old Oscar. Simply put, the younger boy was a prodigy in many areas. Reading, writing, arithmetic—he only needed to learn a concept once to master it. The Central Provinces’ history, each country’s state of affairs, geography—he learned it all at an unbelievably terrifying speed, like dry sand greedily sucking up water.

As the boys’ instructor, even the elder himself was amazed by Oscar’s performance. Before he retired, the old man had encountered many naturally gifted and bright people whose intellects Oscar already matched at only six years old.

It was easy, then, to pity Cohn in the face of Oscar’s genius. Nevertheless,

Cohn worked diligently with a simple, almost foolish, earnestness. His schoolmate being a prodigy wasn't a good enough reason for him to stop moving forward in his life. He was determined to become an adventurer. In order to accomplish his goal, he would learn everything he could here... So he studied seriously.

That was all there was to it. There's no one stronger than someone who has a goal and doesn't waver in its pursuit.

Learning alongside him, Oscar must have sensed something in Cohn. At first, he wanted nothing whatsoever to do with the other boy. Six months later, however, the two had become very good friends.

They usually practiced swordsmanship in the afternoons, but they had this time free two days a week. Most of the time, Oscar used this time to work on his fire magic while Cohn reviewed what they learned. Lately though, Cohn noticed Oscar disappearing from the estate during these free periods.

Today, he finally discovered where his friend had been going. When he found him, he saw Oscar sharpening a blade at the remains of a blacksmith's forge next, only five hundred meters from the mansion.

"Oscar, what are you doing?"

"Cohn! As you can see, I'm sharpening this blade."

"R-Right..."

Oscar was honing a knife with a hand-sized whetstone. There was a large, rotating whetstone in the workshop, but it didn't work well since it hadn't been serviced in some time.

"If I remember right, this workshop belonged to old man Basan... He passed away last year."

"That's what I was told too. He didn't have a successor or heirs, so the village is using it as a communal workshop. The elder said I could use it, so I have been sharpening my blades here. The whetstones, from coarse to fine, are all in good condition and very easy to use."

Then he showed Cohn the knife he had just finished sharpening.

“Wow, it’s so beautifully sharp... Oscar, you’re really good at this.”

“My master taught me. He was a blacksmith.”

With a somewhat wistful expression, Oscar set to work on a second blade.

“Then you can smith, Oscar?” Cohn asked timidly.

“No.” Oscar stared at the blade for a moment. “But I used to watch my master when he did... Why?”

“Right. You know the old man I mentioned? The one who owned this forge and passed away? Well, there’s no one in the village now who can smith. I s’pose that’s the reason his workshop became communal. So, anyway, there’s a big town called Mashuu about half a day from here. We go there to buy things when we absolutely need to, but—well, everything is completely different from when the smithy was still alive... Take your sharpening, for example. No one in the village can do it well because they’d always asked Basan to do it for them.”

“I think I understand now...” Oscar said. It had always seemed strange to him that the ever-capable Berlocke, who seemed like he could do anything, wasn’t very good at using a whetstone. Oscar finally understood why after hearing what Cohn just said: the villagers had always depended on old man Basan for their smithing needs.

“Hm... If the elder allows it, I think I’ll try practicing smithing a little at a time.”

“Huzzah! Looking forward to it!”

Cohn was genuinely happy and Oscar too was happy to be relied upon. Because everyone likes to be depended on. Of course, constantly being relied upon would exhaust anyone, but Oscar had yet to experience this.

On the afternoons when they didn’t have swordsmanship lessons, Oscar usually practiced his magic. Sometimes, however, he visited the workshop instead.

Berlocke was an earth magician, but he needed spells to execute his magic. The elder couldn’t use magic at all. For these reasons, the retiree decided to

hire a private tutor for Oscar. On the days the tutor didn't come to the estate, he met Oscar at the forge instead.

The tutor was a magician named Assa who lived in the nearby town of Mashuu.

"I'm looking forward to today's lesson, Mr. Assa."

"On that, we agree, Oscar. Let's do our best today too."

Assa was a jovial man around fifty years old. For whatever reason, Cohn had just assumed all magicians were gloomy folks, so Assa's cheerful nature surprised him.

"We'll start by reviewing what we learned in our last lesson. Try to create a barrier."

"Yes, sir."

Oscar overlapped a magical barrier with a physical one and deployed them in front of him. Assa tested the strength of his pupil's barriers first by knocking on it with his fist and then by striking it with a small fire magic attack.

"Very good. I see you've been practicing properly every day, hm? It's much more durable than before. A job well done."

Oscar was delighted to hear Assa's praise. During his life in the village, the only thing his magic had been useful for was lighting stoves. Fire magic was entirely unsuited as a hunting weapon. After all, it would incinerate its target if used clumsily, and there was no utility in a hunting weapon that turned an animal's meat and hide into ash. For this reason, he had devoted himself to polishing his bow skills instead of his magic when he lived in the village. Things were different now though. He still struggled with the fire aspect of his magic, but not with non-elemental magic.

In Fost, no one had taught him how to use magic. Since they'd lacked much knowledge about magic in general, no one had even known that the first thing magicians learned was non-elemental magic like forming barriers.

Assa had suspected as much about Oscar's upbringing, so he'd started off by teaching the boy two kinds of barriers: a physical barrier to defend against

physical attacks and a magical barrier to ward off magical attacks.

“A barrier is a shield. Combine it with the sword of offensive magic attack and you’ll have what you need to protect yourself and your allies, Oscar. Make sure you continue practicing every day how to construct barriers, all right?”

Although Assa himself was a fire magician, he still needed to recite spells to activate his magic like most magicians in the Central Provinces. He’d been shocked to his core when he first saw Oscar generating his magic without the use of spells. He had learned this information when his services were first requested, of course, but seeing the reality with his own eyes was completely different. Assa was grateful for the chance to see it in person. After seeing it unfold, he’d reviewed what he already knew about how Oscar created magic as well as the process’s strengths and weaknesses and came to the conclusion that the boy was creating the magic he imagined in his mind.

Assa had tried to do the same in the past, but his attempts never succeeded. Despite lamenting his own inability on that front, he understood it wouldn’t be difficult at all to help Oscar develop the power of his magic.

He taught his student by first demonstrating what magic should look like when successfully generated, then he asked Oscar to envision the same result without the use of a spell.

By doing exactly this, Oscar mastered the generation of two barriers in a very short time. It didn’t matter whether it was fire magic or non-elemental magic. Moreover, he discovered that if Oscar repeated the magic he’d learned over and over again, he could generate it in a shorter time and in a more powerful form.

He didn’t think there would ever be another student who was as much fun as Oscar was to teach. Assa was happy.

Up until now, Assa had taught many young magicians. He had been the head magician of the territory of Mashuu before he retired. His position meant he had trained many subordinates and disciples, but there had been none among their numbers who could create magic without using spells.

Regardless, over his long years of service, he learned to tailor his teaching

style to each student's unique personality, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. This meant they developed their powers at a much faster rate instead of stagnating with a standardized teaching method. That was why he understood the importance of guiding others.

"Fire magic is inevitably weak concerning defense because you can't harden fire, which is why you must learn how to use these two barriers well. Spellcasting unfortunately creates weak physical barriers, but it's not a problem in the case of your magic, Oscar."

"Yes, sir."

Like the elder, Assa was the type of teacher who used praise to encourage his students' growth.

"This entire situation reeks of skullduggery," the elder murmured while perusing through documents.

"Might you be referring to the neighboring domain of Hunt?" Berlocke commented to the retiree as he poured coffee.

"Indeed. I doubt anything will happen right away, but if the Federation doesn't back down from its expansion plans... Well, we may have to get involved whether we want to or not."

The elder shook his head in dismay and sighed softly.

"Even though this is no time for war."



Four years had passed since Oscar's arrival on the estate. Ten years old now, he commuted to the neighboring town of Mashuu, the capital of Baron Rothko's territory, once a week to train his swordsmanship skills with the order of knights based there.

He departed from the mansion early on Tuesday mornings and arrived in Mashuu a little after midday. Once he did, he headed straight for the order's training ground for his training regimen, stayed the night when it ended, and left Mashuu on Wednesday afternoons to return to the estate by evening.

That was his schedule. Of course, for training purposes, he made the journey there and back on foot. His sixteen-year-old schoolmate, Cohn, accompanied him like it was the most natural thing in the world. They might not have been fans of the long journey, but there was no denying it built up their stamina.

“It still amazes me how strong Groun is... We still can’t land a single hit on him.”

“That’s because he’s the knight commander. He’s not the only one though. Everyone is the best of the best in the Scarlet Armor.”

Cohn and Oscar always chatted like this on their way home from Mashuu. They also analyzed their training and talked about what they would have or could have done differently.

After four years at the mansion, they had already graduated from Berlocke’s lessons in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Last year, they finished the elder’s educational curriculum too. On top of that, both of their skills with the sword surpassed the butler’s, which was why he’d asked the order of knights to train them instead.

Cohn noticed something wrong when they reached a spot not far from the village of Shuk.

“Oscar. There’s something off about that smoke.”

Smoke often filled the skies of the rural areas around Shuk, but this smoke, created by burning grass and trees, was almost always white.

But the dark, murky column of smoke rising from Shuk meant something else was burning...

“Cohn, run.”

Oscar took off and Cohn followed in a rush.

They discovered that the village office was burning, but the two of them paid it no attention. They needed to get to the estate.

A battle was taking place near the entrance to the mansion.

“What the hell?!” Oscar shouted as they drew close.

The bandits hesitated for a moment when they heard Oscar’s shout. Berlocke seized the opportunity to cut one of them down with nary a pause, and that only agitated them even more.

Mere seconds later, Oscar charged into the fray and attacked two bandits circling Berlocke. After slashing one’s throat, he plunged his sword into the other’s chest. Perhaps relieved to see the boy alive and well, Berlocke pitched forward, falling to the ground.

“Berlocke!”

Panicked, Oscar rushed to his side. Though Cohn had been slow to react, he too had taken action and now reached the butler too. Berlocke had sustained many deep wounds, all of which were tokens of his valiant struggle against the enemy. Fortunately, the older gentleman remained conscious.

“Oscar,” Berlocke said, strained. “My lord is still inside...”

“Understood. I’ll go. Cohn, take care of Berlocke.”

With those words, Oscar shoved open the door to the mansion, dashed inside, and ran upstairs to the second-floor parlor where he’d heard the clangor of steel blades coming from.

It happened the moment he entered the room... He watched with his own eyes as the bandit’s sword pierced through the elder.

For a second, Oscar stood paralyzed with horror. Then, a beat later, his mind went blank as he watched the elder’s body drop to the floor...

There was no denying what he saw. All traces of calm vanished.

“You bastard!”

Oscar drew his sword, screamed in rage, and charged the bandit. His enemy was alone, but Oscar was so overwhelmed with emotion that he may not have even realized this. With his head clear of any thoughts, Oscar let the memory in his muscles guide his movement. His sword flashed in front of him at lightning speed.

The bandit, perhaps underestimating his opponent because he was a child, tried to evade Oscar's sword by bending back, but instead sustained a rather deep wound on his left cheek. It enraged the man.

"You little shite!" he roared.

Oscar's swings were diligent and true to the fundamentals of swordsmanship, but no more than that. The man effortlessly parried his blade then stabbed the boy deep in his side.

"Ngh—"

Oscar spat out blood as the bandit's sword made contact with his internal organs. A second later, the man slashed his sword across Oscar's back. The wound in his side had already made it difficult for the boy to stand, but this second attack made Oscar collapse in a puddle of his own blood.

"That's a mighty fine sword, but you're wasted on it, eh?"

Just as he was about to deal the killing blow, another bandit rushed into the room and spoke to the man.

"Boskona, hurry! The knights are coming. Time to retreat."

"You need to relax, Poche."

Boskona... Poche...

Oscar stared at the man who struck him down while fervently clinging to his rapidly fading consciousness. That was when he got a good look at his face. A huge scar ran down his right cheek, from his ear to his chin... In his right hand, the brigand held the blade his master had forged for Sna, his father...

No... It can't be...

A few tears of regret spilled from Oscar's eyes. The scum who killed his mother and father had also murdered the elder. He'd been defeated in such a shameless way, unable to exact vengeance on him.

With that last thought, Oscar lost consciousness.



Berlocke survived thanks to the potion Cohn always carried on him when they

went to Mashuu. The elder had insisted he do so since their first trip there.

Oscar's wounds were deep. The knights of Mashuu had rushed to the village of Shuk upon seeing the smoke signals, but the priest accompanying them couldn't cast Extra Heal. More precisely, there were no high-ranking priests in the region capable of using the spell...

In any case, the priest cast a series of Heals to repair the damage to his organs. Unfortunately, Oscar had lost a great deal of blood, so he didn't wake up for three days.

By the time he did, the elder's funeral had already been held. The elder's formal name was Baron Luke Rothko. He was the former lord of the domain of Mashuu. The current lord's wife was the elder's oldest daughter. For these reasons, the funeral couldn't be delayed for Oscar's awakening...

The boy listened absentmindedly as Berlocke apologetically explained all of this to him. He went on to tell Oscar how he and the elder had discussed how the lord of Hunt's domain was terrorizing the neighboring fiefs by employing bandits. Berlocke suspected this attack was part of it.

All the information entered Oscar's ears, but he didn't react at all.

After regaining consciousness, the scene of his parents' murder replayed over and over again in his mind. He hadn't thought of it once since washing up in the river near the village of Shuk. At the same time, he started dreaming about the elder's death too.

As the days passed, Oscar became more and more gaunt. He even lost his generosity of spirit. And above all, his hair—that flaming red hair—turned completely white.

Of course, the people around him—Berlocke, Mr. Assa, and Cohn—worried about the boy, but none of their words reached his heart.

His behavior didn't change for the worse. His speech also remained unaffected. In fact, he didn't stop doing any of the things that had become habit to him by this point in his life. He just simply...stopped smiling. In fact, it was as if all the human emotions in him had disappeared. A month after he woke up,

Oscar suddenly vanished without a trace from the estate. It was a given that everyone in the village searched for him. Even the knights in the town of Mashuu looked for him. All of the knights knew how much the departed elder, who had often come to watch Oscar train, had doted on the boy.

But no one had any idea where Oscar went.

Two years later, rumors began spreading about a fire magician who hunted bandits.

Abel and the Smugglers

The original plan was to stow away on the ship's hold by hiding himself in a barrel, wait for night, then search the ship for evidence in the dark... "Was" being the operative word. The ship was scheduled to leave port the next day, so the plan should have been foolproof.

But...

"How? How did this happen..." Abel muttered to himself.

The curtain of night had fallen around him, shrouding him in utter darkness. The sea at night was darker than anything, a true pitch-black.

No light from the shore could reach him any longer. In fact, he was so far out at sea now that he couldn't even see the coast any longer.

The time should have been right. Sunset that day in the port town of Whitnash was just after eighteen o'clock. At precisely half past the hour, Abel had emerged from the barrel and checked his pocket watch. 18:30.

He *did* wonder why the inside of the ship was so noisy. He'd received information that most of the crew went ashore upon making port, leaving only a few on board... It didn't sound like it, though. Still, he chalked all the noise up to the preparations those left behind must be making for their departure the next day.

Abel was wrong in the end. The ship was so loud because the captain had decided to leave port earlier than scheduled.

Abel was a B-rank adventurer belonging to the Kingdom. This meant he was a top-class adventurer in the country.

Adventurers accepted commissions through guilds. Successful completion of a job earned rewards.

This particular job was to acquire evidence of smuggling. Specifically, evidence pointing to the involvement of a certain high-ranking noble in the kingdom involved in illegal trade with a neighboring country.

That said, even if he *did* find the evidence, he clearly wasn't in a position to disembark safely. Abel sighed deeply, dismayed by the situation.

As a ship designed to tread the open sea, the vessel had a fairly large hull. Abel estimated it measured around sixty meters from bow to stern. Three masts soared high.

"Fore mast, main mast, and..." Abel paused, trying to dredge the knowledge out from wherever he'd learned it long ago. "And mizzen mast, wasn't it?"

He stared at the masts from a hidden alcove. The first two masts, the fore and main, had square sails while the mizzen mast boasted fore-and-aft sails. The square sails were for catching tailwinds and the fore-and-aft sails for headwinds. This smuggler's ship clearly had both.

Of course, no matter how much easier fore-and-aft sails make it to catch headwinds, sailboats can't sail completely into a headwind. They move toward the headwind, zigzagging as they go, and then move toward the windward side. The angle of the zigzag is called the angle of cutoff, and the performance of the ship depends on how small that angle can be made.

The smugglers' ship was surprisingly short and stout compared to the clipper ship, which can be considered Earth's ultimate form of sailing ship. Nevertheless, it was a fairly standard ocean-going vessel in this era of Phi. If someone from Earth who knew a lot about ships saw it, they might shout, "It's a

carrack!”

Despite its stoutness, you could say the ship was excellent in terms of cargo capacity.

Abel’s ears picked up a conversation as he lurked in the shadows.

“That was a close one, huh, Captain?”

“You can say that again. Good thing we loaded not just the cargo but the water and rations too in the afternoon. Whodathunk Whitnash’s guards would lock down the port?”

“You’re telling me, ’specially considering all the suspicious stuff we got on board this time. They must be after the special orb, huh?”

“Nah, doubt it. Some kinda treasure musta been stolen from the royal family and they prob’ly got information that it was ’boutta be taken outta the country. I can’t think of any other reason they’d take such strong measures like blockading the port.”

The man addressed as the captain chuckled deeply. “Y-You don’t mean we got something that dangerous on board too...?” his subordinate said, surprised.

“My lips are sealed. All you gotta know is that we definitely can’t get caught. Hear?”

“...Heard.”

“Still...” The captain paused, frowning. “This wasn’t when I’d hoped to leave port, ya know.”

“Makes sense... A storm is definitely coming.”

The other man stared up at the sky in response to the captain’s comment.

“I doubt they’ll chase us considerin’ how far out at sea we are now,” the captain said.

Then, after a beat of silence, he shouted orders to the crew.

“Oy, ya lot! Storm’s comin’, fold the sails!”

His men rushed to do his bidding.

“A storm... You gotta be kidding me.”

Abel grimaced more than the captain had after hearing the news. He still hadn't come up with a way to escape, so what the hell was he supposed to do now that a storm was approaching?

Up until now, seasickness had never been a problem for him, but he *had* heard how the violent rocking of a boat in the middle of a storm far exceeds anything one could ever imagine. Even experienced sailors couldn't stave off the effects then.

So not only did he have to survive a storm on a ship, he still had to find the evidence and *then* on top of all that he needed to escape too...

“Shit. This is really bad.”

No one heard Abel muttering to himself.

For now, he decided to return to the ship's hold. Every other part of the ship was crawling with crew members while the hold only contained cargo. Of course, if any of it fell on top of him while he was there, things wouldn't end well for him... Not to mention this ship would soon be embroiled in a storm... Unfortunately, he had nowhere else to go. Fortunately, the cargo was tied down tightly. Seagoing vessels always made sure of that because if anything happened to the cargo, it would be the crews' heads the ships' owners would demand in retaliation.

The first thing Abel did when he returned to the ship's hold was secure himself in place. On his trek back, he'd borrowed twine and a hammock, both of which he used to fix himself to the hold wall. He refused to suspend himself from the ceiling. Truly, he couldn't imagine a worse fate. Even those who usually didn't get seasick would definitely be nauseous in that state.

The most basic way to avoid seasickness is to sit with your back against a wall. It's even better to press the back of your head against the wall too. After all, you don't want your head bashing against the ship as it rocks against the waves.

Perhaps Abel's method could have been considered a powerful version of

this. The ship would inevitably be tossed around during the storm, so it was important that he find a way to stop his body and head from being thrown all over the place.

As soon as Abel finished securing himself, a huge tremor shook the ship. When it did, he could no longer hear the voices on deck over the sound of the waves slamming into the hull of the ship—or maybe it was the heavy creaking of the ship itself.

It was pitch-black in here. The ship rocked so wildly that Abel could sometimes feel the vessel being tossed several meters into the air before it slammed back down to the sea surface. Other times, he worried the violent movements meant the ship would capsize.

Bound as he was to the boat, Abel moved every time it did.

When the shaking finally subsided hours later, Abel removed his fastenings and checked his watch for the time. Three in the afternoon.

“That took forever, huh?”

The ship entered the storm late last night, so he’d endured roughly twelve hours of the shaking. When he peeked out the hold’s door, he heard the crew’s frantic steps on the deck as they rushed around.

“Hurry! We need to fix the rudder and masts!”

“God damn it, the waves swept us so far south...”

“I’ve never encountered an ocean current like that. If we didn’t manage to control the ship somehow with the masts and rudder, it would have just swept us along to the very end...”

“We won’t know our precise location until nightfall. The stars will guide our way.”

An ocean current even the crew doesn’t know about...? That means I can’t go back...

The thought depressed Abel, but this was only the beginning of the tragedy.

He returned to the hold and dug through the cargo looking for food to fill his stomach. Once he finished eating, he waited for night, when he could move around freely, relatively speaking. It would be the height of recklessness if he wandered around the ship in daylight. Night was a different story though. Besides the few on the night shift, most of the crew would be asleep.

Unfortunately, there was a problem with that plan too. The evidence he sought was most likely in the captain's cabin and the captain would most definitely be in there at night... Nothing he could do about it though. Abel would just have to take the man down as quietly as possible. Clearly, he'd come to a decision and he was nothing if not practical.

However, just as night fell and he decided to sneak out of the hold, he once more heard the words he didn't want to hear.

"Storm's comin', gents!"

Huh? Again?

His second storm since boarding this boat arrived.

This one was worse than the previous one. Abel lashed himself to the wall again like before, but the waves were particularly awful. They rocked the ship up and down countless times. What made it worse was the unmistakable sound of wood cracking. Something huge on deck must have broken. Most likely...

One of the three masts.

After the second storm passed, Abel stuck his head out of the passage leading to the hold and looked out onto the deck. It was a disaster. All three masts had been ripped off from the ship at the base. Not a single one remained.

He listened to the sailors' conversations and learned that quite a few of the crew had fallen overboard. He also heard the captain giving orders to each of the remaining crew members as the man focused on repairs.

It's now or never!

The captain's presence on deck meant his cabin was empty. Abel had infiltrated this ship to acquire evidence of smuggling. Of course, he had no idea if he'd even be able to return to land safely, but he had to do what he could at this point. After all, if he didn't find the evidence, then what had been the point of sneaking aboard and suffering through not one but *two* storms?

The captain's cabin was located in the ship's stern. It had been shockingly easy to find the evidence he needed. All he'd done was open the desk drawer and there it was.

Well, it had technically been locked, but that was a very easy problem for Abel to solve. Though he was a swordsman, his fingers were incredibly nimble.

Mission accomplished.

He turned around to leave, then the door opened and a man—the same who'd been discussing the cargo with the captain on deck—entered.

“Oy!” he boomed. “What are you—Mpf—”

Abel leaped at him immediately and punched him in the solar plexus, but it was too late. Nearby sailors had already heard the commotion.

But even on the boat, Abel's swordsmanship was brilliant. He used the wall and any obstacles to make sure he was never surrounded as he moved. Never let the enemy get behind you. As long as you could see them, you could deal with them, even if they outnumbered you. The difference in skill between him and the crew was abundantly clear.

Having said that, there was strength in their numbers. Moreover, the crew was the home team while Abel certainly was the away team. He needed to be careful.

When possible, he tried to defeat them without engaging. When that wasn't an option, he broke through their defenses and knocked them down in a single move. Dodge, strike. Parry, strike.

Though Abel was focused, his fatigue built up. This was normal for anyone.

He was a B-rank adventurer, which meant he possessed top-class stamina among adventurers as a whole. Even so, exhaustion was hitting him much more quickly on the unsteady deck of the ship given that his battles usually took place on land. Facing off against more than forty people in these conditions would tire anyone out.

The last two crew members seemed like they'd been waiting for just that opportunity. One was the captain, but Abel didn't know who the other one was. He suspected he was a swordsman because of the familiarity with which he held his blade. Master and weapon fit well together.

Smugglers often faced pirates out on the sea, or even warships. In either case, the only solution was force. So taking all this into consideration, it wasn't strange at all to have someone like the swordsman on board.

The captain stood in place while the swordsman took a step forward.

Abel was fairly exhausted by this point, but now wasn't the time to complain.

His opponent approached another step and began with a thrust of his sword. Abel parried it with his own sword, but the sharpness of the swordsman's thrust told Abel that the other man was skilled with the weapon.

If he rushed to seek a short, decisive battle just because he was tired, he knew he'd find himself defeated... The difference between their skill levels was so small it made him a dangerous opponent.

Once you've made up your mind, the only thing left to do is act.

The swordsman attacked and Abel defended. He thrust and thrust while Abel parried and parried. He parried every single swing, then took the offensive just to keep the swordsman in check. At this point, his goal was to simply drag his opponent into the same swamp of fatigue.

The swordsmanship Abel had learned was a well-known style in the royal capital. It was solid, beautiful, and economical in its movement, but its secret essence was the swamp. When both sides were tired, the one using this school of swordsmanship survived... And that had become one of the secret

techniques.

There was nothing fancy or brilliant about the essence of swordsmanship. Quite the opposite, actually. It was the pursuit of ultimate strength.

Abel kept an eye on the captain, who was waiting intently for an opening. The fact that he hid his right hand behind him meant he probably held a throwing knife or something else. If he took a hit from the man's hidden weapon at the wrong time, things would take a turn for the worse.

But the captain couldn't move. Abel's eyes, following him restlessly, kept him in check, a technique only the best were capable of executing.

As a result, the stalemate continued.

Except a stalemate was exactly what Abel wanted. He had to keep the captain immobile with his eyes while steadily dragging the swordsman into the depths of the swamp... His complete control of the situation meant he most definitely had the upper hand.

Soon, the swordsman's sword went flying from his hand when he became too exhausted to fight. Abel didn't hesitate to thrust his sword into the man's chest.

The captain, still unable to move, simply watched it all happen.

Total victory for Abel.

At least it should have been.

Just as he was about to triumph, catastrophe struck. Without warning, the ship leaped into the air. You heard right: *leaped*. Leaped into the air like it had been thrashed hard by the waves—but the sea was calm now. Shockingly calm.

Everyone on board—Abel, the two men, and the crew he'd defeated—were thrown into the air along with the ship. While he was airborne, Abel saw it then. The thing that tossed the vessel into the air. He knew what the creature was... Well, he knew the small version... A squid.

Except the squid he was familiar with measured no more than the length of his arm at its biggest. However, the one in the ocean was sixty meters long,

bigger than this ship!

“Kraken...” The word slipped from his mouth. “I spared some of the crew because I still needed them to operate the ship. Guess that was a waste of my time.”

That was Abel’s last thought before he was hurled off the ship. As soon as he crashed into the water, he started sinking into the sea...



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