

THE CENTRAL  
PROVINCES ARC

II

# THE WATER MAGICIAN

AUTHOR: TADASHI KUBOU  
ILLUSTRATOR: NOKITO



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# CHARACTER BIOS

THE KINGDOM OF KNIGHTLEY

## THE CRIMSON SWORD



### [ABEL]

B-rank adventurer, swordsman, and the leader of the party "The Crimson Sword." He's twenty-six years old and seems to have some kind of secret...?



### [LYN]

B-rank adventurer, air magician, and a member of The Crimson Sword. She's teeny tiny.

### [RIHYA]

B-rank adventurer, priestess, and a member of The Crimson Sword. Her voice rings as sweetly as a bell.

### [WARREN]

B-rank adventurer, shield bearer, and a member of The Crimson Sword. He's a taciturn giant of a man over two meters tall.



### [RYO MIHARA]

Protagonist, D-rank adventurer, and water magician. He was granted the ability to manipulate water magic and immortality in his new life. His favorite things are comedy and coffee. Forever nineteen.

## ROOM 10

### [NILS]

E-rank adventurer, swordsman, and a resident of Room 10 in the guild dorm. He's twenty years old and a rascal, but he cares deeply for his friends.

### [ETO]

E-rank adventurer, priest, and a resident of Room 10 in the guild dorm. He's nineteen years old, and his lack of physical strength is his weakness.

### [AMON]

F-rank adventurer and a resident of Room 10 in the guild dorm. He's sixteen years old and the person with the most common sense in Room 10.

UNKNOWN AFFILIATIONS



[LEONORE]

Akuma and absurdly powerful. She's a battle maniac who seems to have enjoyed fighting Ryo.



[THE DULLAHAN]

The Water Fairy King and Ryo's sword master. He took a liking to Ryo and gifted him with a sword and robe..

[FAKE MICHAEL]

By Earth standards, his existence is close to that of an angel's. He explained things to Ryo when Ryo reincarnated.

[LEWIN]

The Dragon King. He calls the Forest of Rondo home.

ADVENTURERS' GUILD

[HUGH MCGLASS]

Master of Lune's adventurers' guild. He's a fierce-looking man who measures one hundred and ninety-five centimeters.

[NINA]

One of Lune's guild's receptionists. Like a famous idol, she has a dedicated fanbase among Lune's adventurers.

SWITCHBACK

[RAH]

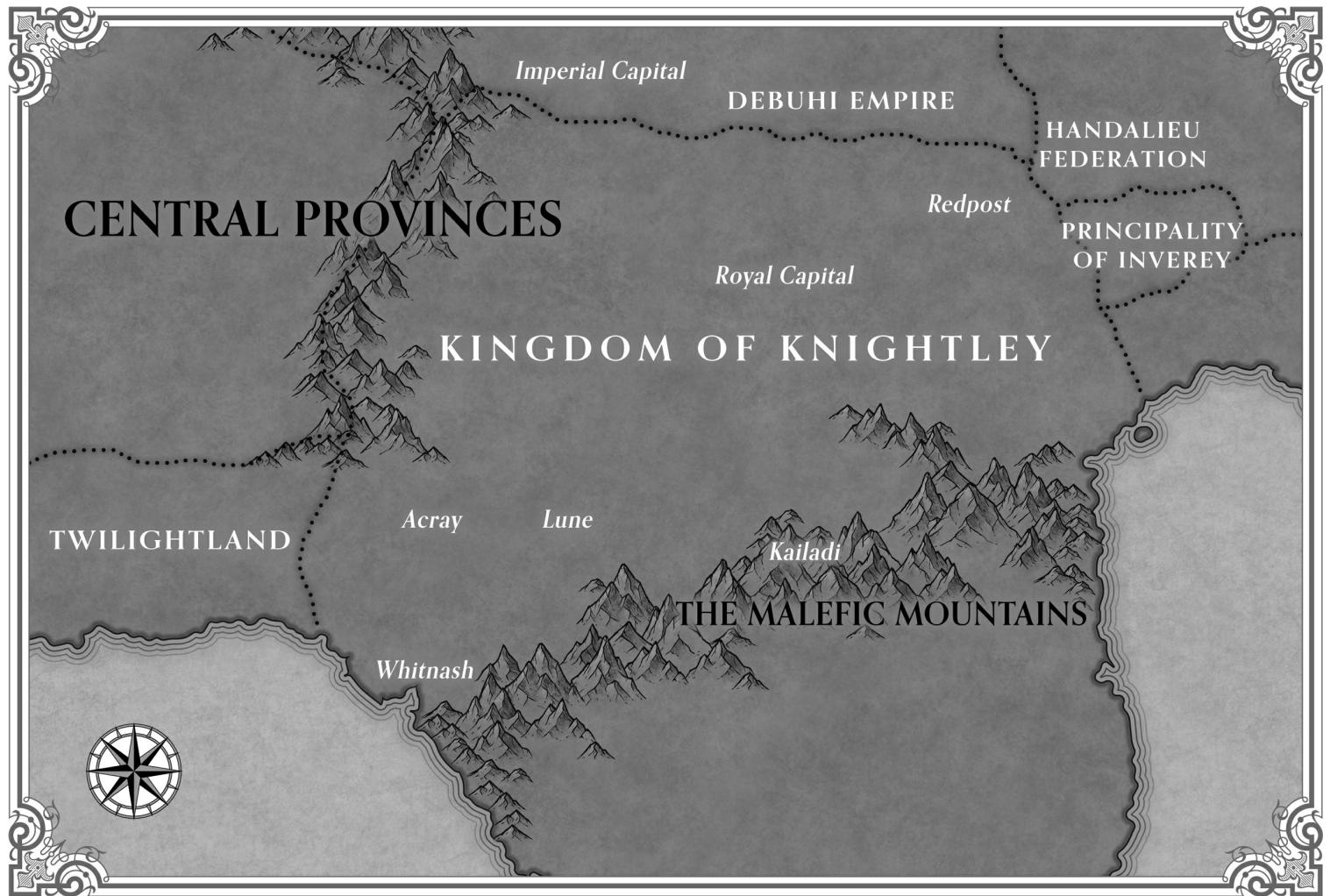
C-rank adventurer, swordsman, and the leader of the party "Switchback."

♦THE DEBUHI EMPIRE♦



[OSCAR]

A fire magician nicknamed The Inferno Magician. According to Fake Michael, he'll stand in Ryo's way, but how...? He's also the protagonist of the side story "The Fire Magician."



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# An Omen

The Kingdom of Knightley was one of the countries in the Central Provinces. We find ourselves currently in Lune, the largest city on the frontier, located in the southern part of the Kingdom.

After washing off the sweat they'd worked up in the public bathhouse, the water magician Ryo and his three roommates—Nils, Eto, and Amon—had headed for the adventurers' guild canteen, where they were currently eating dinner.

"Oh, right, Ryo. You mentioned you were going to the library today before you left the room. Can I ask what you were looking for?" Eto asked. Compared to the other two who were swordsmen in training, Eto was a priest. As one would expect from someone of that vocation, he was curious about Ryo's research.

"Information on alchemy."

"Does that mean you can perform alchemy too then?"

"No, I've never tried it. But there are a few things I want to try to become good at."

Ultimately, Ryo wanted to construct an ice golem to clear land for a rice field in the Forest of Rondo. However, he hadn't disclosed this with anyone yet, so he kept his desire hidden.

"I've heard you can make potions using alchemy, but apparently it consumes a significant amount of magical energy...?"

"That's right. I bought a recipe book geared toward beginners and it mentioned something along those lines too."

"You bought—a book...?" Nils asked.

Eto the priest smiled ruefully.

Amon, the apprentice swordsman, tried to look as impressed as he could

without knowing how much money was at stake.

“Abel compensated me for guiding him, so I guess you could say that’s how I was able to afford it.”

“That makes complete sense!” Nils replied. Abel was already a hero he admired tremendously. “I shouldn’t be surprised to learn that he can afford to pay you those kinds of wages.”

For whatever reason, the mention of Abel’s name brought an image of Rihya to Eto’s mind. “Miss Rihya truly is an angel...” he muttered to himself, cheeks flushed.

“I’m assuming books are expensive then?” Amon asked.

His extremely ordinary reaction made Ryo feel relieved.

“Oh, right,” Nils said suddenly. “Ryo, Amon is partying with me and Eto tomorrow to hit the dungeon. How about joining us?”

“Sorry, but I have to decline.” Ryo bowed his head. “There’s something I want to do up here.”

“Ahhh, okay,” Nils replied, scratching his head. “I had a feeling you’d say that, so don’t even worry about it.”

Eto chuckled wryly. He and Nils were both aware of the huge disparity in power between Ryo and the three of them.

The two of them had been exploring the dungeon for half a year now while Amon had only recently arrived in the city from his village, so the difference in ability among the three of them was clear. Even then, it was negligible compared to the gulf between them and Ryo. Nils and Eto understood that plainly. They had suspected as much when he had been able to register right off the bat as a D-rank adventurer, but their suspicions had been confirmed when Ryo defeated Dan earlier that day in one fell swoop.

Dungeon exploration progressed more smoothly with a strong adventurer, but there were always two sides to the equation: those who worked hard to keep up and those who led them. Dungeon exploration placed undue strain on both sides of this equation, so the guild recommended that people of similar

ability levels form parties.

Amid this, the fact that only Ryo found himself in such a situation was unusual. Typically, those who had just registered as adventurers weren't considered particularly strong. Ryo was one of the rare exceptions. Even the guild hadn't anticipated someone like him wanting to move into their housing annex, so perhaps it was inevitable.



The next day, Monday.

"All right, Ryo, we'll see you later."

With that, Nils, Eto, and Amon left to do their dungeon dive.

After seeing them off, Ryo left the city limits. Outside the city walls, he began running. The guild's outdoor training ground had been perfectly fine for this activity, but he couldn't help getting distracted by the goings-on in the place where he lived, so he decided to do his training outside the city instead.

As he ran, he built microscopic ice versions of Tokyo Tower on both palms. Just like he used to do back in the Forest of Rondo. Magical control and stamina...his goal was to train both. The more he increased his magical control, the faster he could generate magic.

Yesterday, Ryo had lost to Leonore's magic in a number of ways, including sheer power. Fortunately, he *had* actually measured up to Leonore in how fast he could produce magic. He definitely hadn't lost on that front. This was evidenced by the fact that he'd been able to obstruct her magic during the fight while it was still in the process of being generated.

That was exactly why he wanted to be able to use his magic faster and more precisely. He needed to keep improving upon his strengths and he needed to shore up his weaknesses until they were no longer weaknesses.

In that respect, he had felt an overwhelming disparity between them in movement speed. Leonore had closed a gap of several dozen meters in an instant. He thought the most likely reason for that was air magic. Unfortunately, Ryo could only use water magic, meaning he needed to find a way to combat her air magic with his water magic...

On Earth, there was something called water jet propulsion. Mainly, aquatic warships sucked in water and blasted it out behind them, which propelled them forward. Ryo had already mastered his own water jet in order to cut through things, so he might be able to use that.

Plus, in reality, he had actually used his Water Jet spell to move from one place to another when he launched himself out of the sea during his battles against the bait ball and the kraken all those years ago. He had generated the Water Jet from the soles of his feet to blast himself straight up through the water's surface.

Back then, he'd been under such an incredible amount of mental strain that he just hadn't had the headspace to think about the risk of failing, but...without preparation, Ryo had managed to pull it off just when he needed it most, so he knew very well that it was possible.

However, the problem now was trying to figure out how to produce it from behind in a land battle. Maybe shoot Water Jets out of his back...? That might be his only option, but wouldn't he break his neck? He'd have to shoot a jet from the back of his head too. Yeah, that was the way to go—but then he started wondering if that wouldn't give intense whiplash to his limbs... Okay, so then he had to shoot it from his shoulders, upper arms, butt, hamstrings, and heels too...?

It looked like he might have to launch the Water Jets from every part of the back of his body. For now, he had an idea of how to visualize it, but he wanted to start off as small as he could on his first attempt.

*If I freeze the ground using Ice Bahn, I should be able to propel myself forward easily enough with a weak stream of Water Jet...?*

With that thought, he set about putting his plan into action right away.

“Ice Bahn.”

First, he froze the ground. Then, in his head, he imagined shooting Water Jets from every part of his back.

“Water Jet 256.”

Currently, the highest number of Water Jets he could produce was two

hundred and fifty-six, so he pictured that many bursting out of the back of his body. What actually happened was...

“I’m not moving forward...”

Not a single inch. It only *felt* like he had moved forward the tiniest bit.

Ryo’s knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground on all fours in his usual pose of despair.

“I lost...”

Evidently, *something* had beaten him...

A minute later...

“Well, I guess I can’t do it just yet... But I think I have a shot if I can increase the number of jets from two hundred and fifty-six to one thousand and twenty-four!”

He got back up. Then he started running again.



Nils, Eto, and Amon were in the dungeon’s fourth layer, where goblins first appeared. Alone, goblins weren’t a big deal. Compared to the lesser wolves that showed up until Layer 3, defeating one goblin was pretty easy.

Unfortunately, goblins had weapons and they sometimes attacked in groups too. They usually used broken swords, spears, and such, but there were also goblins who used bows and arrows, though these were rare. Even rarer were the goblins that used magic.

As long as you avoided those rarer types of goblins and didn’t let groups of them surround you, the monsters were easy enough to defeat. However, no resources could be extracted from them, meaning nothing of theirs could be sold off other than their magic stones.

“Man, hunting goes a lot faster with another swordsman, huh?” Nils grinned heartily as he took a magic stone from the goblin he’d just killed.

“It really does,” Eto said. “The speed we progress is especially obvious against

goblins.”

Since he was a priest, Eto focused almost exclusively on healing during combat, but he did help harvest materials and collect magic stones afterward. Of the three, he was actually the best at this activity.

“I feel like goblins are easier to take down because they move more slowly compared to lesser wolves,” Amon said. Unlike Nils and Eto, he still wasn’t used to gathering magic stones. Still, he did his best to keep at it a little at a time.

“All right, guys. Let’s take a break.”

At Nils’s order, the three of them sat to rest with their backs against boulders. Having said that, a break didn’t change their surroundings, i.e., the dungeon. In here, resting did nothing to alleviate their mental fatigue. Even so, it was vital to schedule regular breaks.

As an adventurer, Nils was the cautious type who liked to take many extra precautions during his expeditions. Amon was extremely grateful for his careful nature since he was still very much a beginner at dungeon dives.

“Amon, make sure you drink water *and* lick salt too, okay?” Nils was also the type who liked looking after others.

“That reminds me... You said the same thing yesterday after we ran, about the salt.”

“Yup. Supposedly, it’s good to take in water and salt after you sweat. It’s a tradition in my village.”

“*Mother Goddess, lend me your healing hand. Lesser Heal,*” Eto said, casting the spell on Amon’s injured arm.

“Haaa. Jeez, that was too close.”

Nils extracted the magic stone from an archer goblin that had been part of the group of goblins they’d just defeated. They had left the fourth layer of the dungeon behind and were now in the fifth, but there hadn’t been any reports of goblins employing archers here.

“I don’t like the looks of this. There shouldn’t be goblin archers in Layer 5. We managed somehow since the group was made of only three goblins, but still, it

makes me uneasy about what might lie ahead.”

While Eto healed Amon, Nils finished extracting the magic stones from the remaining two goblins.

“You’re right. Time to head back to the surface. We’re done here for the day. A little sooner than planned, but it’s all good since we made more than we usually do, even with the loot split between three.” Nils smiled broadly.

Survival was the most important thing. Even without recalling Abel’s words, Nils understood the value of life because of past experience. Never overdo it. You should always leave yourself enough energy to return to safety. Nils knew how important that was.

An hour after three of Room 10’s residents withdrew from Layer 5, the E-rank party, Eternal Waves, met their annihilation on the same layer.

“Why are there so many goddamn goblins on this layer?! It shouldn’t be possible!”

“My magic is running out... I can’t keep going...”

“Ngh... Shit... Gah...”

“Help...”

The five E-rank adventurers fell silent, then succumbed to eternal slumber.



“M-Miss Nina...”

“Oh, hello, you three. Welcome back. Finished early today, hm?”

“We did. Y-You’re looking as bootifu—”

Just when Nils was on the verge of making an utter fool of himself by fumbling his words, Eto intervened by chopping his friend on the top of his head to shut him up.

“We came back early because of a goblin archer in Layer 5.”

After explaining to her their circumstances, Eto showed Nina the magic stone they had extracted from the goblin archer. The difference between a normal

goblin's magic stone and a goblin archer's magic stone lay only in the slight size disparity, but Nina the receptionist recognized at a single glance that the stone Eto held out belonged to a goblin archer.

"This is indeed a magical stone from a goblin archer... We haven't had reports of them in Layer 5 for several years now, though. I'll let the guild master know right away, and then I'll update the notes section of the notice board. Thank you very much for informing us."

Nina walked away from the reception counter and headed to the guild master's office.

"Ahhh, Miss Nina..." Nils muttered in a daze.

"Haaa... Nils, let's go. We need to sell off the magic stones."

And with that, Eto and Amon dragged Nils to the magic stone purchase counter.

Lune's guild master, Hugh McGlass, was waging his endless war against the documents piled on his desk when he heard a knock on his office door.

"Enter," he said.

At first glance, no one would expect a fierce-looking giant like him to have anything to do with paperwork, but they would be terribly mistaken. There was simply no way the master of the frontier's largest adventurers' guild could avoid doing paperwork. The role demanded leagues more processing power than the average person possessed—it would be impossible to run an organization so massive otherwise.

"Excuse me, master," Nina said as she entered. Even though Hugh continued focusing on the documents in front of him, Nina continued without waiting for his signal. All of Lune's adventurers' guild staff knew Hugh's standing orders of getting to business straightaway. "I have urgent news. Just moments ago, a party composed of the F-rank adventurers Nils, Eto, and Amon came to reception and reported encountering goblin archers in the dungeon's fifth layer."

"Goblin archers in Layer 5?" Hugh asked. This news was enough to make him

lift his attention from his paperwork and stare at Nina in surprise. “But they’re supposed to be in Layer 10 and deeper.”

“Precisely.”

“This might be an omen then. Which B-rank parties are currently in the city?”

“The Crimson Sword and White Brigade.”

“All of the White Brigade? Including Phelps and his army?”

“Yes, sir,” Nina answered without hesitation. “They returned from an expedition the day before yesterday and they’re still here.”

“All right, I want you to summon both the Crimson Sword and White Brigade. Tell them to come here to my office in an hour for a job.”



“The White Brigade too? I’m not so great at dealing with them...”

“How can you say that, after all this time? Especially since you’re all childhood acquaintances.”

“Honestly, Abel, all you do is complain. You should follow Warren’s example once in a while.”

As always, Warren remained silent.

Abel, Rihya, Lyn, and Warren were standing in the corridor outside the guild master’s office. They had come here at his behest.

“Haaa...”

Abel exhaled then knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

“Excuse us.”

With that, Abel stepped into the room. Just like he’d anticipated, he found Hugh the guild master along with the White Brigade’s captain, Phelps, and its vice-captain, Shenna, inside.

“Hey, Abel,” Phelps said amiably. He measured roughly the same height as Abel at one hundred and ninety centimeters, but his frame was much more

slender. He was twenty-four years old with golden hair and blue eyes. And also very handsome.

His popularity was through the roof. While Abel was popular with both men and women, Phelps was ridiculously popular with women in particular. Of course, that didn't mean men hated him. They were usually just jealous of him. That aside, without exception, everyone respected him as an adventurer. That was what he'd accomplished so far.

"Hello, Phelps," Abel said, scowling.

Phelps grinned, amused. "You always greet me in the same way, huh, Abel?"

Once the Crimson Sword's four members sat down, Hugh spoke.

"I 'preciate both the Crimson Sword and White Brigade responding to my call. My people should've already told ya the gist about the goblin archers in the dungeon's fifth layer."

"Master, how accurate is that information?" Phelps asked.

"One hundred percent accurate. Three F-rank adventurers took down a trio of goblins, one of 'em an archer. They brought back its magic stone and Nina verified it at reception."

"An F-rank party hunted down a group of goblins, including an archer? Looks like the future just got more interesting, huh?" Abel sounded delighted. As a veteran adventurer, it made him happy to hear about such promising novices.

"Nils is their leader and the boy's got a good head on his shoulder. Always careful with his decision-makin'. I'm damn sure he'll last a long time as an adventurer," Hugh replied, giving them his stamp of approval.

"Wait, Nils? So was the party made up of Ryo's three roommates then?"

"Yep. Nils, Eto, and Amon. I had no idea you knew them, Abel."

"Well, I had a chance to chat with them for a bit a while ago..." Abel nodded slightly, a soft smile on his face as he thought back to his meeting with them in the restaurant. *They'll definitely make good adventurers since they understand the importance of staying alive.*

"Okay, I understand that the sighting's been confirmed. So what exactly are you asking us to do, Master?" Phelps asked.

"Right. I want the Crimson Sword and White Brigade to go down into the dungeon and check whether or not another Great Tidal Bore is comin'."

Everyone in the room went tense at the mention of the words "Great Tidal Bore." The Great Tidal Bore was a phenomenon that occurred once every few years in Lune's dungeon when the monster population exploded. Monsters that should have existed only in the deeper layers beginning to appear in the upper ones was a portent of a Great Tidal Bore.

There were some normal instances of lower-layer monsters appearing on the upper layers. For example, the soldier ants on the first layer likely dug shafts up to the first layer from below. This explained why the first sighting of soldier ants in Layer 1 had been reported six months ago but was not considered a harbinger of a Great Tidal Bore.

A goblin archer, however, was a different story. Although they were supposed to be in Layers 10 and deeper, one had been discovered in Layer 5, making it extremely likely that this was in fact a Great Tidal Bore omen.

Moreover, ten years had passed since the last Great Tidal Bore, so they were long overdue for one to occur.

"I'll pay ya a hundred gold coins upfront and two hundred each after ya come back."

"GuilMas, just making sure here. All we have to do is check whether or not there's an outbreak, right?" Abel said, repeating the job description.

"Yea, got it in one."

"And if there *is* an outbreak?" Phelps asked. He wanted to confirm how they should proceed in that event.

"Ya haul yer asses back to the surface pronto and report to me. I'll be at the branch office waitin' for ya all. If this *is* another Great Tidal Bore, the plan is to abandon the dungeon's entrance and intercept the monsters on the surface by containin' 'em within the double wall. The guild's gonna work together with the margrave's knights. I already told him about this commission I'm sendin' all of

ya on and the counterattack plan too.”

Everyone’s nerves ratcheted up another notch upon hearing that. Hugh informing the lord of the region about his strategy meant he was already certain about a Great Tidal Bore. There was no other conclusion to draw from his words.

“I need ya all to head into the dungeon tomorrow morning. I got a bad feelin’ I’ll have to ask all the adventurers still in the city to be on standby at the guild the day after tomorrow. We already put up a flyer on the guild’s notice board that dungeon dives are a no-go startin’ tomorrow. ‘Course, the branch office near the dungeon’s been notified too and they’ll be ready to stop anyone from going down tomorrow.”

Hugh had made all the moves he could. The fierce-looking giant may have seemed like a meathead inside and out, but appearances could be deceiving. Not only was he Lune’s guild master, he was also a former A-rank adventurer. He couldn’t have attained either rank without a set of first-class brains as well.

“Crimson Sword, White Brigade, will ya take on this job?”

“Yeah, the Crimson Sword accepts.”

“As does the White Brigade.”

# The Great Tidal Bore

The next day, Tuesday, a little past nine in the morning, Ryo set off for the southern library on his quest for information about akuma. He figured it wouldn't hurt to try.

After eating breakfast with Ryo, the other three occupants of Room 10 went to the guild where they now stood in front of the notice board.

For Nils and Eto, Tuesdays were for commissions on the surface. Amon had joined them because if he didn't accept regular jobs too, it would take him forever to move up to E-rank. Moreover, adventurers were discouraged from exploring the dungeon on back-to-back days for the sake of their mental health. So the three of them had stopped by the guild's notice board to accept normal commissions, but...

"The flyer says dungeon dives are prohibited until further notice," Amon said, reading the notice tacked on one end of the jobs board.

"Oh, shoot, you're right..."

Nina *had* told them yesterday that she'd post a warning about goblin archers, but...instead of just a warning, for whatever reason, all dungeon explorations had been suspended.

Eto tilted his head thoughtfully. "It's possible they received additional information after our report."

At around the same time, the Crimson Sword's four members and twenty of the White Brigade's gathered in front of the dungeon's entrance located in the center of Lune.

"Hello, Phelps. Brought twenty with you, huh? That's half of your people. What about the rest? They aren't coming?"

"Morning, Abel. These twenty adventurers are all C-rank or higher. It wouldn't be right of me to bring along D-ranks knowing the dangers we're about to face."

The White Brigade consisted of forty members in total. It would be more accurate to call them an organization, a group, or a clan rather than a party. However, their size didn't mean they accepted just anyone. Applicants needed to be at least D-rank adventurers. Furthermore, they all had to be approved personally by Phelps. He couldn't have any problematic personalities in his organization.

And within the group, Captain Phelps and Vice Captain Shenna along with four others made up the six elite core of the White Brigade. The best of the best among them. They were all B-rank adventurers who formed their own B-rank party within the organization and Hugh referred to them as the Army.

Usually holed up in the headquarters, Hugh now walked out of the branch office. "Oh ho, yer all here, eh?"

Abel stared at him curiously, like he was witnessing an extremely rare event. "It's so weird seeing you here, GuilMas."

"I can imagine, but I gotta be ready to make a decision as soon as ya get back, so I'm hunkerin' down here for the day. Just like what I said yesterday. All ya ladies and gents ready to dive in?"

With that, Hugh ordered the gatekeeper to open the doors.

"Wait, GuilMas."

"Hm? Whatsa matter, Abel?"

"I sort of have a bad feeling. Lyn, can you use your Probe spell to check out the first layer?"

"Roooger!" Lyn stood in front of the doors and chanted, activating her air magic. "*Bring to me the pulse and existence of life. Probe.*"

Waves of exploration spread from Lyn. When the waves reached the end of the hundred-step stairs past the doors and arrived at the first layer's main cavern, her expression changed.

"I'm getting a lot of readings from the main cavern. A *lot*, Abel. It feels like hundreds."

"Damn. So the Great Tidal Bore already made it that far?"

“Son of a bitch! We’re withdrawin’, now! All of ya! Retreat to the top of the first defensive wall. Contact both the knights and guild’s headquarters and tell ‘em the Great Tidal Bore is already underway, that it won’t be long ‘fore the monsters rush out.”

All of them, including the guild staff in the branch office, all headed toward the rampart stairs. Staff members tasked with contacting the knights’ headquarters ran north while those responsible for contacting the guild headquarters raced south.



“Master, everyone has been evacuated to the walls and the gate has been blocked off.”

The moment Hugh heard the report from his subordinate, the doors to the dungeon’s entrance blasted out.

“They’re here, eh...”

Originally, on Earth, the term “great tidal bore” often referred to the massive backwash called the Pororoca in the Amazon River. It was apparently a majestic and frightening sight, as if a whole host of living things were rushing up the river all at once. Here on Phi, the fury of Lune’s Great Tidal Bore held its own against the Pororoca.

More, to put it more directly: its horror was overwhelming.

The courtyard within the enclosed walls of the dungeon’s entrance was about the size of a four-hundred-meter track in a track-and-field stadium. Nearly oval in shape, it measured seventy-five meters from north to south and one hundred fifty meters from east to west.

Currently, the whole area was overflowing with monsters. Truly the definition of packed in like sardines. The sheer number was so great that every single member of both the Crimson Sword and White Brigade was left speechless. Hugh McGlass, master of Lune’s guild, was in the same state, even though he’d personally witnessed the last Great Tidal Bore.

*Where in the bloody hell did all these things come from... There wasn’t anywhere near as many last time! Not to mention this ain’t even a fraction of*

*'em, considering how many are still crammed inside the dungeon.*

A cold, greasy sweat trickled down Hugh's back at the unexpectedly massive amount of monsters.

Be that as it may, plans were already in motion. They all knew what they had to do: annihilate every last one of the monsters. If they couldn't, then they would spill out into the city and destroy Lune.

"We'll whittle 'em down as much as possible with ranged attacks, specifically magic and arrows. The vanguard'll cut down the arrows they shoot at us and protect the magicians and archers on our side."

In the nine years since he retired from adventuring, Hugh had essentially spent day and night battling an endless mountain of paperwork. An adventurer was an adventurer until the day he died, however, and he was a former A-rank. He had survived more carnage than all of the young'uns here combined.

Though the Crimson Sword and the White Brigade were both excellent groups, there was no clear hierarchy within the guild. With that being the case, the best choice to take command of the situation was the guild master, as it would mitigate confusion tremendously. Unifying the chain of command was an absolutely necessary protocol for fighting.

The battle began under Hugh's orders. Having said that, it was less a battle and more a one-sided slaughter. Standing atop the first ten-meter-high defensive wall, the members of the Crimson Sword and White Brigade launched an assault of magic and arrows.

The monsters retaliated sporadically. Mixed in with the huge numbers of goblins was a smattering of goblin archers, but most of their arrows couldn't reach the top of the ramparts. Even if they did, the defenders repelled them all with swords and shields.

The Crimson Sword and White Brigade took up positions on the south wall. Others defended the north wall. Then, ten minutes after the fighting commenced, long-awaited reinforcements finally arrived at the north wall: the order of knights under the command of Margrave Lune, the lord of the region.

“Reduce their numbers as much as you can with ranged attacks.”

Their plan was fundamentally the same as the adventurers’ because naturally, Hugh had discussed it with Neville Black, the knight commander, the day before.

*I’m glad I made the time to talk to him yesterday, despite how crazy busy it was...*

Hugh was fervently glad for his foresight. He’d worried he might offend the knights’ honor or what have you by asking them to work side by side with adventurers. Things would have taken a turn for the worse if they suddenly found themselves lacking in allies.

*Neville doesn’t seem like the type to obsess over things like that, so I think we’re fine.*



Let’s rewind just a little bit.

At the moment when the adventurers’ guild was informed of the unusual situation at the dungeon’s entrance, there were quite a few adventurers at the guild. There were some who intended to explore the dungeon today and others who intended to accept normal jobs on the surface.

Regardless, when they sensed something abnormal occurring, the various parties talked to each other and exchanged information on what they knew. Whether A-rank or F-rank, all adventurers understood the importance of information. Although, at the moment, there weren’t any active A-rank adventurers in the city of Lune...

Amid the chatter, a messenger came running in and shouted, “A Great Tidal Bore outbreak! Monsters are coming to the surface from the dungeon.”

At those words, C-rank and D-rank adventurers sprang into action without hesitation. They took up their weapons and flew out of the guild toward the dungeon’s entrance. The remaining E-and F-rank adventurers weren’t left in the dark for long about the situation.

“A Great Tidal Bore is a phenomenon when monsters pour out of the

dungeon,” one of the guild’s staff explained. “This is an emergency request. You should all be able to help defend from the top of the rampart. Please hurry to the scene.”

Once they heard that, even the adventurers who weren’t sure about what to do immediately followed suit with the rest. This group included Nils, Eto, and Amon, who had been exchanging information with other adventurers at the guild.

On top of the rampart, guild staff distributed their stockpile of bows and arrows. The guild headquarters had sent them here ahead of time because of the sheer volume of reserves they had in storage. Now, they were being put to good use.

In any case, no one had to worry about running out of arrows. They could fire their bows to their hearts’ content. This knowledge was a huge mental advantage because no matter how many monsters they defeated, they kept coming out of the dungeon...

“Shit! It doesn’t feel like we’re making any headway.” Abel kept firing arrows even as he complained. Though he was a swordsman, an adventurer of his level grew proficient at all methods of attack, melee, midrange, and long-range. Naturally, he was far better than the average archer with a bow.

Next to him, Rihya the priestess loosed arrows too. She wasn’t as skilled as Abel, but she could still hold her own. “A war of attrition, hm?” she replied, aiming at a goblin not too far away. “But if we don’t defeat these goblins, the real terror won’t appear.”

The real terror... So far, it seemed that this Great Tidal Bore revolved primarily around goblins...which meant the outbreak would likely end when they finally killed the goblin general. Another way to put it was this influx would keep going as long as the goblin general didn’t come out of the dungeon.

“Lyn, I think we’re in for a long haul here. It’ll probably wind up being me and the Brigade charging in toward the end, so make sure you preserve your magical energy.”

“Roooger!”

"Having said that... If you got a magic trick up your sleeve that can wipe them out in one shot, you have my permission to use it. I don't suppose you do, huh?"

"Are you nuts? Of course I don't! You know that too, so stop fooling around!"

Lyn the air magician sat down and focused on recovering her magical energy. In this type of prolonged fighting, magic was inevitably inferior to a bow and arrow...

On the wall a little ways away from the Crimson Sword stood the White Brigade's captain, Phelps. A lancer by vocation, he was also firing arrows matter-of-factly. Next to him was the magician and his vice captain, Shenna, doing the same.

The remaining twenty members of the Brigade had arrived as well, so all forty took up positions on one section of the wall and unleashed a hail of ranged attacks. About thirty of them were firing arrows. Only five of them were archers in their own right, but this situation called for quantity over quality.

"All of you, don't neglect to drink water. So far, only goblins and some goblin archers have come out, so this will take some time," Phelps ordered as he continued loosing arrows.

Some of the brigade members were finding it difficult to draw the bowstring, probably because they had been shooting arrows for almost an hour now. Since they weren't professional archers, they wound up using excessive force at times, leading to unnecessary strain on their bodies. Their priest healed them with magic and sent them back to the front lines.

But...the end was still nowhere in sight.



*The people who work for me are the best of the best. One of 'em should be comin' back soon,* Hugh thought as he awaited news.

"Master!" a voice called from the city street outside the rampart wall.

"Yer here!"

“We gathered all the arrows we could from all the weapon shops in the southern part of the city. A total of about 80,000.”

“Huzzah!”

The other guild staff members by Hugh and the adventurers in the vicinity shouted in excitement at the announcement.

“Nice work. Hand ‘em out quick as a flash to the adventurers.”

“Master, a report just came in from the group assigned to the northern part of the city. They acquired close to 70,000 arrows and are distributing them to the knights as we speak.”

“I’ll be damned! We’ll be able to keep up this ranged attack for a while yet.”

Would you like to guess what Nils, Eto, and Amon were doing around the same time?

Since he was a priest, Eto worked his way through the adventurer parties on top of the wall, healing them whenever necessary.

Nils and Amon were running to and fro distributing arrows to the various parties.

“Abel, we got more arrows from the weapon shops in the city.”

Nils delivered two barrels overflowing with arrows to the Crimson Sword.

“Oh, hey, Nils. Thanks a bunch. We were just about to run out too.”

Abel turned his head ever so slightly in Nils’s direction and nodded in appreciation.

“I also have a message from the guild master. He said, ‘I want the Crimson Sword to charge in at the end, so be ready.’”

Abel burst out laughing. “Yeah, I figured as much. Please tell him, ‘Got it.’”

“I will. May the fortunes of war ever favor you.” With that, Nils turned around on his heel then raced off to tell Hugh Abel’s response.

“Times like this really make me think about the importance of replenishing supplies,” Abel said.

Four hours after the battle commenced, the wave of goblins finally started receding. It was also around this time that both the adventurers and knights began to run low on arrows. All of their arrows had been gathered from the city, so they couldn't expect a resupply from Lune. This meant they would soon need to descend the wall and engage in close-quarter combat to settle this battle once and for all.

"The Crimson Sword and White Brigade'll lead the charge. I saw goblin mages too, so be careful out there," Hugh said, shooting out orders briskly.

Goblin mages were an extremely rare type of goblin that could use offensive magic.

"Once the Crimson and White open a way forward for us, C-rank and D-rank parties will charge behind them and widen it further."

"Master, the northern wall!"

Hugh looked toward where one of his subordinates pointed. The northern wall's door leading down had been opened and the knights there had already begun fighting the goblins at close range.

"Shite. Guess that means the knights're outta arrows. Right then, we're goin' in too. Folks, let's crush this Great Tidal Bore"!

"Aaaye!" the adventurers roared enthusiastically.

While they understood the necessity of the tactics employed so far, they had been growing increasingly frustrated with being restricted to engaging the enemy only from afar. There were many adventurers whose blood fired up at the prospect of melee combat. After all, was there a better way to end such a battle?!

Suddenly, the southern wall's door opened. With Abel and Phelps in the lead, the Crimson Sword and White Brigade rushed into the goblin horde. Abel slaughtered swaths of goblins in a single stroke, their swords never even once making contact with his own weapon. Phelps's skillful use of his lance's thrusts and slashes meant he massacred goblins in a wide range. Warren used his shield to bash goblins while Shenna stabbed at them using a flame spear with high penetrative power. Together, they created a path for Abel and Phelps to

charge through.

"We're about to see the last of the goblins. Prepare yourself for the incoming mages," Rihya instructed.

Just as the wave of goblins ended, a goblin mage attacked using the Fire Arrow spell. It was a magical ranged attack similar to the Sonic Blade air magic spell. The flame arrow launched by a magic user split into five projectiles on its aggressive flight toward its target.

On this occasion, three flew toward Abel and the remaining two at Phelps. Warren positioned himself in front of Abel and blocked the flame arrows with his massive shield.

*"Earth, become our shield and protect us against evil. Clay Wall."*

Capable of using earth and flame magic, Shenna, the vice captain, created an earth wall in front of Phelps and blocked the flame arrows rushing at him. That was when the Crimson Sword and White Brigade arrived near the entrance from where the goblin mages came. They were the only groups who succeeded. The knights who had charged into battle first were still fighting behind them.

Right after he finished confirming this fact, Abel caught sight of a humongous goblin lumbering out of the dungeon entrance.

"A goblin general..."

Unlike other goblins, the goblin general, just as its name indicated, possessed a unique and extremely high combat strength. A B-rank adventurer could take it in a one-on-one battle, but the issue was...

"Three goblin generals..." Shenna murmured.

It was actually the first time Abel had heard Shenna's voice and he couldn't contain his surprise. This, however, was neither the time nor place to turn around and gawk at the Brigade's vice captain.

"Several of these generals mean..."

"There's a king inside, yeah," Abel said, finishing Phelps' thought.

Goblin king. A mutant species of goblin that was occasionally sighted in the Central Provinces once every few decades. There was even a record of a goblin

king leading an army of tens of thousands of goblins and destroying an entire city.

The goblins pouring out of the dungeon numbered more than ten thousand, so they should have expected the existence of a king—except...until now, there hadn't been any record of goblin kings being born in dungeons.

"I honestly have no clue how strong a goblin king is supposed to be, which is exactly why I want to take down these generals before it gets to the surface."

"Agreed."

Abel and Phelps were clearly on the same wavelength.

"Phelps and I will each take one, so the rest of you handle the third," Abel said.

With those orders, the battle against the three generals commenced. If it had been purely a melee, Abel and Phelps would have won relatively easily. Unfortunately for them, the goblin mages launched their magical attacks with the perfect timing to put the adventurers at a disadvantage. Because of this, the two parties were having a tough time dealing fatal blows to the goblin generals.

When the general Abel faced swung its mighty sword down, Abel evaded without using his own blade to parry the attack. Then he immediately slashed at it with his magic sword.

"Grrraaarrr!!!"

The general's bellow echoed throughout the space.

Abel wasn't the only one pressing his advantage though. Phelps too was making inroads in his fight.

*All right, this is going pretty well.*

Then, in the next instant, a sense of foreboding struck Abel. He looked toward the dungeon's entrance where a goblin leagues taller than the generals was emerging. It lifted its arm, then swung it across the battlefield.

*Crap!*

"Get down!" Abel shouted at his comrades, his instincts as a swordsman

warning him.

Neither the Crimson Sword nor the White Brigade understood what was happening, yet they were all seasoned warriors who had experienced their fair share of carnage. Each of them immediately dropped to the ground.

A split second later, the three goblin generals were cut in half, their upper bodies cleanly separated from their lower. The adventurers, face down on the ground, felt the air above their heads being disturbed by the flying body parts. Abel shuddered. *It doesn't even care if it kills us or its own generals, huh?*

Air Slash was an invisible air magic spell, but whatever the king had unleashed was not only much faster than an Air Slash, it also possessed an incomparable cutting power. Moreover, unlike an Air Slash, which required a chant to execute, the creature had executed the attack silently.

*Then maybe...it's not magic? I mean, all it did was swing its arm... Either way, we need to close the gap between us.*

“Phelps, you and I are charging in.”

With that, Abel ran straight for the king. Phelps followed without delay. The former attacked at melee range while the latter used his lance to attack at midrange. The king fought back, using its sword and shield to engage them in an orthodox melee.

What *wasn't* orthodox was the incredible heaviness behind even just one of the monster's blows.

The king suddenly swung its sword so fast Abel had no time to dodge, leaving him with no choice but to parry.

“Ngh!” He grunted at the unexpected heft of the strike.

While his sword clashed with the king's, Phelps took the opportunity to stab it with his lance, dealing damage. Just like Abel's sword, his lance glowed red. A magic lance.

Within the Crimson Sword and White Brigade, the only ones in possession of magical weapons were Abel and Phelps. This was the reason Abel said the two

of them would attack the king together. He'd guessed that normal weapons would most likely have no effect on the monster, a suspicion that had been confirmed during their battle with the generals. Although Abel and Phelps had succeeded in hurting their respective generals, their peers' attacks hadn't been strong enough to deal serious damage. Since the king was undoubtedly more powerful than its generals, he'd concluded that only magical weapons could harm the king.

His theory turned out to be correct. Normal weapons, including arrows, inflicted no damage whatsoever to the goblin king's flesh. Their only viable options were Abel's magic sword and Phelps's magic lance.

The two of them had a very slight advantage in this situation, but it was so small that a single misstep on either of their parts and the tables would be turned against them. Unfortunately, that was exactly what happened. Abel's foot slipped the next time he attacked.

"Shit—"

He managed to stop himself from falling entirely by planting one knee on the ground. At the same time, the king took a step back and put some distance between them. Then it swung its arm.

"Get down!" As he shouted, Abel charged toward the king.

"Abel!" Phelps cried out in surprise.

But he had already dropped to the ground and could only watch. Why would Abel do such a thing...?

*"Sword Skill: Perfect Shadow."*

Perfect Shadow was a technique Abel used to dodge long-range attacks, including magical ones, with minimal movement. With it, he evaded the king's invisible attack and then closed the gap between them completely.

*"Combat Skill: Total Impalement."*

Normally, the surefire way to kill an opponent with this technique was by stabbing them through the throat or head. The king's enormous size, however, made it impossible for Abel to reach either of those targets. So Abel aimed as

close to its heart as he could get from below.

“Gugaaaaahhhhhh!!!”

The king screamed either in pain or fury, but he wasn’t down yet.

“I predicted as much. Lyn, shoot! Don’t worry about me and just shoot!” Abel yelled.

“*Bullet Rain.*”

From under the shadow of Warren’s shield, Lyn shouted only those last two trigger words of the spell. Over a hundred invisible air bullets raced toward Abel and the king.

“*Sword Skill: Perfect Shadow.*”

Abel executed Perfect Shadow again, allowing him to dodge her magical ranged attack too. Meanwhile, the king, severely wounded, couldn’t.

“Hraaagh...”

Normal weapons were useless against the king’s skin. However, the same couldn’t be said of Bullet Rain, the highest level of air magic. It required a frighteningly long chant time, so it was considered impractical. Lyn hadn’t used her magic at all since they descended from the defensive wall so she could use Bullet Rain to deal the finishing blow. You could almost say she’d been stubbornly focused on *not* using her magic for this very moment.

A top-tier air magic attack boasting nearly invincible penetration power. As expected, even the king couldn’t withstand it. Countless air bullets pierced through its flesh...and the goblin king breathed its last breath.

Around the same time as the Crimson Sword and White Brigade defeated the goblin king, the rest of the adventurers behind and outside finished their extermination of the goblin horde.



“We recovered 32,133 magic stones, eh... Helluva a lot, even for goblins. Much more than the city of Lune can process.”

Hugh sighed. When Abel had defeated the goblin king, even Hugh had raised

his fists high in triumph. He had been genuinely happy that they'd all somehow managed to overcome the Great Tidal Bore.

But his duties as Lune's guild master weren't over yet. If anything, the real challenge would begin now, especially because he couldn't ask anyone else to do his work for him.

He needed to update the national government and the margrave. Submit documents. File a petition to the government to disburse funds to Lune from the budget it set aside specifically to deal with the periodic Great Tidal Bore outbreaks. Even after he submitted it, it would take them six months to approve it, so he had to advance the adventurers' their rewards from the guild's coffers in the meantime. There was also compensation to the weapon shops for providing all those arrows and condolence money to the families of those who sacrificed their lives in the battle. Then there would be assessing rank-ups for the adventurers who participated in the battle, planning to restore the facilities and equipment destroyed in this latest Great Tidal Bore and how to acquire the funds for the restoration, bonuses for guild stuff, and so much more that the list just didn't seem to end...

When he thought about one thing, it inevitably led him to remember another task. Work that he couldn't ask anyone else to do...

*Still...*

Hugh looked down at the goblin king's magic stone resting near his hands. A pale green magic stone about half the size of a clenched fist.

*This is a damn big stone. It'll fetch a pretty copper on the market, which makes the wyvern magic stones Abel and Ryo brought in even more abnormal in comparison... Although I s'pose that's par for the course when wyverns are involved.*

The wyvern magic stones were deep green and big as a clenched fist. With their color and size, those wyverns in particular must have lived a long time and accumulated a great many experiences. That was what the depth of the shade indicated.

*Meaning the goblin king this time around hadn't been alive for very long considerin' how light its magic stone is. A monster who spent a dang short time*

*in the bowels of the dungeon.*

Much still remained a mystery about the Great Tidal Bores. All people knew was they occurred routinely and when they did, the resulting surge of monsters only consisted of one type.

“Ahhh, hell and damn... The scholars’re definitely gonna descend on us, demandin’ I let ’em study what happened... The dungeon’s s’posed to be sealed off for a month after the outbreak, but how’m I s’posed to hold off the scholars if they come during that time...”

A guild master’s suffering never ends...

Nobody was thinking about the guild master’s worries because of the feast taking place in the guild’s canteen. Naturally, the adventurers were celebrating overcoming a Great Tidal Bore, an event which occurred once every few years. Moreover, this latest outbreak was the biggest in recorded history.

That explained why the guild’s canteen, with its strict no-alcohol policy, made an exception. For today only, liquor flowed throughout the dining hall. For this one night only, the guild would bear the costs of food and drink for all. Well...at least until the national government disbursed the funds to Lune from the discretionary budget dedicated to the unique phenomenon. Then the guild master would just use those to settle up the guild’s coffers after tonight’s celebration.

Either way, it was a grand banquet for all the adventurers here in Lune today: those who participated in the battle, those who couldn’t for various reasons, and even those who had no idea a Great Tidal Bore had even occurred.

Amid the merriment, Ryo returned from the library. He had initially planned on heading straight to his room in the housing annex, but then he heard the din of drunken voices coming from the guild’s canteen, which was unusual given the guild’s strict no-alcohol policy. Curious, he peeked inside, and sure enough, saw the huge feast taking place.

The guild had bought many casks of liquor and adventurers dipped their tankards into them freely. Servers placed mountains of food down on the tables, constantly running back and forth from the kitchen.

Ryo stared at the scene in astonishment. Farther back in the hall, he finally spied his three roommates of Room 10 beckoning him over. He avoided cutting through the heart of the celebration, instead electing to skirt around the edges of the room before he reached the trio.

“Welcome back, Ryo...” Eto, who had once mentioned his low tolerance for alcohol, greeted him, already half-asleep. Amon, the one who’d enthusiastically waved Ryo over when he saw him, drank juice since he was still underage.

“Ryo, you made it in time for the party! It’s all you can eat and all you can drink! Courtesy of the guild too,” Abel said happily. The heap of food overflowing his plate was a testament to the bounty of the buffet tables surrounding them. A true paradise for adventures lacking funds.

Nils arrived at the table with his own plate piled high with food. “You’re late, Ryo. Grab a plate and a mug from over there and fill ‘em up to your heart’s content,” he explained.

“But...what’s this feast for?”

“Ahhh,” Nils said. “So you still don’t know, huh? There was a Great Tidal Bore outbreak. You should have learned about it in the beginner seminar, right? It occurs once every few years.”

“I see...and this banquet is because you all managed to weather it. I guess I’ll make a plate for myself then.”

“Yeah, go for it. Gotta make sure we stuff ourselves with a week’s worth of food tonight!” Nils cackled at his own joke, then started tearing into his food like a wild beast.

Next to him, Amon dug into his own plate like a hungry demon hell, showing off a teenager’s voracious appetite.

When Ryo returned to the table with a plate full of food and a mug full of wine, he saw that Nils and Amon had finished eating. For now, anyway, since they planned on going back for another round soon enough.

“You should have seen Abel! He was amazing!” Nils said before launching into a story about all the things Abel had done during the Great Tidal Bore.

Ryo listened attentively while eating. Not only was Abel a great swordsman, he was just as good with the bow and arrow as any professional archer. Then Nils told him about how Abel led the charge when it was time to fight the goblins up close and carved a way forward for the adventurers. He concluded by telling him how Abel had almost single-handedly taken down the goblin king.

“Almost single-handedly?” Ryo tilted his head curiously. A dexterous feat indeed.

“W-Well, technically speaking, Miss Lyn dealt the finishing blow with her magic. But! It only worked because Abel had already immobilized the goblin king by stabbing it. When he told her not to worry about him and just shoot, I got chills in more ways than one.”

Nils couldn’t stop grinning as he recalled the sight. It creeped Ryo out just a bit. It was fine for men to admire other men, but he felt like Nils was starting to take it too far.

“He would have been in real trouble if her magic actually hit him, right? A goblin king’s body sounds really tough. If her magic punctured it, Abel probably might have died.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point. I heard the chant for the spell takes a terrifyingly long time, which is why magicians hardly ever use it in combat.”

Eto lifted his head. “It’s called ‘Bullet Rain’ and it’s the most powerful air magic out there.” Then he dropped his head onto the table with a thud and fell asleep again.

“Bullet Rain... A shower of bullets... Sounds really cool.”

“Apparently, it’s an invisible magical attack made of dozens of air blades. Man, I sure am glad none of them hit Abel.”

“Only because I deflected them with my sword,” someone said from behind them. Nils jerked around in surprise.

Behind them, Abel stood holding a tankard in one hand. Ryo hadn’t even noticed his presence until now due to a combination of how crowded the hall was and the intensity with which he was eating.

“Are you referring to your Sword Skills?” Ryo asked Abel.

“Yeah, right in one. Even more advanced than Combat Skills and exclusively for swordsmen to use. Specifically, I used Perfect Shadow. It’s a technique to dodge all long-range attacks, including magical ones.”

“Sword Skill: Perfect Shadow. That’s the one you used in our fight against the harpy queen, isn’t it? What a really cool naming convention!”

“Of course that’s what you focus on, Ryo. Why am I not surprised...”

Nils was still completely frozen by Abel’s sudden appearance. His admiration for him had grown to such an extent after today’s battle that he no longer knew how to interact with someone he practically worshiped as a god.

“Oh, yes. Abel, Nils couldn’t stop gushing about you. He said you were amazing and incredible and more.”

“Gah, stop it. You’re gonna make me blush. But Nils and the others pulled their weight too, you know. They didn’t take any breaks while they rushed around resupplying everyone with arrows. It’s thanks to them we ultimately won. So be proud of yourselves too.”

His words finally brought Nils back to reality, though only for a moment, because hearing his hero praise him made him freeze up again.

“One thing though... We’d have won a lot easier if you’d been there, Ryo. Where the heck were you?” Abel asked.

Ryo took a swallow of alcohol from his mug. “Right, about that... I was in the library,” Ryo said, a little sheepish.

Of course, his absence wasn’t his fault. He simply hadn’t known. Any adventurer who hadn’t been able to participate in the battle for whatever reason wouldn’t be penalized. That was little comfort, though. It didn’t sit well with him that he hadn’t been there for a major event that demanded all hands on deck.

“The library, huh... Then yeah, it is what it is.”

“I’m just glad I didn’t have the chance to steal the spotlight from you, Abel.”

Abel burst out laughing. “Jeez, you didn’t have to say it out loud!”

“Ah ha! I found you, Abel.”

“See. I told you odds were good that he was with Ryo.”

Lyn and Rihya had apparently been searching for him.

“Ryo,” Rihya said. “I see Abel’s taken a real shine to you.”

Ryo sensed the barest hints of jealousy and a dangerous bite in Rihya’s words.

“Nah, that’s not why I hunted him down. I just wanted to complain to him that it would’ve been a lot easier for us with him there.” Abel nodded vigorously, agreeing with his own comment.

“In any case,” Rihya said. “The guild master has a message for you. He wants you to go with him tomorrow when he visits the margrave to give his report. Said you should be in his office by the time the clock strikes noon.”

“Ugh...”

“Sounds like your reward for a job *very* well done, hm?” Ryo said.

Ryo’s sarcasm made Abel scowl even more. “But I wasn’t even the one who finished the thing off. It was Lyn...”

“Ah ah, don’t think you can wiggle your way out of this, Abel. My Bullet Rain never would have hit it if you hadn’t stabbed it practically in the heart.”

Upon hearing Lyn’s words, Abel didn’t just scowl but also hung his head.

“Oh, right,” Lyn said, swinging aggressively toward Ryo. “I wanted to ask you something, Ryo.”

“Sure, what is it?” Ryo, having finally cleared his fully loaded plate, began sipping the wine in his tankard.

“Abel told us you can create an Ice Wall in midair, and really high up too. Is that true?”

“Yes, it is. I’d say the highest I can go is around forty meters up in the area?” Ryo replied, trying to visualize the scene to give her an estimate.

“Omigosh. It really is true...”

“Oh, but just so we’re clear, it took me an incredibly long time to perfect it

because of how ridiculously difficult it is.”

“You say that, but it’s not a normal thing to accomplish. Most people can’t...”

Lyn’s whisper was so low no one heard her.

# Ryo's First Alchemical Experiment

Five days after the Great Tidal Bore had been quelled, inspectors from the royal capital arrived at the adventurers' guild to investigate. Since the guild was responsible for hosting the inspectors, the already busy guild staff became even busier, leading every single one without exception to suffer from total exhaustion.

The fact that the dungeon would be sealed for at least a month, if not longer, was announced not just within the guild but throughout the city as a whole. During this period, the only work adventurers had was to accept jobs on the surface. Only adventurers whose coin purses weren't empty could afford to take time off and there certainly weren't many of those...

That day, the notice board, which usually had a few commissions remaining, had been completely stripped of jobs. Even the lesser contracts that normally fell to F-rank adventurers or otherwise remained on the board, like collecting medicinal herbs or harvesting minerals, were gone. Not a single one left...

"Now what..." Scratching his head, Nils looked away from the notice board. He couldn't believe even the most low-level commissions had been taken.

"I'm so sorry about this, Nils. Yesterday and the day before, E-rank and F-rank adventurers rushed the board and snatched up every last request... So the purchasing department had to put a temporary hold on any more."

Nils started, only then realizing that the woman he had a crush on, Miss Nina, had been standing next to him while he complained. "I-I see! And it's not your fault at all, Miss Nina! The purchasing department is the one to b-b-b-b-blame..."

Eto did his best to stifle his laughter watching his friend.

Next to him, Amon smiled ruefully at the tableau.

The three of them weren't yet in dire enough financial straits that they couldn't afford food, but with dungeon dives being suspended for at least a

month, they wanted to avoid running through their savings.

As the trio mulled over what to do, Ryo passed them as he walked out of the guild store.

“Oh, hey, you three. Picked up any jobs?”

“No. Even the material-collection ones are gone.”

Nils, still frozen from his conversation with Nina, couldn’t respond.

Eto replied with a shrug. “Are you looking for something, Ryo?” he continued. “Since you just walked out of the store.”

“I am. I went to check if they sold ores and such for alchemical experiments, but sadly they don’t... I didn’t see any in the general store in town either and the alchemy workshop seems to be closed too... Honestly, I hadn’t considered any alternative ways to procure the resources because I’d planned on acquiring them all easily enough in the fifth layer of the dungeon. But...you know. So now I’m not sure what to do.”

“The fifth layer...meaning you were going to mine for magic copper ore?”

“Yes, exactly.” Ryo nodded vigorously.

“Aren’t those really expensive though...?”

“Well, the last time I saw them in stock at the general store, a fist-sized piece of ore was priced at 500,000 florins. So I’d say yes.”

“That’s fifty gold coins...” Amon said, stunned.

“It’s produced in the fifth layer of the dungeon, but the adventurers’ guild won’t buy it,” Eto explained. “I hear it’s because they’re not on good terms with the city’s alchemists’ guild. That’s why you won’t see it for sale in the guild store and also why it costs so much in the city’s other shops.”

“I see, I see,” Ryo hummed, deep in thought.

After ruminating for a while, he looked at the others. “If I offered you three a job, would you take it?”

“Huh?”

Excluding Nils, who still wasn’t functioning, the two conveyed their surprise in

unison.

“Well, it can be mined outside the dungeon, right? A place near the city whose name I can’t remember...”

“That’s right, an abandoned mine in the village of Rusay, about a half a day’s walk west of Lune.”

“Four gold coins each, for a total of twelve for all three of you. I’ll pay this sum even if we can’t find any of the ore. But for every fist-sized ore you extract, you get twenty-five gold coins. I’ll add a premium for any that are bigger, and as for any smaller...well, we can settle on a price together if that happens. The only other condition is that all three of you return safely to Lune. What do you think?”

Nils started functioning again at some point and answered Ryo enthusiastically.

“Those are all actually really good terms,” Nils, who’d started functioning again, enthusiastically answered. “Are you absolutely sure about this, Ryo?”

“I am. Even if you only find one of the ore, I’d only be paying thirty-seven gold coins in total. Much, much cheaper than what they’d charge me in town. Not to mention they’re all sold out at the moment. But this won’t count toward your rank since we’re not going through the guild, so...”

“Not a problem at all!”

The three of them bought preserved food in bulk and set out right away.

Ryo could have gone alone, but, well...money makes the world go round. He felt ashamed that he didn’t have to worry about feeding himself while the trio floundered for a way to earn. Then again, he could have just treated them to meals, but he figured that wouldn’t have been good for any of them on an extended basis.

Of course, giving away money for no reason was even worse. It was a line he just couldn’t cross as roommates. A proper commission shouldn’t pose any issues though. The three of them worked to gather what he wanted and he compensated them accordingly. All very above board.

Because Ryo most certainly wasn't hurting for money thanks to the wyvern magic stones.

"Money buys time." Rich people on modern-day Earth put into practice this exact adage. He had never gotten close to doing it in his old life, but here on Phi, he was able to experience the meaning of those words in the present. While they were off gathering the ore for him, he could do more research and conduct different experiments using other materials he'd been able to buy in town.

Ryo had a strong feeling he would have a *very* good time in his own company.



Lyn was in Lune's northern library when three of Room 10's residents departed the city. In contrast to the southern library, which collected books geared toward the general public and novices, the northern one contained only specialized texts. There was even a more specific section within the northern library that housed restricted books.

Only nobles and B-rank or higher adventurers who received special permission from the margrave could peruse the books there. It held volumes and materials, such as books on advanced water magic and expert-level magical techniques, best sequestered from ordinary folks.

Lyn was currently poring through a magical text outlining such magic known as forbidden spells.

"Hm, it's not in here after all."

Unfortunately, she couldn't find the magic she was searching for. She had suspected from the beginning that it—a sort of magic that allowed the user to create a wall of ice far from them—didn't even exist...

All of the magics used by magicians in the Central Provinces were recorded in magic books, including the incantations necessary to generate those magics. Beginner, intermediate, advanced, and expert. The Bullet Rain spell Lyn had used against the goblin king—the same spell with the impractically long incantation—was listed in the expert compendium for air magic.

Only those with vast reserves of magical energy and a constitution adapted to

magic could use advanced and expert-level magic. If magicians who failed to meet both conditions tried to chant spells falling into either of these categories, the magic would either run out of control or the magician themselves would be swallowed up and destroyed by the magic. This was the reason advanced and expert-level magical texts were kept in the restricted books section, away from the eyes of the ordinary folks.

But the magic Ryo seemed to have executed wasn't in any of the advanced or expert texts. That meant...

"It's original magic..." Lyn said to herself.

That went against the very nature of magic, which worked by using incantations to generate specific magic and magical phenomena. Those with an aptitude for magic could activate beginner-level magic of their attribute simply by reciting the appropriate incantation. As they moved on to intermediate-and advanced-level magics, their bodies became more accustomed to magic, thereby allowing them to generate spells in those classifications.

This was the strict, well-defined framework in which magic existed. However, original magic lay outside of this framework. It wasn't clear *how* this kind of magic could exist without the use of incantations or other components. In that sense, original magic might as well not exist.

In the past, Lyn would have dismissed Ryo's abilities as a mistake and left it at that. However, there was a famous magician currently in the Central Provinces who used what could be categorized as original magic.

"It's almost like he's the water version of the Inferno Magician..."

The Inferno Magician... A magician who controlled magic so unbelievably powerful other magicians had never seen or heard of anything else like it, thus the appellation given to him of the Inferno Magician.

Just as Lyn was exhaling deeply, someone called out to her:

"Oh, my. Lyn, fancy seeing you again after so long."

When she lifted her head from the magic book, she saw a woman of unparalleled beauty. She had huge green eyes and platinum blonde hair. At a height of one hundred and seventy centimeters, she stood more than a head

taller than the petite Lyn. And then there was her outstanding figure. Her distinctive ears were exposed by her long hair being tied back. They were pointed just a smidge at the end... Elf ears.

This was the sole elf living in Lune that Abel had mentioned some time ago. She was also the only member of the B-rank party Wind.

“Hello, Sera.”

Lyn wasn’t very comfortable interacting with her. Sera hadn’t done anything wrong. Lyn just felt inferior to her in so many facets...

As an air magician.

As a B-rank adventurer.

And as a woman too.

“I see you’re looking at something unusual in such an unusual place, hm?”

Sera was such a dedicated bibliophile here that everyone called her the Mistress of the Northern Library behind her back. Sometimes she could be found in the great reading room, and other times, like today, in the restricted books section. A single glance at the book Lyn was reading told Sera it was the expert-level tome on water magic.

“I wanted to look into something,” Lyn said. “In the end though, I couldn’t find it.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that.”

For a moment, Lyn was strongly tempted to ask Sera. Supposedly, elves lived for over a thousand years. She didn’t know Sera’s age, but she *did* know that the elf was more knowledgeable about magic even though Lyn could execute expert-level air magic.

Except Lyn couldn’t ask. She didn’t know why. She just knew she didn’t want to for whatever reason. She asked her something else instead.

“Sera, you left Lune for a job in the royal capital, right?”

“I did. I finally returned yesterday,” Sera replied with a small smile.

To Lyn, that smile was blindingly bright...

"Oh, my apologies for cutting this short, but the librarian is waiting on me," Sera continued. "I'm sure we'll see each other again soon." With those parting words, Sera turned around and walked to the great reading room.

Lyn sighed heavily then reshelfed the book and left the library.



Adventurers were allowed to move into the adventurers' guild dormitory within three hundred days of registering, which explained why so many of the adventurers were beginners. Despite being novices, most people who wanted to become adventurers were strong-willed and skilled...by their own standards at least.

Room 10 was located the farthest back on the first floor of the housing annex. From there, its residents could see the adventurers' guild outdoor training grounds and the annex's inner courtyard. Inside that room, Ryo was currently experimenting with the basics of alchemy after sending off his roommates on a job to acquire materials.

Ultimately, during his time in the Forest of Rondo, he had never once managed to find even a leaf of the detoxifying herb. Fortunately, one of the herbalist shops in Lune carried it, so he had finally got his hands on the herb. And right next to it had been leaves from the phosphorus plant too. Mixing the two using alchemy would allow him to create an antidote. This was undoubtedly God's work!

As soon as he bought the two ingredients, he rushed back to his room and holed himself up inside it. There, he got to work drawing one of the magic circles noted in *Alchemy, A Collection of Recipes I* on a piece of paper. Anticipating something like this occurring, he'd bought compounding tools like a mortar and pestle at one of the supply shops in the city, which he'd laid out on the table and now used to grind the plants. He measured the correct amounts of each, combined them, then finally poured his magic into the alchemical magic circle.

But this last step was a difficult one. The amount of magic had to be just right, not too much and not too little. Unfortunately, the recipe book's instructions on the matter was frustratingly vague: "Use the appropriate amount of magic." He

supposed it made sense since magic couldn't be described in exact quantifiable values like water and electricity.

It took him thirty minutes of intense concentration and effort to determine the right amount of magical energy. When he finally found it, all it took was an instant. A red glow appeared alongside an adorable popping sound and—voila! He'd made an antidote that looked just like the illustration in the book.

Ryo's first attempt at alchemy succeeded.

"Heh heh heh. I won, huh?"

Indeed, Ryo had won... Nobody knew what exactly he'd won against. In any case, he'd won.

Still ecstatic about the success of his experiment, he noticed some kind of trouble occurring in the lodging's courtyard. He could hear the voices outside since the windows were open. It had apparently been going on for a while now, but Ryo had been so focused on his work that the sounds simply hadn't filtered into his ears until now.

"Hey, assholes. Cut the crap. She clearly doesn't wanna go anywhere with the lot of you."

"We're knights of the national order and if you drink with us, I promise you'll have a good time tonight. In fact, you can keep us company while we're in Lune."

"N-No, I don't want to. Please, let me go."

A group of knights were in the middle of trying to force a woman, who looked to be an adventurer, to accompany them. One of them had his hands on her. Upon closer inspection, she was less a woman and more a girl, clearly a minor around Amon's age. Shockingly, the ones trying to protect her were none other than Dan and his lackeys in Room 1.

Although, *because* it was them, it was entirely possible they'd had her in their own sights before the knights... Ryo couldn't decide one way or another since he didn't know much about the goings-on in the dormitory.

"Woman, the fact that you're in this annex means you're still a new adventurer, doesn't it? So you're not making much money. You should just be grateful we're offering to pay you to drink with us."

"Not just to drink but stay with us *all* night long."

The five knights guffawed in a vulgar way at their own so-called joke.

"No. I refuse."

"Oh ho, you refuse, huh? Keep giving us lip and you'll find yourself on your back whether you like it or not."

A terrified girl who didn't want to go with them...and Dan was trying to save her. It would be very tactless of Ryo to charge into this particular fray... Having said that, the knights looked strong. They must have accompanied the inspectors who came to investigate the latest Great Tidal Bore.

*There are plenty of the sort of venues they're looking for in the city itself, so why don't they just go to one of those? Maybe...these knights are picky. Or they just have too much time on their hands.*

That was all Ryo's thoughts on the situation amounted to. But the tension gradually ratcheted up in the courtyard. While he absentmindedly watched the tableau outside unfold...things finally went too far.

"You low-class scum," spat the knight holding the girl's arm. "I'll teach you worthless adventurers the meaning of courtesy." Then he flung the girl toward Dan and unsheathed his sword. "Don't worry," he said. "I won't kill you. I'll just give you a little lesson in manners."

Then the knight took a huge step forward...and slipped and fell.

"Ngh—"

A patch of Ice Bahn had existed under his foot for only a second, but neither the knights nor Dan and his hangers-on had noticed it.

"Son of a bitch! Don't you dare move. I'll teach you..."

*Ice Bahn.*

The knight slipped and fell again.

“Gah!”

“You bastard, what did you do?!” the other knights shouted at Dan.

“I didn’t do shit. Your friend over there’s just trippin’ on his own damn feet.”

Dan was clearly bewildered. He had been ready to fight, but both times the knight tried to approach, he suddenly fell down. He glanced questioningly at his lackeys and they all shook their heads, just as confused as him. None of them knew what happened.

“You...piece of garbage!”

The knight stood up again and decided to do away with his slow, menacing approach. Now he charged at Dan in an attempt to close the gap between them instantly and cut him down... Well, he *tried* to cut him down, but...only succeeded in slipping and falling once more.

“Ugggh!”

At this point, everyone there knew it wasn’t a coincidence. Hatred and fear lurked in the knights’ eyes now. There was no denying the humiliation they were being subject to by the adventurers in front of them. The hatred stemmed from that fact. Yet there was also no denying that something they couldn’t understand was happening. And so the fear stemmed from that fact.

Just as their hatred and fear was about to explode...

“Right then, that’s enough,” a voice cut in.

Ryo had never heard it before, but Dan and the others recognized its owner.

“Phelps!”

It was Phelps, captain of the B-rank party the White Brigade.

The knights glared at him, the hatred still burning in their eyes. “Who the hell are you?”

“You call yourselves the knights of the country, but you have the nerve to act so shameless?! Disgusting!” Phelps rebuked. His last word carried incredible contempt.

The hatred vanished from the knights’ gazes and was instantly replaced by

fear. “H-How dare you treat us royal knights so...discourteously even though you’re just a lowly adventurer...”

It was unbelievable that they were trying to put on a bold front even now.

“Shut up! Us being adventurers is entirely irrelevant. But *you!* If you’re going to call yourselves knights, then bloody well act like it!”

They had no retort now. Not a single grumble. Yet the knight who had grabbed the girl’s arm, the one who’d fallen a few times because of Ryo’s Ice Bahn, insisted on opening his mouth. “Do you have any idea what would happen to you filth if you stand against us royal knights? We can have everyone in this city, including the guild master, banished from the Kingdom.”

His attempt to shoot back at Phelps despite being savaged by him was...admirable, in a way. Except his reply only fanned the B-rank adventurer’s fury.

“You’re right, I *am* an adventurer. But I’m also of noble blood. My name is Phelps A Heinlein, and I’m the son and heir of Marquess Heinlein.”

“Heinlein...”

“Let me think now. If I recall correctly, the previous commander of the royal knights was Alexis Heinlein. Who just so happens to be the current marquess and my father.”

Upon hearing his words, a fine tremor overtook the knights, as if they’d been struck by lightning. The former commander of the royal knights was a man whose name had rung famously throughout the Kingdom during his tenure...a man so ferocious he’d been dubbed the Demon, yet was simultaneously a just and upright individual. Even now, his influence over the nation was enormous as one of its central power players.

And here the knights stood, subject to the contempt of that very man’s son and heir...

The five knights’ tremors escalated to full-blown shaking then.

“Don’t ever again stain the name of the royal knights! Get out of my sight!”

Even if he didn’t *look* like a typical handsome young scion, Phelps was

certainly commanding enough to be called the Demon's Son.

"Thank you very much, Phelps," Dan said once the knights had left. He said the words so politely that it was hard to reconcile this version of him with the person who had ridiculed the residents of Room 10 only a few days ago. His lackeys and the girl followed suit with thanks of their own.

"Not a problem, especially since their behavior infuriated me. You're Dan, aren't you? Well done on your part, standing up to them. I'd expect no less from another adventurer." Phelps, smiling broadly, suddenly laughed. A handsome man's laughter naturally relaxed any atmosphere and this was no exception. The tension dissipated.

"Right then, make sure she gets safely to her friends," Phelps said. With that, he walked away from them and toward Room 10's windows. Toward Ryo.

"Hello, nice to meet you. You must be Ryo, right?"

"Oh, yes, I am. Nice to meet you as well. Phelps, was it?"

"That's right. Captain of the White Brigade. Abel told me about your magic, but it really is interesting seeing it in person," Phelps said with a cheerful smile on his face. In short, he knew Ryo had caused the knight's repeated tumbles with his Ice Bahn.

"Uuummm..."

"Ah, you don't have to respond and I don't plan on outing you either, so don't worry. For all intents and purposes, the knight stumbled on his own feet and Dan and the others didn't attack. The incident ended without escalation thanks to you. As an adventurer of Lune, I'm grateful." He bowed his head respectfully.

"No, no, don't do that. Please, raise your head. You could say Dan and I have met before, but it wasn't a great experience. Honestly, a part of me didn't want to help at all, so I decided to do that instead," Ryo replied, scratching his head.

"You're very interesting, you know that? Abel was right about that too."

"What exactly did he tell you...?"

"Well, at the banquet after the Great Tidal Bore, he kept saying over and over how much easier it would have been with you there, Ryo. He repeated it dozens

of times, like he was chanting a spell.”

Phelps grinned, remembering Abel’s behavior. “Darn it, Abel...”

“No, actually, it’s amazing to hear Abel rave that much about someone. I mean, you *are* the reason he even managed to make the return journey safely across the Malefic Mountains, right? Losing Abel would have been a tremendous blow for the adventurers of Lune. Nothing would have compared to it. You really have my deepest gratitude. Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it...”

Before they knew it, Shenna, his vice captain, appeared behind Phelps and murmured quietly, “Captain, if we don’t leave now...”

“Ah, right. Apologies, Ryo, but I have to go. Let’s talk again soon. Thanks once more for today.” Then Phelps walked away with Shenna.

“Both Phelps and the woman who showed up after him are strong, hm? I really shouldn’t be surprised anymore by the variety of people in Lune. But...is it really all right for a marquess’s heir to be an adventurer?”



“Whoa. So weird to see you eating dinner alone,” a certain B-rank swordsman said to a certain water magician eating dinner quietly by himself in the guild’s canteen.

“The other three are away on a job at an abandoned mine in a village west of the city.”

The swordsman sat down across the water magician.

“You can sit there all you want and I still won’t treat you.”

Naturally, Abel the swordsman had every intention to pay for his own meal. “Like hell I want a greenhorn new to the adventuring business to treat *me!*” he said.

“Well, since you’re a veteran and all, feel free to treat this greenhorn whenever you want.”

“Like hell I have plans to treat a rich greenhorn!”

And with that, Abel ordered the day's special.

"What a rough world I'm living in..." Ryo said, sighing.

"Of course you'd say something like that now. Jeez."

"Speaking of, it's pretty unusual for you to be eating dinner at the canteen too, especially at this house. Where are the others?"

"Except I eat here a lot because I love the food here." Abel dug into the daily special with gusto as soon as it arrived.

"I mean, yes, you're right, the food here *is* delicious. But..."

"Anyway, just because we're a party doesn't mean we spend every second together," Abel replied once his mouth was no longer full of food. He focused properly on chewing and swallowing first before responding. A man truly skilled in many ways.

"Ahhh ha! Ah ha ha! I know exactly why you're alone at this time of night, Abel."

"Oh, yeah? Why don't you tell me?"

"You're filling up your stomach here so you can have energy afterward to visit the red-light district, right?"

"Y-You moron!" Abel hurriedly slapped both hands across Ryo's mouth and looked around warily to see if anyone had heard. Evidently, there was a certain person who would be very displeased to hear Ryo's words. "You don't know who could be listening in on our conversations, or where."

"I get it. The walls have ears and the shoji screens have eyes, hm? It would be a problem if some girl named Mary suddenly burst through one."

"I understand the part about walls having ears. But what is a 'shoji screen'? And who exactly is Mary...?" In any case, Abel was relieved that the person who shouldn't hear Ryo's words hadn't. "Anyway, I'm not going to the red-light district."

"Then does that mean you're rendezvousing with a particular woman?!"

"Wrong again, moron."

"Abel...you know some folks might call you a pedophile for making a move on Lyn, right..."

"Damn it, don't even go there. Besides, Lyn likes Warr—" Abel abruptly cut himself off when he realized what he was about to disclose. "Uhhh. Pretend you didn't hear that just now."

"Well. That's certainly an amazingly unbalanced combination, hm?"

A giant man over two meters in height and a tiny girl barely one hundred fifty centimeters tall.

"Eh, height doesn't matter as long as two people love each other." Abel nodded vigorously as he finished eating the daily special. Then he looked sadly at his empty plate.

"Which means, you and Rihya are..."

"N-No, we aren't, you moron." Abel flushed. Was he a middle schooler?! Could he *be* any more obvious?

*Eto's doomed for a broken heart before he's even confessed... Too bad.*

As Ryo suddenly looked back on his life, he suddenly realized something: his so-called sex drive had completely disappeared since arriving on Phi. In short, he hadn't been attracted to women *or* men all this time. Although, it wasn't really a problem for him since he wasn't especially bothered by the lack of a libido...

Now, Abel, Nils, and Eto's blushing faces abruptly looked dazzling to Ryo as he recalled their embarrassed, lovestruck expression.

"Abel, why don't you order another plate if one wasn't enough?"

"Nah, that's a bit much even for me."

"All you have to do is move your body more. Exercise away what you ate."

"Huh?"

"Night work should be more than enough to help you digest." Ryo nodded gravely as he spoke.

"What do you mean by night work? Soliciting customers like they do in the

red-light district?"

"Not at all. Infiltrate the mansion of a corrupt merchant, steal his ill-gotten wealth, and give it away to the poor. That kind of night work!"

"I don't know if you know this, Ryo, but that's called *theft*. Doing it under the guise of chivalry doesn't *not* make it theft, y'know."

"Then that makes you a fake ally of justice, Abel..."

"Don't say that," Abel replied, annoyed.

Ryo pursed his lips, his expression dissatisfied, but it didn't take long for Ryo's expression to return to normal as he pressed Abel again. "Then what *is* the real reason you're here at this time, Abel?"

"Riiight, about that... Hm... I have an idea. How about you help me since you're clearly not busy?"

"No. I don't want to."

"Are you serious right now?"

"*Contrary* to appearances, I'm actually quite busy. Very busy in fact."

"Are you now? All right, then tell me what you're doing after this?"

"I'm going back to my room to devote myself to alchemy. Then I'm going to keep devoting myself to it. And finally, after some more devotion, I'm going to...sleep."

"Yeah, free as a bird, huh? No way you're getting out of helping me now."

"Geh..." Ryo scowled, frustrated to be treated lightly not only as a water magician but also as an alchemist. "Okay, from *your* perspective, it might *seem* like I'm not busy, but...but I won't help you for free. You should know that my hourly rate is high!"

"I'll pay for your dinner."

"Allow me to follow you to the ends of the world, Abel! For eternity! All hail the most wonderful Abel! Maybe I should order more food then..."

"Hey, wait!"

Ultimately, Ryo gave up on the idea of ordering more because he didn't want to become a fatty from eating two plates of dinner.

"Will you tell me already what we're doing?"

"It's your own damn fault, Ryo. You wouldn't let me get in a word edgewise to explain properly." Abel exhaled deeply before he laid it out for him. "The truth is...the inspectors visiting Lune from the capital are old acquaintances of mine. A group of royal knights is accompanying them as security, but a few of them are anything but knightly. I've been asked to capture them before they sneak out of their lodgings and cause problems again tonight."

"I see..." Ryo nodded firmly. Unfortunately, he knew exactly who Abel was talking about. What he had seen that afternoon in the guild dormitory's courtyard was probably related to Abel's commission... He decided to tell Abel about it.

"Yeah, it sounds like them," Abel said.

"What do you mean *sounds* like them? Shouldn't you have their names or descriptions...?"

"Nope. Didn't get any."

"Oh... Hm... Well... You see, Abel, I don't have the ability to judge criminals on sight like you and famous detectives, so perhaps I should sit this one out..."

"Ha. You really think I'm letting you escape so easily at this point? Besides, I don't have that ability either."

"Then how do you suggest we search for them?"

"Easy. We go into the city and drag away any knights causing trouble. And if they're just drinking quietly and behaving, then no problem."

Ryo was surprised by both the simplicity and haphazardness of Abel's plan. He wondered if maybe they should think this through more...but then he stopped thinking about it halfway through. If Abel was willing to pay him, then that was more than good enough!

Because it wasn't good to work harder than needed. It wasn't good for him, the employee, and it wasn't good for his partner, the employer! And it

definitely wasn't about getting paid for random, easy work. It wasn't, okay?! He had agreed at once when Abel said he would pay for his dinner, so it wasn't like he'd receive more money for working harder. This was merely the disadvantage of paying in advance!

They sallied forth into Lune's nightscape. It was up for debate whether the phrase 'sally forth' suited the situation though.

"Abel, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"I'm not making any progress in the city's southern library, so I'd like to visit the northern one. Are there any restrictions for using it?"

Ryo had heard rumors that normal people couldn't use the northern library. Since he planned to go there tomorrow, he figured asking Abel would help him avoid any issues.

"Yeah, there are, unlike the southern library. Adventurers D-rank and higher can use it. If you show your guild card at the front desk, they'll give you an entry badge, which you should hang around your neck while you're inside. Let me see..." Abel peered up at the sky thoughtfully. "If I remember right, the entry badges for adventurers are jet black."

"In that case, I should be able to get in too."

"But only B-ranks and higher can go into the restricted books section."

"There's a restricted books section?!"

The words made his heart leap with joy! He had no idea what it held, but it must be hair-raising books. He couldn't access it just yet since he was nowhere near B-rank, but someday, he'd definitely like to check it out...

"I know right? Aren't you glad I had you register as a D-rank?"

"Yes, indeed, I am grateful to you for that, Abel."

"Good, good. Don't you forget it either." Abel nodded, expression satisfied.

Lune's shopping district was quite busy even at night. Thanks to streetlamps,

one of the most commonly used alchemical devices, there was a lot of activity going on at this late hour too. Unlike the streetlights in villages and small towns, Lune's were always lit.

Of course, lots of people greeted Abel as they walked by, proof of his popularity in the city. He responded kindly to everyone, especially the adventurers, whose names and faces he had apparently memorized.

“Abel, how popular are you exactly here?”

“Where the heck is this coming from?” Abel replied a little bashfully, but Ryo’s gaze was off in a different direction.

“A lot of folks came to see you one after another during your return party, right? Did most of Lune’s adventurers go to it?”

“Hm, I’m not sure. Though I feel like a lot of them did.”

Ryo’s stare remained focused elsewhere even as he questioned Abel. At this point, Abel became curious too.

“Ryo, what are you looking at?”

“Shhh. Be quiet.” He placed his index finger against his lips in the universal gesture telling someone not to talk.

Baffled by this sudden change, Abel nevertheless obeyed and looked in the direction Ryo did. He saw a few men who seemed to be adventurers gathered in the darkness.

“They didn’t come to your party after your return, Abel. That means you’re really not so popular!”

“N-Not like I even care about being popular anyway... Well, Lune has the only dungeon in the Central Provinces, so it’s perfectly normal for adventurers from abroad to drop in.”

“They must be from somewhere else then. Although they do look suspicious.”

“Really? But I don’t see how...”

Of course, since it was just Ryo’s sloppy assumption, no one could actually tell if they *were* suspicious. But once the men noticed Ryo and Abel staring at them,

their eyes met for a second before the unknown adventures suddenly and hurriedly began moving.

And that most certainly *was* suspicious!

“Are they doing this on purpose? To lure us?” Ryo muttered quietly.

Abel heard him and nodded slightly. “I think so. Four of them. They definitely aren’t Lune’s adventurers.”

“That’s great for you, Abel. It means your popularity hasn’t taken a nosedive here after all.”

“I’m pretty sure that has nothing to do with this...”

Then the two of them started walking. Their gaits were very casual as they followed the strangers into the dark. Only a particularly observant person might note that they strode right alongside one another, their steps perfectly in sync.

As soon as the darkness surrounded them...

*Klang. Klang. Klang. Klang.*

The four of them immediately attacked Ryo and Abel, but the Ice Wall Ryo generated around them repelled their swords.

“*Icicle Lance 4. Icicle Lance 4.*”

Four extremely thick spears of ice jabbed the men’s solar plexuses, stopping their movements and allowing Ryo the chance to generate another four to smash into the backs of their heads, rendering them unconscious. They probably passed out without ever understanding what exactly had happened...

“Hah, and they were the ones who lured us in. What a disappointing bunch. Right, Abel?”

“More like you never play fair, Ryo,” Abel replied with a small, exasperated shake of his head. Then he searched their clothes.

“Abel, I know they attacked us, but I’m not sure about the ethics of robbing unconscious people.”

“That’s not what I’m doing, you jerk! I’m looking for anything that’ll tell us who they are... Oh?” He extracted a guild card and a small box about half the

size of a fist.

“What is that?”

“Good question. Maybe an alchemical tool...”

“Oooh, you don’t saaay?” Ryo’s eyes started sparkling from the moment he heard ‘alchemical tool.’ “I sure would like it...”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Why?!”

“Cuz it’s evidence.”

“Grr...” Ryo scowled. Be that as it may, he was put off by stealing evidence, so he acknowledged that he had no choice but to give up on the item. He understood it. He came to terms with it—well, he was trying really hard to come to terms with it.

“According to this guild card, this guy’s name is Gamingam and he’s a C-rank adventurer from Jeclaire in the Federation. But...Jeclaire is the Federation’s capital. So why is an adventurer from there all the way here? Something’s not right,” Abel mumbled, looking between the guild card and the man in bewilderment. He searched the remaining three and discovered from their guild cards that they too were C-rank adventurers from Jeclaire in the Handalieu Federation. The Federation was one of the three major powers making up the Central Provinces alongside the Kingdom of Knightley and the Debuhi Empire.

In the end, Abel let out a huge sigh. “I’ll turn them over to the city’s garrison. They should be able to find out more about them.”

Ryo nodded firmly, agreeing with his decision. “Abel, you do good things once in a while too, hm?”

“Once in a while? More like all the time.”

“But I heard at the feast after the Great Tidal Bore you kept going on and on about how ‘things would have been easier with Ryo.’ I don’t consider that a good thing, you know.”

“Why the hell do you even know that?!”

Answer: because Phelps had said so.



Right around the time Ryo and Abel set aside their original hunt for the useless knights and captured themselves a suspicious group of adventurers, Phelps was on his way back to the White Brigade's headquarters after enjoying dinner at his favorite restaurant in the city. He walked at a leisurely pace. Alone.

Why? To make sure the five shadows tailing him didn't lose their way. They'd been following him the whole walk since he'd left the restaurant. If someone had witnessed the spectacle in the guild's courtyard this afternoon, they would have realized the five shadows were those exact five knights. So...the only reasonable interpretation for their current behavior was...they intended to exact vengeance on him and turn him into a corpse. He couldn't think of anything else.

Then the situation reached its climax when they arrived at a deserted location. All five of them drew their swords and attacked him from behind simultaneously. At that moment...each one of them stiffened.

"Wh-What...?!"

"I can't move."

"Ngh..."

"Something's stabbing me."

"A needle..."

Then they heard a woman's voice, just barely audible.

"Lord Phelps deigned to overlook your grievances and this is how you repay him? Fools. Rubbish must be incinerated."

That was all they heard. She spoke an incantation so softly they couldn't make out the words, but speak it she did. It was equivalent to a death sentence for the five and they waited in terror for a very, *very* long time.

Then:

*"Inferno."*

As soon as she said the trigger word, a raging fire burst upward and consumed the knights.

When a few residents of the city later found their way to the spot, they would see only five piles of ash.

“Thank you, Shenna.” Phelps spoke without looking behind him, though he did smile slightly. The White Brigade’s vice captain, Shenna, acknowledged his words with a bow, then vanished into the darkness.

# Blockade Lifted

The next morning, Ryo's schedule was immediately thrown into chaos. It started in the guild's dining hall. He went there to eat breakfast because he wanted to spend the rest of his morning in the city's northern library.

He arrived at his usual time, just a bit past seven o'clock, but there weren't any breakfast items left. "Everything is sold out already?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Ryo. Those scholars and inspectors from the capital took everything with 'em. I'm headin' to the market shortly to buy everything I need for lunch and dinner, so those meals shouldn't be a problem. But...again, I'm sorry, to you and the others."

The head chef bowed his head apologetically, a change of attitude from his usual cheeriness in the kitchen. He was of course a former C-rank adventurer himself, slightly older than the guild master. To the young adventurers, he was like a father figure who always cooked delicious food for them. When a man like him bowed his head, they couldn't criticize him. On the other hand, the adventurers' impressions of the group of academics only worsened since they were responsible for forcing the head chef to act like this.

Research teams were dispatched from the royal capital whenever something unusual occurred within the country. They were sent to investigate the cause and course of the event, then determine a forecast for the next event. The research teams consisted of a variety of individuals, often scholars from the Royal Central University and researchers from the University of Magic. Sometimes, royal magicians made up the core of the research teams as well.

Almost a decade had passed since the last Great Tidal Bore and the latest outbreak in the Central Province's sole dungeon had been the most massive in recorded history, which explained the size of the enormous research team dispatched to Lune on this occasion. Never before had such a large group of surveyors been sent before. Usually, the Royal Central University, University of Magic, and Bureau of Royal Magicians simply sent as many people as each

organization could spare.

They had mobilized five thousand people in total.

Research teams usually consisted of fifty people, no more than a hundred at most. So five thousand meant...that all of the city's lodgings were strained at full capacity. The members of this enormous research team who hadn't been able to secure rooms inside the city were mostly low-level personnel, luggage carriers, and guards. They unfortunately had been forced to camp right outside Lune.



"The hell do you mean?!" Hugh yelled, his voice reverberating throughout his office.

Three of the research team's top brass were in front of him:

Clive Staples, president of the Royal Central University.

Christopher Blatt, head instructor at the University of Magic.

Arthur Berasmus, advisor at the Bureau of Royal Magicians.

All three were considered bigwigs in the royal capital's scholarly realm, particularly the president of the Royal Central University who had taken charge of the research team. He possessed both an academic and bureaucratic air about him and was undoubtedly one of the top academic leaders in the capital.

None of that mattered to Hugh. Though he understood it would be a pain in the neck if he made enemies of any of them, he still didn't care about any of it.

"Your lot commandeered every last bit of food from the adventurers' guild soon as ya got here and now yer tellin' me to lift the blockade on the dungeon b'cause yer wantin' to dive right in? Then ya demand adventurers as guards on top o' that? Ya got some bloody stones, ya know that?!"

Hugh's fury didn't have much effect on any of the trio. Clive's expression remained cool, Christopher stared off somewhere else, and Arthur sipped his tea while shaking his head in exasperation.

"Master McGlass, His Royal Majesty himself made Earl Harold Lawrence, minister of domestic affairs, the head of this research expedition, who in turn

granted us full authority over the team while we're in the field. Read the decree for yourself," Clive said.

McGlass was Hugh's family name. His full name was Hugh McGlass.

Clive handed over a wax-sealed letter as well as a decree of authority to Hugh.

"A decree of authority?"

As the document stated, full power was given to the ones mentioned... In short, the three men in front of him were made Earl Lawrence's proxies by the king himself. They were individuals not to be made light of.

Hugh stared at the wax seal on the letter. An official seal unique to Earl Harold Lawrence. One look at it and anyone would know who the letter was from. He broke the seal on the envelope and read the letter inside.

"Huh... This does say I should accommodate you lot as much as I can."

"We appreciate your understanding." Clive smiled politely though his cool aura still remained.

"The key word being *can*, gents. And there are things I can and can't do. The guild can't provide all of ya with food," Hugh said bluntly.

"Master McGlass, do you understand the meaning of the words 'should accommodate'?"

"Clive Staples, you understand the meaning of the words 'as much as I *can*'?"

Another voice cut in as the two men glared at each other.

"Clive, Hugh, enough. We're all leaders of the same country. Hugh, you're right about the food supplies. Apologies for taking all of it from the guild's canteens. From now on, we won't step foot inside it or press the guild to provide us with food. We'll talk to the leaders of Kailadi or Acray and arrange for them to deliver us food instead. That should work, right?"

The one who settled the dispute was probably the oldest among the four, Arthur Berasus, advisor at the Bureau of Royal Magicians. He had a long white beard and wore the gray robes characteristic of a magician. He possessed a large staff. He was a magician who looked exactly like a magician.

“Yes... Thank you very much.”

Even now, Arthur Beresus could be considered as one of the Kingdom’s ten most powerful magicians. He used to be an adventurer in his youth, so Hugh himself certainly couldn’t disrespect the intervention of such a veteran colleague.

“Understood. If Advisor Beresus insists, I’ll yield on the food supplies, but I can’t concede on the dungeon’s blockade being lifted because then there would have been no point to us coming here in the first place,” Clive persisted.

“None of us have any idea what’s going on in there. So to ask me to open it again so soon is...”

Clive sneered. “That is precisely why we’re here. To investigate what’s happening.”

Hugh growled low in his throat at the obvious slight before speaking again. “Fine. But know this. You all assume full risk for yourselves the moment ya step inside the dungeon. No matter what happens, neither the city of Lune nor the adventurers’ guild and its members will take any responsibility whatsoever. And all three of ya will sign acknowledging these stipulations.”

“Y-You—”

“If ya don’t like it, then I won’t lift the blockade!”

Clive and Huge glared at each other once more.

“Clive, we have no choice but to accept his terms. Hugh, you won’t have a problem if we hire adventurers and pay them regular commissions, right? Adventurers always need to make coin, don’t they?”

Arthur, the former adventurer... Accept one condition himself while forcing his opponent to accept another. Give and take. A master at the fundamentals of negotiation. As far as Hugh was concerned, that was what made the advisor exceptionally tricky to handle.

“No problem ’t all. Each adventurer can decide for ’emselves whether or not to accept jobs from you lot. Just remember one thing though. There’re almost no records of what goes on in a dungeon after a Great Tidal Bore. Things’ll

happen that have never happened before, and that goes double for adventurers workin' in today's day and age. I suggest you conduct yer exploration very carefully."

And so, six days after the Great Tidal Bore, the dungeon blockade was lifted.



Ryo wandered the city streets looking for a shop where he could eat breakfast since the guild canteen hadn't worked out. If the dungeon had been open, the main avenues leading to the city center, where the dungeon was situated, would have been bustling with a variety of food stalls. After the Great Tidal Bore, however, only a few were open for business.

Part of the reason had to do with fewer adventurers traversing the area, meaning lower sales. The biggest factor, though, was the sudden decrease in monster meat supply from the dungeon. Goblins on the fourth and fifth layers of the dungeon didn't make for good eating, but delicious monster meat could be hunted in a few of the other layers up until the tenth one.

The few stalls that were still around despite the dungeon's blockade weren't yet open this early in the morning, which was why Ryo had decided to search for a restaurant located on one of the main streets. But...they were all closed too...

"Oh, no... Does this mean I have to go without breakfast...?"

Breakfast was important. The day's energy started with breakfast. There was no way he could skip it!

Those thoughts ran through his mind as he continued looking for an open restaurant. Then he found himself in front of the Golden Wave, the restaurant where they'd held Abel's return party, where Ryo had gotten ridiculously drunk. He knew their food was superb. It was also the inn which Abel's party, the Crimson Sword, used as their preferred lodging. The first thing you saw when you stepped through the entrance of the Golden Wave was a receptionist's counter. To the right was its dining hall.

"You're kidding... The Crimson Sword isn't here?" someone asked.

"Yes, they left together about..." the proprietress of the inn replied, "half an

hour ago or so? They didn't mention anything about vacating their rooms, so I presume they won't be going too far on whatever job they've taken."

She and a guest were conversing at the counter. The customer was as short as Lyn, wore the same style of black magician's robes as her, and held a staff as large as the air magician's. Based on what Ryo could hear of her voice, the girl was still a minor. When she learned that the Crimson Sword wasn't in residence, her frustration was clear in her eyes.

"Do you think I might run into them at the adventurers' guild...?"

"Hm, I'd say there's a chance, yes."

Then the innkeeper noticed Ryo who had entered.

"Oh, hello, Ryo. Welcome back."

The girl spun around and stared at him. A second later, she rushed toward him and grabbed his arm.

"Big brother!"

"Big brother?!" the proprietress shrieked, stunned to hear the girl address Ryo like that.

"No, you have it wrong. I'm definitely not her big brother."

She might have thought they were long-lost siblings separated at birth, but the girl was definitely a stranger to Ryo.

"You're an adventurer, right, big brother? I *must* go to the adventurers' guild right away. Please take me there."

"Uhhh..."

Would Ryo ever find breakfast at this rate...?

Of course, he could have ignored the girl's plea and enjoyed a delicious breakfast at the Golden Wave, but Ryo was ultimately a softie. He took the girl magician back the way he'd come on the main boulevard.

"Like I said earlier, if you keep heading south on this road, you'll reach the guild..."

"I understand. It would just be terrible if I took the wrong turn somewhere and wound up lost... I only just arrived in this city, so I really don't know up from down here."

The girl's name was Natalie. She told him she had arrived last night from the royal capital as part of the research team, specifically the royal magicians. Though the rest of the members of the Bureau of Royal Magicians were staying in the Golden Wave and other nearby inns, her room was in another inn entirely.

"My magic teacher's teacher, a great teacher indeed, gave me a letter I must present directly to Abel of the Crimson Sword. That's why I need to visit the adventurers' guild..."

"I see. Sounds like you have a lot going on, hm?"

While talking, the two of them arrived at the adventurers' guild. Their timing was impeccable. Just as they arrived, Abel and the other members of his party were exiting the guild.

"Abel, this couldn't be more perfect."

"Hey, Ryo. What's the matter?"

"This young lady here has something for you. Don't worry, it's not a fan letter."

"I have no idea what a fan letter is, but I'm pretty sure you're making fun of me. Or is it just my imagination?" Abel looked at Natalie.

"U-Um, this is from Master Hilarion in the capital." With that, she gave him a wax-sealed envelope.

Abel wasn't the only one surprised to hear the name Hilarion. Lyn was too.

"Probably a good idea to read it now, huh? How about we grab some seats in the canteen? Ryo, come with us. You too, uhhh..."

"I'm Natalie."

Her name stunned Lyn even more, but no one noticed the air magician's shock.

“Right, Natalie. You join us too since I might need you to give him my reply.”

The four members of the Crimson Sword stepped into the guild’s mess hall accompanied by Ryo and Natalie. A mess hall with no food whatsoever at the moment...

After reading Hilarion’s letter, Abel scratched his head then handed the paper to Rihya.

“You said your name is Natalie,” Lyn said in the meantime. “As in Natalie Schwartzkoff?”

“I am. Why do you ask...?”

“If I remember correctly, the house of Schwartzkoff is a distinguished one that produces water magicians...” Lyn trailed off in thought.

*Water magicians... I think this is the first time I’m meeting another water magician...* Ryo thought, keeping his excitement to himself.

“I’m personally not very skilled with magic yet, but...I study diligently every day.” Natalie looked down in shame as she spoke.

Hilarion’s letter passed from Rihya to Warren and finally Lyn.

“Hm...”

Ryo couldn’t decide if Lyn said that in response to Natalie or the letter.

“Basically, the Bureau of Royal Magicians wants backup in the dungeon, huh?”

“Backup?” Ryo blurted. “But I thought dungeon diving was suspended until further notice?”

“Yeah, it is, but the leaders of the research team are probably gonna try to get it open again. I have a feeling GuilMas will end up giving in since the national government deployed the research team. When that happens, it’s only natural they’ll wanna hire experienced adventurers... Which explains this letter. They’re using their personal connections to stake a claim on our services.”

Then Abel’s expression grew even more troubled.

“Abel, does that look on your face mean a dungeon after a Great Tidal Bore is super dangerous?”

“You’re half right. Originally, dungeons were supposed to be blocked off when a Great Tidal Bore ended. The practice started a few decades ago when an A-rank party didn’t make it back from the dungeon after the Great Tidal Bore. They weren’t *just* a normal A-rank party either. Their leader was an inhumanly powerful swordsman who could have been an S rank. So the fact that they never returned was a big deal and led to creation of the practice.”

“Then that *is* super dangerous... So how am I only half right?”

“Given the disappearance of the A-rank party, to this day, nobody knows what happens in a dungeon after a Great Tidal Bore. So the other half has to do with not wanting to go inside when we don’t even know what the hell could be waiting for us in there,” Abel said with a shrug.

*Best not to go anywhere near it for a while then*, Ryo swore to himself firmly. Then he stood. “Right. I’m off to eat breakfast.”

“Hm? Why don’t you just eat here? But, wait... No one’s eating at all...”

Puzzled, Abel turned his head and surveyed the canteen. The few other people sitting in the area drank only water, creating a bizarre sight for the dining hall.

“The research team took all the food this morning.”

“Wha—”

First Abel became speechless by this news, quickly followed by Rihya, Lyn, and the ever-silent Warren. Though what surprised Ryo the most was Natalie’s shock. She rushed to explain.

“Th-The royal magicians are supposed to be paying for their own food supplies and cooks... So I’m aghast to hear something like that even occurred...” She looked apologetic despite knowing she wasn’t to blame.

“If this spreads in the guild, the research team’s gonna have a hard time hiring adventurers, considering how many of us are so irritable about things like this,” Abel noted calmly.

“Darn right. The fastest way to earn anyone’s hatred is by taking away their food,” Lyn replied with a universal truth. In any case, Ryo had already made the decision to stay far away from the dungeon for the immediate future.

“Abel, if the dungeon blockade’s going to be lifted, it means we need to cancel today’s hunt, hm?” Rihya asked.

“Yeah, I think so. Got a feeling GuilMas is gonna summon the major parties and explain everything soon enough. We should probably stay in the city where he can reach us. At the very least, he’ll ask B-rank parties to show up.”

“That means us and the White Brigade. There should also be around twenty C-rank parties currently in Lune.”

“Oh, that reminds me...” Lyn said. “Sera’s back.”

“Sera of the Wind, huh? She’s been in the capital for a while now, right?”

Ryo, who had been standing the entire time, finally made up his mind to leave the dining hall. “I’ll be heading out then.”

“Gotcha. You should be able to grab a bite at the Golden Wave.”

“Yes, that’s exactly why I went there in the first place...”

Natalie, her face flushed, bowed her head at Ryo when she realized she had stolen Ryo’s chance to eat breakfast. “Um, I’m very sorry...”

“It’s fine. You were in a rush and needed help. I’ll see you all around.”

Then he left the guild and set off on a journey to the Golden Wave, intent on satisfying his appetite for breakfast.

Natalie couldn’t stop feeling bad even after Ryo left. “Ryo went to the Golden Wave to eat breakfast...and yet he wound up bringing me all the way here...”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Cuz Ryo for sure isn’t.” Abel comforted her with a laugh.

“Oh, Natalie, I have a question for you. As a member of the Schwartzkoff family renowned for its water magicians, do you know of a specific type of water magic where the user can create an Ice Wall far from themself and high

up in the air?"

Though bewildered by Lyn's question, Natalie nevertheless answered without hesitation. "What? No, as far as I'm aware, no such magic exists."

"Hm... Just as I thought."

"Jeez, Lyn, are you still stuck on that?" Abel asked.

"Of course I am!" Lyn snapped. "There is absolutely no way a magician wouldn't be 'stuck on that' as you put it!"

"Are you saying a magic like that does in fact exist?" Natalie asked tentatively.

"Yes, but I myself haven't seen it."

"Then who has?"

"Our vaunted leader over here."

Abel raised a hand and tilted his head politely. "Vaunted leader reporting for duty."

"I...don't think it's possible, but... Abel, are you certain of what you saw?"

Abel smiled wryly in response to Natalie's tenacity. "Huh, guess you're right about magicians being curious about that kind of magic, Lyn. Even Natalie's intrigued."

"Ack! I-I'm sorry. But if it's true, then I'd definitely like to see a demonstration myself... Where exactly did you witness this kind of magic?"

"On a journey..."

"Oh... That means we can't see it anymore."

Natalie was very obviously upset. Not only by his answer but by what it implied, that it could have been a trick of his imagination since he saw the magic only on a journey...

"Not...exactly. Before I say... Natalie, I need you to promise me that you'll keep this discussion between us, okay? You can't even tell your family. I'll only keep talking if you swear to me that this secret is safe."

"Huh...? O-Of course. I won't tell anyone. You can even bind me with contract

magic!"

"Nah, we don't have to go that far." Abel contemplated for a bit before continuing. "The magician who created a wall of ice in midair and used it to crush golems was the one you just met. Ryo."

Natalie's eyes widened in astonishment and stayed that way for some time.

"Ryo's an anomaly. Rihya, Lyn, Warren, you three listen up too. Don't ever, and I mean *ever*, pit yourselves against him. Even with the four of us against him, he'd kill us in an instant. And in the worst case you *do* find yourselves fighting him, surrender. Just surrender. That way, he'll let you live. Got it? I'm being dead serious right now. This is an order from your party leader."

"Understood."

"Got it."

Warren nodded.

"Abel..." Natalie stared at Abel gravely. "Is that really how powerful Ryo is?"

"Natalie. If you ever find yourself in a pinch and you need someone to save you, but we're not around to help, I want you to rely on Ryo. He's usually either in his room, which is number 10 here in the housing annex, or in one of the libraries. If something like that happens, don't lie to him. He'll know. And once he knows, he'll probably kill you. Just tell him everything honestly and be sincere when you ask for his help. He's a good guy at heart and a bit of a softie. As long as you don't try to trick him, there's a good chance he'll help."

They received their summons from the guild master an hour after Ryo left for the Golden Wave seeking breakfast. Hugh had called for all leaders of parties D-rank and higher. It was each person's prerogative to accept or ignore his request, but no adventurers were dumb enough to ignore the guild master's invitation.

However, if the summons never reached the person in question in the first place, they wouldn't be able to answer it. One such person was Ryo, a water magician heading to the northern library via the main avenue after breakfast at the Golden Wave.

## Ryo Meets Sera

Ryo arrived at the northern library just after ten o'clock. Compared to the southern library's massive three-story-tall stone entrance, the northern library's entrance wasn't all that big. Although it was also made of stone, the entire wall was carved with bas-reliefs. The northern library possessed a certain beauty that was in contrast to the heavy stateliness of the southern library.

While the southern library always had at least three or more librarians collecting the fees at its entrance, the northern library's entrance was empty. A single slip of paper was pinned to the door. It read: *"I've stepped away for a moment. Your patience is appreciated."* Someone would be returning eventually, it seemed.

After fifteen minutes, a young man wearing a monocle returned. "Thank you for waiting," he said.

Ryo paid the fee, hung the black visitor's tag for adventurers around his neck, and walked into the great reading room. While the southern library's great reading room was a massive domed chamber, the northern library's reading room looked—at least to Ryo—more like something that could be found in Europe's old university libraries. The bookshelves were so tall they'd needed to install movable ladders so patrons could retrieve books from the higher shelves.

Ryo fell in love with the library at first sight. Though he found the overwhelming scale of the enormous southern library pleasant to experience, he much preferred the atmosphere here in the northern library. He felt at one with the sea of books surrounding him. As usual, he basked in this exceptional ambience of the great reading room upon first entering. Then...something suddenly caught his eye and he couldn't look away.

Sunlight streamed in gently through the high windows, illuminating a woman. The very air around her seemed to glow and he couldn't tear his gaze away from the sight.

Platinum blonde hair. Pale, almost translucent skin. A soft, refined face with

well-shaped lips... Slightly pointed ears that would normally be the most noticeable feature... But what captured his attention even more than those ears were her huge, striking green eyes.

A scene too far removed from reality. A vivid scroll painting.



Ryo didn't know how long he stared at her in a daze. The woman suddenly lifted her head and looked right at him. After a few moments, her eyes widened and surprised colored her face.

That was when he finally returned to his senses and realized he'd been staring at her all this time.

The woman stood up from her seat, then walked in his direction.

"Hello. You're an adventurer too, right? I'm Sera. Pleased to meet you." She thrust her hand out toward him.

"Yes, I am. My name is Ryo." He took the hand she offered and shook it.

The woman, Sera, continued watching him the whole time... Except her attention wasn't on his face but his robe. She scrutinized it intently for some time before raising her eyes to his face with a smile.

"All of the librarians here have been hauled away by the academic research team, so if you're looking for a specific book, I'd be more than happy to help you find it. I know where most of them are."

"Ahhh, so that's why no one was staffing the entrance..."

"A young man wearing a monocle appeared, right?" Sera tightened her lips and tilted her head in disappointment. "He isn't a librarian. Just a caretaker dispatched from the castle, so he doesn't know the books' locations."

*I'm not sure if I should ask her about akuma...especially because I don't know how she'll react. I'll give up on the hunt for today then.*

With that thought, Ryo ran with his hobby instead. "Um, I'm looking for texts on alchemy. Intermediate level... Actually, that might not be enough... I know I'm still nowhere near proficient enough, but eventually I'd like to bring a golem to life, so books on that sort of alchemy would be very helpful."

Startled by his announcement, her huge eyes widened even more. "Golems! What a grand ambition... Hmm, I don't believe there are any books with direct references to golem creations. But...there should be some related to the topic. Follow me."

After that, the two of them pored through every alchemical volume even

remotely related to golems for several hours. They gathered a rather large collection of books, but those few hours were incredibly blissful for Ryo.

He had loved reading back on Earth, but the only books he'd had access to during his life in the Forest of Rondo were *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition* and *The Flora Compendium, Beginner Edition*. That hadn't bothered him while he was living there, nor had it aroused a desire to seek out more books, but spending long hours in the southern library after arriving in Lune had reignited his lost obsession with the written word. So for this Ryo, who had rediscovered his hunger for knowledge, the northern library's reasonable size, vast collection of tomes, and tranquil atmosphere...all of it felt wonderful to him.

What's more, a beauty like no other was helping him now. Truly a joyous time, however brief it might be...



While Ryo was enjoying his time in the northern library, the third-floor conference room in the adventurers' guild was in chaos.

"This doesn't make sense! Why do those arrogant jerks get to push us around?!"

"How can they think we'll actually work for them after they stole our food?"

"Isn't the dungeon connected to another world after a Great Tidal Bore? I absolutely will *not* step foot inside it."

"The country's will?! To hell with that! We ain't the country's slaves!"

"They can just go in on their own. Not my problem."

"Although to be honest, I sure wouldn't mind the income..."

That last opinion was said quietly and the person trailed off before they finished because of the other adventurers' glares. The discussion went from a heated one to adventurers expressing their dissatisfaction. Most of them had found out about the research team confiscating the guild's food supplies this morning. Information like that spreads quickly, like wildfire. As a result, ninety percent of the adventurers were solidly opposed to the research team.

As the guild master who'd called this meeting to order, Hugh related deeply to the adventurers' feelings. He also understood that there was no chance of them readily and meekly agreeing when told to cooperate with the research team's dungeon expedition, not after those condescending bastards stole their food. Still, it was his duty to relay the decisions that had been made.

"I get where ya all are comin' from. Trust me, I do. Which is why helpin' the research team is just a regular commission. If ya don't like the details of the job, then ya don't need to accept it. And that's the most important condition as adventurers, right?"

Frankly, Hugh still didn't like the idea of allowing the adventurers, his comrades, back into the dungeon so soon after the Great Tidal Bore. He especially didn't like that they'd be working with the idiot scholars who were the sort to prioritize their investigation over their allies' lives and sometimes their own depending on the circumstances. He dearly wished to continue the monthlong suspension of dungeon activities.

"I know I don't have to tell ya this, but accept the job and yer on yer own inside. Don't make any promises without thinking real hard, considerin' your lives and your party's will be on the line."

Many of the adventurers nodded in understanding. Dungeon diving was always done at their own risk.

"But let me make myself clear on one thing. I don't want any of ya treatin' other 'venturers badly, callin' 'em traitors and whatnot just cuz they decide to accept the work. Ya'll answer to me if I hear any bad-mouthin'. Got it?!"

It was obvious to the ones who intended to take on the research team's commission that they'd be derided and insulted by the ones who refused, which was exactly why Hugh deliberately made this declaration.

"GuilMas, can I say something to everyone here?" another voice called.

It was Abel, his hand raised.

"Sure, go ahead, Abel."

"We of the Crimson Sword will be escorting the royal magicians in the dungeon."

As the crowd grasped the implication of Abel's words, its uproar only grew louder.

"The request came from an old friend, so refusing wasn't exactly an option, okay? Besides, the royal magicians' main focus might be investigation, but no one can deny they're the most powerful among all the different groups on the research team since they have actual combat experience in the field. So I'm almost positive we'll reach the lower layers before the others. Each time we descend, we'll relay any info up to the guild, and I hope you'll put it to good use. That's all I wanted to say."

*Nice work, Abel. That should cut down on a lot of carpin' 'venturers will get after they agree to take on the commission.*

Abel's timing in making his announcement couldn't have been better and Hugh was both impressed and relieved by it. He also understood how vital any data the Crimson Sword sent from inside the dungeon would be.

"The suspension'll be officially lifted tomorrow mornin' at seven. We'll post an update on the guild notice board, so make sure you all read it carefully. I got nothing more to say. Ya can skedaddle."

Back in the guild master's office, Hugh called for Nina, one of the guild's receptionists.

"Nina, I'm gonna explain the situation to the E-and F-ranks tomorrow. Let 'em know to be in the conference room by nine o'clock."

"Yes, sir. Does this mean you'll be giving them permission to enter the dungeon as well?"

"Nah, not a chance. I'm just gonna remind 'em that they're still forbidden from goin' in for a month."



That evening, Ryo sat on a sofa in the guild's lobby. The three other residents of Room 10 would be returning at any moment from their job in the abandoned mine in the village of Rusay, west of Lune. Half a day to get there, half a day to mine the magic copper ore, and half a day to return.

“Ryo, Nils, and the others should be coming back today, yes?” Nina the receptionist asked.

“That’s right.”

He wasn’t surprised Nina knew their return date despite the job not having been tendered through the guild’s official channels.

“Tomorrow morning at nine, the guild master is going to hold a meeting for E- and F-rank parties about the dungeon. Would you mind telling them to come to the conference room by that time?”

“Not at all. I’ll let them know.” Ryo nodded at her.

“You didn’t participate in today’s discussion, did you, Ryo?” Nina continued.

“Discussion?”

“Yes. The guild master provided a dungeon update to party leaders D-rank and above...”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know...” He felt like a scolding was coming...

“Oh, no, please don’t worry. Situations like yours occur sometimes too. Though you’re a D-rank, it hasn’t been very long since you registered as an adventurer, so I think it’s fine if you join Nils and the rest at tomorrow’s meeting.”

“Got it. I’ll attend too then.”

“Thank you.” Nina smiled then headed toward the offices behind the receptionist counter.

Not long after, the three other residents of Room 10 trudged in, completely exhausted.

“Nils, Eto, Amon, welcome back.”

Despite their obvious fatigue, they looked accomplished.

“Ryo, we did it!” Nils said. He looked like he was on the brink of collapse, but Ryo wouldn’t let that happen.

“Nils, the job isn’t over until you get back to the room.”

And with that, he led the way to Room 10.

Once they arrived, the three of them literally toppled onto their beds. Eto and Amon were in such a bad state that neither of them had been able to say a single word since their return. The first thing Ryo did was give them each fresh, clean water in cups made of ice.

He waited patiently while they drank it.

“Ahhh! That hits the spot. All right, I’ll tell you everything since Eto and Amon are too tired to even speak.” Nils reached into his bag and pulled out two fist-sized chunks of magic copper ore. “Here’s what you wanted. The magic copper ore. We got lucky and managed to dig out two huge fistfuls.”

Ryo’s eyes ping-ponged between two chunks. “Wow! This is amazing!”

“Now, about our payment... I’m thinking you won’t mind adding a little extra to the pot since we got two... Oh, I’m not trying to force you or anything since we’re roommates and fellow adventurers...”

“Of course, not a problem at all. You went above and beyond my expectations, so it’s only right that I increase the compensation accordingly. Hm, let me think... Including various expenses you might have incurred, how about nine hundred thousand florins? That means each of you gets three hundred thousand.”

“Th-Three hundred thousand... That’s thirty gold coins each...” Nils’s shock was clear in his voice.

The other two couldn’t make any sounds, surprise or otherwise, because of their exhaustion.

“It’s not enough, after all, hm? But I’m not sure I can go any higher...”

“No, your offer is totally okay with us. More than okay. Eto and Amon, you agree, right?”

Eto and Amon nodded as vigorously as their tired bodies would allow.

“Great, we have a deal then. I’ll go back to the guild and have them transfer three hundred thousand florins to each of your accounts from mine. Please let

me know when you have confirmed that the transfer has gone through. And finally, thank you again so very much. Rest up. You deserve it.”

Ryo stood up and bowed his head respectfully at the trio. In times like this, it was important to remember good manners even between friends.

“No, no, don’t even worry about it. If anything...thank *you* for giving us the chance to earn money.” Nils bowed his head politely in response too. He remained sitting on the bed, too weak to stand up...



Right around the time they finally managed to sit up in their beds, somewhat recovered from their earlier exhaustion, Ryo said, “Oh, right. I have something I need to tell you three. The suspension on dungeon exploration is being lifted tomorrow.”

“What?!”

It was shocking news. Before they left on his job, the blockade was supposed to continue for at least a month. Not even seven days had lapsed since the latest Great Tidal Bore, so for the dungeon to be open again soon was...

“But this measure is only being implemented for the academic research team dispatched from the royal capital to investigate the Great Tidal Bore,” Ryo continued. “Only they and the adventurers they hire as bodyguards will be allowed inside the dungeon. And apparently, only parties ranked D and higher.”

“An academic research team... I had no idea a group like that was even here...” Eto muttered, finally able to muster enough energy to use his voice.

“D-rank and higher means we’re out, huh?” Nils said, disappointed.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that,” Amon added in resignation.

“Which is why the D-rank and higher parties had their meeting today with the guild master, but E and F-ranks have been asked to be at the conference room by nine tomorrow for their debriefing. I’ll be joining you all since I didn’t know about today’s discussion and thus couldn’t attend,” Ryo informed them with a rueful smile.

“Wait, you weren’t at the meeting today? What the heck were you doing

then, Ryo?"

"Researching in the library." He grinned as he thought back to his time in the library.

"Well, aren't you a carefree kinda guy..."

"I suppose this is the difference between a D-rank and F-ranks..."

Both Nils and Amon sounded a bit tired.

Eto snickered watching the three of them. Business as usual in Room 10.

The next day at seven o'clock in the morning, the Crimson Sword and ten members of the Bureau of Royal Magicians' advance unit gathered in front of the dungeon's entrance. The guild's branch office by the entrance had been destroyed during the Great Tidal Bore and it currently remained in ruins. Repairs wouldn't start until after the inspectors from the royal capital finished their survey of the damage.

Normally, this wouldn't have posed an issue because the original plan had been to seal the dungeon off for a month. Now that the suspension had been lifted so the research team could proceed with their investigation, tents would be pitched to establish a temporary branch office in the meantime.

"All right, we ready to head inside?" Abel asked.

The rest of his party and the ten royal magicians nodded.

"But first, Lyn, I need you to do your Probe."

"Sir, yes, sir! *Bring to me the pulse and existence of life. Probe.*"

Last time, during the Great Tidal Bore, Abel had experienced a foreboding sensation before opening the door, which was why he'd asked Lyn to use her air magic spell, Probe. They'd learned then that the main cavern of the first layer had already been overrun with monsters. As a result, they had been able to inform the guild of the signs of the outbreak, thereby allowing the adventurers to ready the defenses in time.

He didn't feel anything off this time. Nevertheless, he wanted to be *extra* cautious. No one knew what happened in a dungeon in the aftermath of a Great

Tidal Bore.

“Not detecting anything living in the main hall of the first layer!” Lyn said.

Abel nodded. “Then let’s open the doors.”

At his signal, the guild staff lifted the blockade and opened the doors. Their group of fourteen descended the hundred steps with Abel in the lead. As Lyn had said, there was nothing in the main cavern of Layer 1.

The amount of magic her Probe spell required depended on the size of the area it was surveying. If she were to use it to search through the first five layers of the dungeon, for example, she couldn’t use it more than seven times. It wasn’t the kind of spell she could use an unlimited number of times.

“Okay, folks, we’re gonna start by investigating the first layer from top to bottom, every nook and cranny. Just like we discussed yesterday, the absolute farthest we’re going today is the third layer. So go slow and take it easy.”

The ten members of the royal magicians’ advance unit responded in unison: “Yes, sir!”



Right around the time the Crimson Sword and the royal magicians were carefully investigating the dungeon, the four members of Room 10, including Ryo, were arriving at the guild’s third-floor lecture hall. Today, on the heels of yesterday’s meeting, the guild master would be explaining the situation to E- and F-rank parties. The other difference now was instead of just party leaders like yesterday, all members of E-and F-rank parties would be participating.

As Lune’s clock tower tolled nine in the morning, the city’s guild master, Hugh, stepped into the room.

“Mornin’, folks. ’Preciate ya comin’ out today. I won’t beat ’round the bush, so let me get right into it.”

He told them that the research team had entered the dungeon to conduct its inquiry, which was being backed by the national government. That they planned on hiring adventurers to escort them. That as part of the terms for employing them officially the research team wasn’t allowed to slander the adventurers.

Etc, etc. In short, it was the same information he'd discussed with the leaders of parties D-rank and higher yesterday.

"However, to the best o' their abilities, E-and F-rank parties should avoid enterin' the dungeon as hired escorts. If ya want a reason, it's b'cause no one knows what goes down in a dungeon after a Great Tidal Bore."

Hugh paused at that point to survey the adventurers' reactions. Thankfully, none of them seemed particularly displeased.

"With Abel's Crimson Sword leading the initial foray, we're gettin' back info in minute detail from 'em. They'll be postin' it as necessary on the guild's notice board, so make sure each o' ya look read it over. Another thing. The research team can commission you lot to support them here on the surface instead of down in the dungeon as escorts. For those jobs, the guild'll act as a go-between as usual. For example, the White Brigade is workin' as guards to wagons transportin' food supplies from nearby towns. Plenty of jobs like that to go 'round, so don't any of ya worry."

*Ah ha. So that's why I didn't see the White Brigade anywhere in the city. Because they're not here.*

Phelps, the commander of the party, had left an intense impression on Ryo. But what he didn't know was that the five royal knights sharply rebuked by the man had mysteriously disappeared and inspectors were desperately searching for them. If he *did* find out...perhaps he'd think, *They were erased, hm?*

After Hugh answered a few questions from others in the lecture hall, no one else seemed to have any more, so Ryo posed one of his own.

"Master, I have a question about the Great Tidal Bore."

"Ryo, eh? Sure, what do ya wanna know?"

"The color of the magic stones of the monsters defeated in the battle. Specifically the goblin king and generals. Can you tell me if they were lighter or darker in shade?"

Most of the adventurers there cocked their heads inquisitorily upon hearing his question. Some of them exchanged glances with each other or shook their heads. They couldn't understand why he'd bring this up.

As the one asked, Hugh was the only person who didn't share in their confusion.

"Oh ho. Ain't you a sharp one, Ryo. Ya bring up a very good point. Yes, indeedy, you do. After all, if yer gonna brag 'bout bein' part of a highfalutin research team, that's the first question ya should ask, eh!" Excited, Hugh continued, "And yet not a single one o' 'em came to verify that information with me!"

At this point, he finally noticed that the other adventurers didn't understand the purpose of Ryo's question.

"Ahhh, that's right. This stuff ain't covered in the beginners' seminar. Well, then, I guess it's time you lot learned. Good thing to know as adventurers."

And with that, Hugh began his explanation.

"The color of a monster's magic stone is determined by the monster's elemental attribute. Air is green, earth is yellow, and so on. But the depth of the color, whether light or dark, is also important to note. A monster who's lived a long time and accumulated a variety of experiences has a deeply hued magic stone."

He stopped there to look at the seated adventurers and confirm their understanding of his words.

"This is related to Ryo's question just now 'bout whether the monsters defeated in the Great Tidal Bore had light or dark magic stones. If the latter, that would've meant they'd lived for a long time in the dungeon. But if the former...well, that would complicate things a lot. B'cause it'd mean they spontaneously came to life recently instead of makin' their way up from the lower layers of the dungeon. So, as for the king, generals, and mages on this p'ticular occasion, all their magic stones were *light* in color."

Hugh waited a few beats for the meaning of his words to penetrate his audience.

"In short, then, we got complications when it comes to the king and the rest o' those goblins. Did the dungeon give birth to 'em? Who's to say. At the very least though, they hadn't been alive for very long by the time they showed up."

Not a single person spoke up.

“There *is* a theory about dungeons creating monsters inside. But if it turns out to be true, the question becomes where exactly did the power come from to produce so many monsters in such a short period o’ time.”

During his time in the Forest of Rondo, Ryo had studied where the water he generated through magic came from. Back then, what came to mind was Einstein’s  $E = mc^2$ , the formula that explains how energy is derived from matter. At the same time, the formula also means that matter can be derived from energy.

So if the dungeon generates physical monsters, where does the energy that makes this possible come from? And if a Great Tidal Bore is a phenomenon that produces a colossal number of monsters, where does the vast amount of energy to make this possible come from?

*The more I think about it, the less it makes sense. Which means there’s only one solution to this kind of problem! Don’t think about it!*

When Ryo arrived at this conclusion internally, Hugh stated his own.

“Anyway, there ya have it. The answer to yer question is that the color of the goblins’ magic stones were light.”

Everyone left after the meeting ended in the lecture hall. Hugh had returned to his office, where he now sat drinking tea.

“Haaa. All that’s left is for this next month to pass without incident...”

Having given voice to the thought, he knew something would most definitely happen... He had resigned himself to the inevitability of things happening regardless of what he wanted a long time ago.

“At any rate, that Ryo sure does have a good head on his shoulders. He’s way more suited to inquiry than the folks on the research team, ’specially considerin’ not a single one o’ ‘em bothered to ask me the same question. No wonder Abel’s got his eye on him.”

Unbeknownst to Ryo, his stock was on the rise. The reason he’d even asked

Hugh about the shade of the magic stones could be attributed to his interest in the concept after hearing about it from Abel on their journey from the Forest of Rondo. Specifically about monsters who'd lived a long time and accumulated many experiences possessing deeply hued stones.

"Things would've been so much easier if those goblins' magic stones had been dark. In that case, it would've meant a good chance they'd come up from the deeper layers, maybe even from the unexplored regions below 39. Too bad for us the color was so light. Over thirty thousand monsters brought to life not too long ago... Is that even possible...? I can't think of anything else to explain it though."

Hugh shoved his fingers through his hair and made a mess of it in frustration.

"I don't know! I just don't know! It ain't part o' my job to think about that kinda thing!"

Saying those words out loud reminded him of his upcoming obligations.

"Right, I need to make a report to the margrave after this. Wonder if I should talk to Neville while I'm there. Yeah, it wouldn't hurt to have the knights ready in case we need 'em again."

Neville Black, commander of Margrave Lune's order of knights, was the man who had taken command of their combined forces on the northern rampart during the Great Tidal Bore. Even Hugh considered him an outstanding individual. An outstanding man indeed, but one who loved spirits too much. Which was why...

"Guess I need a bottle o' somethin' to take as a gift, eh? I think my prize thirty-year-old single-malt whiskey should do it. This is the best opportunity to crack it open too."

Strictly speaking, he didn't *need* to take anything with him since they were both just doing their jobs. Hugh understood that. But that was the logical half of him speaking. The other half, the emotional one, urged him to strengthen their already strong working relationship. A bottle of alcohol was a small price to pay to solidify Neville's support.

On modern-day Earth, this might be considered a bribe, but it was no problem

at all on Phi. Moreover, they lived in a remote area of the Kingdom. Instead of a bribe, it was a lubricant that made sure everything went smoothly. Little things like this could be the determining factor of a successful relationship. Hugh knew that very well.



There was something on Ryo's mind. It had to do with the Great Tidal Bore and the akuma. Two days before the outbreak spilled into the city from the dungeon, a solar eclipse occurred in Lune and Ryo fought Leonore the akuma in some sort of subspace. She had referred to it as a cloister.

It would be too much to call these two events a coincidence.

He didn't know if the akuma had actually caused the Great Tidal Bore. Maybe she had only appeared because she knew it would occur. Or perhaps the akuma had nothing to do with the incident and it was related to the solar eclipse instead.

Either way, he had no idea what the truth was. Even so, he couldn't stop obsessing over it.

*I wonder if I can research this in the library...*

These thoughts crossed his mind while he ate lunch in the guild's canteen. Of course, he wasn't alone. The three other members of Room 10 sat with him.

"Ryo, you're mulling something over, aren't you..." Amon asked.

"Maybe it's about his alchemical experiment using the magic copper ore..." Eto wondered.

Then, finally, Nils chimed in with the most disappointing remark: "Well, you better not be regretting paying us because you're sure not getting any money back, Ryo. I don't care how close we are, it ain't happening! No way, no how!"

Ryo shook his head with a wry smile. "As if I would ever say such a thing."

Nils looked comically relieved at his response. Then Ryo spotted a gold chain hanging out from the pocket of Nils's tunic.

"Nils, what's that...?" Ryo asked.

"Oh, right. Every adventurer's gotta have one, y'know." He took out a pocket watch and showed it to him.

Watches existed in this world. A huge clock was installed in the plaza's tower and the bell tolled every three hours. Many of the city's residents relied on it in their daily lives, but a surprisingly large number of adventurers possessed pocket watches. Otherwise, they would be perpetually late for interviews with clients, rendezvousing with their parties, and such. Regardless of the world or kind of work, anyone who couldn't be punctual was held in low esteem.

Clocks themselves aren't complicated at all, since they measure time by using something that moves at a constant speed, such as a water clock or an hourglass. The problem occurs when you try to make its size and mechanism portable, resulting in some troublesome parts. On Earth, the invention of the mainspring in the sixteenth century solved this problem. However, Phi has something Earth doesn't: the magic of alchemy. A mechanism that uses alchemy to mark time at regular intervals wasn't at all difficult to make.

With such technology, creating portable watches hadn't been a terribly challenging endeavor. Having said that, one pocket watch cost upward of ten thousand florins. For the average townsperson, ten thousand florins was by no means an inexpensive amount. For someone who lived an incredibly frugal lifestyle, that amount might last them half a month at least.

But if you were an adventurer like Nils who had never dreamed of striking it rich then you could buy one if you hadn't exactly earned a fortune. In all likelihood, he had bought it using part of the three hundred thousand florins he received from Ryo.

One hundred thousand florins was the cheapest price for a pocket watch. Fully mechanical pocket watches that didn't use magic or alchemy also existed. These started at millions of florins and only went up from there in price. Absolutely staggering.

Then there were the pinnacle of watches like perpetual calendars, minute repeaters, tourbillons, split-second chronographs, equation of time complications, self-winding devices, and more. These commanded prices in the hundreds of millions... All of which to say, genius watchmakers like Breguet

might also exist in this world.

“A pocket watch, hm? Now you won’t ever be late, Nils.”

“But I’ve never been late in my life...”

Just then, Nina the receptionist arrived. “I’m sorry to interrupt you while you eat, Nils, Eto.”

Nils’s energy skyrocketed the second the woman he admired spoke to him...to the point that it went beyond the stratosphere and turned him into a stiff, nervous mess. “N-Not a problem at all! H-H-H-H-How can I help you?!”

A mean-spirited thought ran through Ryo’s mind: *I’m almost positive he wasn’t this bad when I met him in our room after she gave me a tour of the dormitory... I guess his adoration for her is growing at an exponential rate.*

“Nils, Eto, you have both been promoted to E-rank adventurers due to your contributions during the Great Tidal Bore.” Nina beamed at them.

“Congratulations.”

“E-E-rank...” Nils stuttered.

“Hooray,” Eto replied unabashedly. “Thank you very much.”

“Nils, Eto, congratulations!” Amon said.

“Well done, you two!” Ryo offered.

“Therefore, please come see me at reception later to update your guild cards. At that time, you’ll also be able to register a party. Should you wish to do so, please think of a party name by then as well.”

With that, Nina returned to her post at the guild counter.

“What does she mean by ‘party name’?” Ryo asked Eto. Nils, still frozen stiff, was useless at the moment.

“Right. Starting from E-rank, you can register as a party. Up until now, the three of us were F-rank, though we weren’t officially considered a party. But you need only one E-rank adventurer to form an E-rank party. When you register it with the guild, you can register your party name too. Basically, it means you’ve graduated from being a beginner,” Eto replied with a cheerful

smile. "Hmmm, what should we choose?" he murmured, falling into a contemplative silence.

"I-I have to do my best to become an E-rank too," Amon said. Though his efforts during the Great Tidal Bore had also been acknowledged, it would be some time yet before he could move up to E-rank because not long had passed since his adventurer registration.

Ryo wasn't worried at all. *Amon's partied up with Nils and Eto. That means moving forward he can accept E-rank jobs, so he'll eventually become E-rank himself.*



In the afternoon, three of Room 10's residents trained in the guild's outdoor training grounds. Since they had spent the morning in the lecture hall, there wasn't much time left in the day to take on any commissions, so they decided to do this instead. Many other E-and F-rank adventurers had the same idea, making the space more crowded than usual.

Naturally, Ryo hadn't joined them. After he and the trio went their separate ways, he headed to the northern library. In the morning, he'd planned on using the magic copper ore they'd mined for him in an alchemical experiment, but he just couldn't stop thinking about the timing of the Great Tidal Bore, the akuma, and the solar eclipse... So he had no other choice.

A different person from yesterday manned the front desk at the northern library. He paid the two thousand-florin entry fee, hung the black visitor's pass reserved for adventurers around his neck, and entered the great reading room. When he went to the place Sera the elf had sat yesterday reading a book...he found it empty. He was a bit disappointed.

Of course, it wasn't as if he'd come specifically here to meet her. Anyone and everyone loved beautiful things and Sera had simply looked undoubtedly beautiful as she read her books.

He looked around the great reading room. He was all alone in here. That was when he finally realized something.

*There aren't any librarians around and Sera isn't here to help me research*

*either... How can I look up what I need on past records of solar eclipses and Great Tidal Bores...*

He realized he hadn't once thought about any of this. He had no idea where any of the books were. The fact that he realized *after* paying the two thousand-florin entry fee only made it worse.

As he racked his brain on how to conduct his research, a voice called out from behind him.

"Hm? Well, if it isn't Ryo. I haven't seen you since yesterday."

Finally, his saving grace had appeared. When he turned around, he saw a beautiful woman standing there, a veritable heavenly goddess. Sera, the elf adventurer.

"Sera!"

The delight in his voice when he said her name startled her.

"Wh-What's the matter? Why so excited?"

He explained his predicament. He told her how he had forgotten about the absence of librarians but still came here, about his despair at the situation.

Sera chuckled softly in amusement. After all, they were in a library, so she had to keep quiet. "A request so simple even I can fulfill it. Past records of solar eclipses and Great Tidal Bores, was it?" She emphasized the topics he was interested in, her tone curious. "Ryo, you believe there's a connection between the solar eclipse and the Great Tidal Bore, don't you?"

Her words astonished him.

*She's sharp. Too sharp.*

"If I recall correctly, there was a huge solar eclipse two days before the monster outbreak."

By "huge solar eclipse," she had most likely meant "total solar eclipse."

"Well, as it turns out, in the case of Lune's dungeon, the two events are likely related."

Sera's casual response left him speechless.

"To be precise, a solar eclipse always occurs before a Great Tidal Bore. Except unlike this latest occasion, they've generally been partial eclipses instead of total ones."

A total eclipse or annular eclipse, in which most of the sun is obscured by the moon, occurs only once every few decades at a given location on Earth. Partial eclipses, however, occur once every few years, sometimes as often as every two years. In this sense, it's not impossible for a solar eclipse and a Great Tidal Bore to happen at the same time, even if it is just a coincidence.

"But why do you think they're related...?"

"Naturally, because I looked into this very same subject before." A smile bloomed on Sera's face. A smile with the power to level entire cities.

*Wow, so pretty...*

"So," she continued, "I must admit I'm curious to learn why you focused on the connection between the two."

"Oh, um, it just seemed plausible..."

He definitely couldn't tell her about the fight with the akuma... She might know something about akuma because she was an elf, but he didn't want to tell others about his encounter just yet.

"Hmmm..."

Ryo wasn't used to being scrutinized intently by a beauty. "S-Sera, you know the reason for magic stones' shade difference, yes?" he asked, trying desperately to change the subject and get her mind off the problem that had brought him to the library in the first place.

"Well, I'll go along with that. Don't think I don't know you're trying to pull the wool over my eyes." Sera grinned at him. "Of course, I do. The longer a monster lives, the darker their magic stone."

"Then what do you think the shade was of the monsters' magic stones this time...?"

"Could it be that they were...light?"

"Correct. But how..."

Sera nodded. “But how do I know is what you want to ask, hm? Because I read records of past Great Tidal Bores. Those monsters’ magic stones were light in hue as well. Even within this library, those records aren’t kept in good condition. Not to mention they’re written on parchment, so I think most people, even the librarians, don’t know about them. Would you like to look at them too, Ryo?”

“Yes, please!”

“Let’s go then. Follow me.”

With that, Sera started walking.



On the third day after the dungeon blockade was lifted, the Crimson Sword and the royal magicians reached Layer 7. There had been no issues until this point, though even that was an understatement given they hadn’t run into a single monster thus far.

Bat-type monsters inhabited the first, wolf-type the second and third, and goblins, like the ones part of this latest Great Tidal Bore, were on the fourth and fifth. Abel and the others thought they could find clues if they explored the dungeon up to the fourth or fifth layer, but they had found nothing and no one whatsoever.

“Confound it all... I sure didn’t expect we’d find nothing even this far,” grumbled Arthur Berasus, advisor at the Bureau of Royal Magicians, as he walked next to Abel. Arthur used to be an adventurer in his youth, so it had been a matter of course for him to take the lead on this dungeon expedition.

The Bureau had a research team of one hundred people. Half were stationed up on the surface to analyze the information coming from the dungeon while the other half collected said information in the dungeon. The latter fifty had been doing just that since yesterday. However...nothing had shown itself thus far.

“There *must* be something somewhere. I know I’m not wrong, considering the light color of the magic stones,” Abel muttered quietly.

The information had reached Abel's ears yesterday. After he'd come back from the dungeon and made his report to the guild, a shadow approached him from behind.

The figure—the water magician—had whispered, “Abel, the password is ‘The color of the magic stones was light.’”

“What?”

“The password is ‘The color of the magic stones was light.’ Repeat after me, please. Come on. The color of the magic stones was light.”

Baffled, Abel repeated the words as instructed. “The color of the magic stones was light.”

“That’s right. The color of the magic stones was light.”

“The color of the magic stones was light.”

Satisfied, Ryo walked away.

So of course Abel had gone straight to Guild Master Hugh to verify the color of the magic stones harvested from the monsters defeated during the Great Tidal Bore. Then the mysterious conversation finally made sense. The monsters hadn’t come up from the lower layers of the dungeon. They had come to life only recently.

“Considering the large number of goblins, we should assume that the outbreak originated somewhere in the upper layers, down to the fifteenth layer,” Abel said.

For convenience, Layer 16 and below were known as the middle layers and contained powerful monsters incomparable to those in the upper layers. It was unlikely for goblins to break through those sections...but...even so, the mayhem of their numbers was frightening. Though they also couldn’t completely eliminate the possibility of the monsters having stormed up from below the middle layers.

“As far as I’m aware, the layers goblins inhabit until the fifteenth are the fourth, fifth, tenth, and eleventh,” Arthur replied.

“Right. We didn’t see anything on the fourth and fifth. No monsters, traps,

nothing. The only trace so far..."

"Yes, the trace of a massive concentration of magical energy a few days prior...located a bit farther down. Nothing aside from that, eh?"

"A bit farther down might mean..." Abel began. "Layer 10, where the goblins would normally be... Timing-wise, there's a chance it could be related to the Great Tidal Bore..." As he spoke, he stared at the magical equipment the research team held. If Ryo saw them, the first thing he would think of was that they looked like metal detectors.

"I'm still amazed those alchemical devices can detect traces left by magic days ago."

"Hm. Supposedly, the information they pick up is sent to the team on the surface for analysis. The creators told me they used the principle of the air magic spell Probe, but frankly, I couldn't make heads or tails of their explanation. The Royal Center for Alchemy and the University of Magic worked on it together apparently. A collaboration between two talented alchemists."

"Alchemy, huh..."

"Oh, what's this, Abel? Don't tell me you're interested in alchemy?" Arthur's surprised expression indicated he never would have expected that of Abel.

"Nah, I'm not. I'm definitely not, but my friend is, to an insane degree."

"You have a friend, Abel? Even more shocking." Arthur seemed truly stunned by this news.

"What the heck? I have friends too, you know."

"Hm... Well, maybe it was a good thing after all that you became an adventurer,": Abel murmured softly, a slight smile on his face.



On the fourth day after the dungeon blockade was lifted, the Crimson Sword and the Bureau of Royal Magicians' research team investigated Layers 8 and 9. Tomorrow, they intended to survey Layer 10, the level of the dungeon suspected to be the source of their answers. The Royal Central University's research team conducted their own research alongside Abel and the others.

Their leader and president of the university, Clive Staples, was among them as well.

“Jeez, those university guys sure move fast,” Abel said.

Each time the royal magicians’ research team arrived at a layer, they combed through every inch of it for traces of the Great Tidal Bore. While this thoroughness explained the relatively slow pace of their investigations, the speed at which the university’s research team conducted their inquiries was abnormal. It was almost as if they’d decided there was no need to investigate this layer...because they already knew there was nothing here...

“Evidently, the university team believes that the monsters in this latest outbreak came from somewhere below Layer 38,” Rihya said after Abel voiced his suspicions.

“Wait, really?”

“Yes.” Rihya grinned cheerfully. “One of my former colleagues on the research team confirmed as much when I asked.”

“Colleague...you must mean someone from your time working in the central temple in the royal capital, huh? Aren’t they gonna get in trouble for revealing classified info like that?”

“They’ll be fine even if they do. Priests are in great demand all over the world, you see.”

There was a dearth of skilled magicians. And priests, capable of using light magic, were considered absolutely essential personnel for healing, so demand for them always far exceeded their supply.

“What’s more, you must have noticed that the university team’s escorts are strangers, yes?”

“I sure did.” Abel hadn’t missed that fact either. “Those adventurers definitely aren’t from Lune.”

The Royal Central University’s research team had marched into their city with over three thousand five hundred people. Though their numbers included adventurers working as escorts and baggage carriers, they also hired

adventurers upon arrival here. But during their descent earlier to this layer, Abel and Rihya hadn't spotted a single adventurer from Lune as part of the university's group.

"It seems they brought those adventurers from the capital. The ones they hired in Lune are primarily D-ranks who have been tasked with maintaining communication with them from the surface and securing food supplies for the entire expedition team."

"Kinda feels like a waste of their talents, since adventurers from the capital aren't familiar with the dungeon. Well, I guess it's fine if Lune's adventurers can make money without being put in a dangerous situation," Abel commented with a shrug.

Depending on your perspective, you could call the commission relatively safe even if it wasn't worth doing. After all, very few adventurers would *willingly* step into the dungeon after a Great Tidal Bore event.

Arthur, the royal magicians' advisor, returned grumbling after having checked in on his subordinates. "Abel, Clive and his people have already skedaddled on out of here. At this rate, they'll get the jump on us in Layer 10. You won't let that happen, right?"

"Rihya just told me they're operating under the assumption that the monsters came from below Layer 38, so I'm pretty sure they're just gonna blaze through 10 like the others. Not sure what I can do to stop them, if I'm being honest."

"What...?" Unsurprisingly, Abel's words left Arthur stunned. But the older man was battle-hardened in many ways, so he switched gears immediately and effortlessly. "In that case, maybe I'll let Clive be our canary in the coal mine, eh?"

Arthur grinned shamelessly.



With a sidelong glance at the Crimson Sword and royal magicians still investigating the ninth layer, the president of the Royal Central University, Clive Staples, advanced to Layer 10.

"Lord Clive, this is the goblin level."

"It makes no difference. Those monsters came from much farther below, so we won't tarry here."

Clive could care less about his secretary's report.

*I must become the next chief academician by any means necessary. Solving the mystery of the Great Tidal Bore will help me achieve that goal.*

The chief academician was the head of scholarly administration in the kingdom. Like the minister of finance who managed the country's finances or the minister of military affairs who led its military, the chief academician held power over the country's various disciplines of learning. This included the ability to allot the national budget to the different fields at their discretion. It was one of the most powerful positions forming the Kingdom's political backbone.

He had laid down plenty of groundwork already. All that remained was for him to accumulate enough accomplishments with his research that no one would dare criticize him. If he could make a major presentation about his findings concerning the cause of this Great Tidal Bore, then he'd be able to win the seat as chief academician.

That was why he had deliberately traveled such a great distance from the capital to this remote region.

"But, my lord, many of our people lack the stamina, including the researchers..."

"Damn and blast... There is no reason for one to neglect their physical training simply because they're a scholar. No use complaining about what can't be changed though. We'll end here today. Tell the others we're making camp here in the tenth layer."

The university's research team planned to descend to Layer 38 in a single trip, which was why they invested a great many resources into the expedition, such as camping supplies, rations, and sentries to alternate watch duty. Because of their preparations, the dungeon exploration had begun four days after the blockade was lifted.

# The Gate

The next day, the Crimson Sword and royal magicians finally made their way into Layer 10, their target, after finishing up their exploration through the ninth the previous day.

“Looks like the university people *did* pass through here yesterday,” Arthur said as they entered the level.

“Hm. And yet we haven’t received any reports of problems. I suppose that means there’s nothing here on the tenth layer, eh?” Abel said.

“But nothing’s changed for us. We’ll keep doing what we set out to do. Starting with detecting any residual traces of magic.”

“I’m gonna walk around checking for traps.”

And with that, Arthur and Abel went their separate ways.

If you wanted to explore a deeper dungeon, you definitely needed certain types of people in your party. Namely, you needed scouts, which searched for traps. In the case of Lune’s dungeon, it was well-known that traps existed in Layers 10 and below. In short, if you planned on exploring from here on down, you needed a scout.

But the Crimson Sword didn’t have one. Abel the swordsman, Rihya the priestess, Warren the shield bearer, Lyn the magician. Only these four made up the party. However, in the past, the Crimson Sword had explored the dungeon below Layer 30.

So how had they dealt with traps on that occasion? Abel discovered them and, depending on their design, disabled them as they descended. He’d long since resigned himself to the reality of their party being one without a scout, but he was nevertheless extremely skilled at the role. Of course, he couldn’t deal with *all* the traps because he wasn’t a professional scout, so they generally avoided them when they explored the dungeon as a party. Unfortunately, he’d only taken jobs on the surface these past two years, so his ability to disable

traps had deteriorated...or so Abel himself thought.

The next question on your mind might be: “Why do traps even exist in dungeons?”

Well, the answer to this question wasn’t confirmed as a real theory, but the mainstream idea held that “the dungeon was generating traps for some reason.” Though a very small number of people had hypothesized that the dungeon monsters were creating these traps, this possibility had been recently eliminated.

Either way, a vast majority of the traps in Lune’s dungeon fell into the poison or pitfall categories.

For these reasons, a scout was indispensable for any parties who wanted to explore below Layer 10.

*I could have sworn there were traps discharging poison in the tenth layer... But I don't see a single one now.*

The Crimson Sword’s four members systematically quartered the level.

“No traps or monsters...” Lyn said, her head tilted in puzzlement.

“The university’s research team didn’t encounter any monsters here either, so perhaps the next layer will end up being our real target?”

Apparently, Rihya had gathered information again from her former colleague yesterday.

“They’re already on the eleventh then?” Abel asked.

“Yes. They were scheduled to enter it in the morning.”

The four of them continued prowling through Layer 10 while munching on the portable rations the royal magicians had prepared.

“Sure would be nice if things stayed as uneventful as they are on this level...” Abel muttered quietly.



Around the same time, roughly one thousand of the university’s research team finished their inspection of Layer 11 and arrived at the stairs leading down

to 12. They were led by Clive, the president of the university, who believed the cause of the latest Great Tidal Bore to be monsters inhabiting levels below the thirty-eighth. They had only conducted a cursory search of the eleventh layer, so their trek to the twelfth had been rushed.

But in front of these steps, they discovered something they most certainly couldn't ignore.

"You're certain this connects to a separate space?" Clive asked.

"Yes, without a doubt. However, we won't be able to determine where exactly unless we take a closer look..." replied a researcher from the university's faculty of magic.

"Understood. There's a high chance this is related to the Great Tidal Bore event. For convenience, we shall call it 'The Gate.' Install the necessary apparatus and conduct a thorough investigation of this Gate."

Obeying his instruction, his people unloaded the equipment they'd brought in here and went about setting it up. The thing Clive deemed The Gate was...a black entrance in the dungeon wall. It measured roughly five meters in height and four in width. The color could aptly be called "jet black" since it was impossible to get a glimpse of anything inside. Researchers from the faculty of magic used a number of magical and alchemical devices to study the hole. Their results confirmed it did in fact connect to a different area.

At the very least, no historical records existed in the Central Provinces of anything like it. In which case, this "Gate" was quite likely related to the Great Tidal Bore. Clive was by no means incompetent just because he and his team hadn't anticipated its existence as part of their predictions. The eleventh layer of the dungeon clearly had some sort of influence on the outbreak. And The Gate lay at the heart of it. He was more than willing to accept the truths facing him.

*I didn't expect this, but rushing ahead was well worth the effort. It will be tremendously advantageous for us to take the lead from the other research teams in inspecting it.*

While Clive relished the satisfaction of their discovery ahead of the other organizations, behind him, the work continued as people brought in more

machinery and the inflow of researchers persisted.

Then, amid all this hustle and bustle, catastrophe suddenly befell them—for a ridiculous reason, no less.

University president Clive caught the whole sequence of events from the corner of his eye. Two people, beset by total exhaustion, were struggling to carry a particularly heavy piece of machinery when one of them lost their footing. Stumbling, they tried to avoid falling by slapping a hand on part of the wall...which just so happened to be The Gate...

Putting it into words makes it sound simple enough. Unfortunately, the reality wasn't so simple...because what happened next was intense. In an instant, Clive and every single member of the Royal Central University's research team vanished. Everyone in Layer 11 disappeared on the spot.

The exact same thing happened to the people in the tenth at that moment, including The Crimson Sword and the Bureau of Royal Magicians' research team.



The academic research team sent to investigate the Great Tidal Bore consisted of people from three organizations: the group led by Clive Staples, president of the Royal Central University; the group led by Arthur Berasus, advisor at the Bureau of Royal Magicians; and the group led by Christopher Blatt, head professor of the College of Magic.

Unlike the former two teams, the College's took their time. Not a single one of its members had even entered the dungeon yet. But Professor Blatt had already gathered a great deal of information on the outbreak because of the spies he'd planted in the expedition teams of both the Central University and the Bureau.

Out of all the teams deployed on this investigation, President Staples of the Royal Central University had demonstrated the most determination, of course owing to his desire to claim the seat of chief academician in the Kingdom. The College of Magic and Bureau of Royal Magicians were well aware of his ambition. Frankly, it didn't pose a problem at all.

If Clive wanted to become the chief academician, he was free to take up the position. However, his appearance as the head of the Central University's research team meant the other two organizations needed to dispatch their own high-ranking officials to lead their teams. Therein lay the headache-inducing rub.

Sending out powerless people to lead their teams...would have inevitably led to Clive pushing them around as he pleased. It had been all too easy for the leaders of the College and Bureau to envision such a future. Using their members for his own ends would have been one thing, but it would have been unthinkable if they had lost their human resources because he'd forced them on the firing line against monsters. The possibility of such an outcome had been high considering the fact that the personnel of both the College of Magic and Bureau of Royal Magicians possessed a wealth of combat experience, much more than those working for the Central University...

After racking their brains, the two organizations each arrived at their own solutions.

The Bureau decided Advisor Berasus, well-known for his accomplishments and experience as a magician, would head their team. Regardless of Clive's forceful personality, Arthur wouldn't be so easily manipulated by him. This was a testament to his status as a pillar of the country.

Then there was the College. Its top brass chose an individual whose scheming —...er, broad-minded nature—was equal to Clive's: Head Professor Christopher Blatt, who was essentially next in line to become the school's dean.

Given the intent with which the professor was sent, the highest priority was not to lose their manpower. It would be splendid if they were lucky enough to obtain some measure of findings from their research into the Great Tidal Bore. In Christopher's mind, it was as simple as that.

Even the unsavory method he'd employed to collect information from the other two organizations that went ahead of theirs was justified...because it would cause the least loss of human life. He'd dangled various tempting offers, such as a transfer to the College of Magic with the promise of their own laboratory, to the other organizations' young researchers. They had practically

salivated at his proposition.

Of course, he had no intention of reneging on his promises. Christopher intended to recruit them properly and had already laid the groundwork. While he wasn't particularly swayed by lip service, he was a man who took things in stride and kept his promises.

Additionally, though he showed no mercy to his adversaries in the University's internal power struggles, he never demanded anything in return from the researchers genuinely dedicated to their work. He also distributed research funds based on content and performance, which made him very popular among those same researchers.

All of which to say, there was a reason Christopher was considered a sure thing to be the next dean without having to push himself too hard. Under the leadership of such a man, the College of Magic's research team finally took their first steps into the dungeon. Naturally, the timing of their foray directly related to the information they received about the Central University team's discovery of The Gate.

*I'll let Central University handle the actual investigation while we remain close at hand. It would cause too much trouble if folks started whispering about how the College of Magic knew the details of the search despite remaining up on the surface the whole time.*

Professor Blatt smiled thinly. His smile was so slight nobody would have even noticed it was there.

The College's research team numbered over a thousand, but only around fifty people working directly at the institution would be diving into the dungeon. They would be accompanied by roughly one hundred C-rank adventurers, which was almost the entirety of Lune's population of C-rank adventurers. This also explained why the Central University's team had only been able to hire D-rank adventurers...

Christopher was well aware of how these D-rank adventurers were being utilized too. The Central University's people had stationed them along each layer of the dungeon from the entrance to the eleventh to secure a safe transport route for materials. In short, the researcher teams could traverse the

dungeon from the entrance to Layer 11 without any risk—and without any effort on the part of the College of Magic.

“Shall we head in?”

Just as the College’s research team was about to enter the dungeon with Professor Christopher in the lead, something happened. The D-rank adventurers in front of them disappeared instantly.

“What...?”

“Th-They vanished, Sir...”

“What happened?”

Everyone near the dungeon disappeared, including both those who had already taken a few steps down the stairs and those who were simply near the entrance. All gone in the blink of an eye...

“Everyone, fall back. Get away from the dungeon.”

Christopher wasn’t a large man by any stretch of the imagination yet his team obeyed immediately when he gave the order. And though they were by no means swift, they backed away from the dungeon.

*What in blazes...is this...?*

He exhaled then looked up at the sky.

“Well, this investigation has taken a worrying turn...”

Nobody heard his quiet murmur.



Large pavilions were set up outside the dungeon entrance in the area enclosed by the double defensive wall. One of these tents acted as a substitute for the guild’s branch office that had been destroyed during the Great Tidal Bore. The Bureau’s analytical team used a tent even bigger than that one. Inside it was a magical device that gathered and analyzed information relayed by another magical machine that detected residual magical energy.

Many researchers crowded around it now.

Natalie, the water magician who’d delivered Hilarion’s letter to Abel, was one

of them. Although she had been added to the Bureau's roster on this expedition, she had been relegated to assist with analysis due to being a minor... Most of her work involved transcribing data dictated by her superiors.

On this day, the incident occurred while she was performing such duties.

“Huh?”

The voice wasn't loud at all, but Natalie heard it because she was listening to the reading.

“The detector disappeared...”

In this pavilion, the detector referred to the machine that picked up residual magical energy used by the members of their team who went down into the dungeon. It was connected to the analyzer here through Probe, the air magic spell, and constantly sent them information. Except that detector had vanished?

“Oh, it's responding again. From...Layer 40? What? Why would it be there... Damn, the signal disappeared again.”

At that moment, they heard a distinct voice speak very clearly outside the tent.

“Hurry, inform the guild.”

It was Christopher, the head professor at the College of Magic—but he should have been exploring the dungeon at that moment...

While barking out orders, the owner of the voice drew closer to the tent hosting Natalie. Then he opened the entrance flap and walked inside.

“I'm the College of Magic's Christopher Blatt. Who's in charge here?”

Roche, who'd been looking for the detector's signal up until a moment ago, raised his hand. “I am, Sir.”

“Right then. As the leader of this research team as well as one of the men entrusted with full authority over this entire expedition by His Majesty himself, I want answers. Did anything abnormal happen in the dungeon just now?”

“W-Well, about that...”

This proved to be, as expected, an exceedingly difficult question to answer. While it was true that they had been dispatched as one academic research team, everyone's research was divided based on their respective organizations. Though Christopher was a leader of the group as a whole, Roche hesitated to respond to his command...

"I understand you're in a difficult position. Allow me to present to you the information in my grasp. Moments ago, people inside the dungeon disappeared."

"What?!" Roche's eyes widened in astonishment. The detector he'd been monitoring had also vanished. Rather than assume that only the detector disappeared, it was more natural to assume that something happened to the people using it.

"Your expression tells me you confirmed the disappearance of something too. Am I right?"

"Y-Yes, Sir, you are..."

Since the situation had reached the point of no return, it would help no one to hide information. Roche also suspected something unexpected happened inside the dungeon.

"The royal magicians were on the tenth layer, yes?" Christopher already knew the answer to his own question. He simply wanted it verified. He was aware of their location—and the Central University's team on the eleventh—through his spy network.

"The College of Magic was also involved in the development of the detector the royal magicians are using. So it goes without saying I understand how it works."

A powerful pressure emanated from Christopher that told Roche there was no need to conceal anything and to answer honestly.

"It should be transmitting information continuously through the use of air magic. That includes location data as well. Was there no response after it disappeared?"

"There was, only for a moment..." Roche said. "But it disappeared almost

immediately and we haven't been able to reestablish the link since."

"For a moment? Where was it then?"

"The reading indicated Layer 40..."

"Layer 40..."

Even Christopher was stunned by the news. The deepest level adventurers had reached in the past was 38. Of course, that didn't mean it was completely impossible to venture into 39 and beyond. Not impossible at all, but...even B-rank parties had an incredibly hard time with anything below layer 30.

And Professor Blatt had one hundred C-rank adventurers currently at his disposal... It stood to reason then that the royal magicians vanishing meant the same fate for the B-rank party, Crimson Sword, that accompanied them. In that case, these one hundred C-ranks constituted Lune's most powerful combat assets at present. However, even then it was uncertain whether it would be possible to reach Layer 40 with their assistance...

"I already sent a messenger to the adventurers' guild. The guild master should be arriving soon and when he does, I want you to tell him what you just told me."

"Yes, Sir. Understood," Roche replied weakly.

Not knowing what to do next, everyone there, including Christopher...was struck with despair.

Actually, no. One person reacted, head lifting in determination. Natalie Schwartzkoff exited the giant tent and ran south down the main boulevard.



The door opened violently without a single knock of warning.

"Master, there's a problem!" Nina the receptionist said as she rushed into the guild master's office. The only time guild staff, including her, entered without knocking was for truly urgent, dangerous situations.

Both Hugh and whoever was reporting to him knew this, which is exactly why it was important to remain calm in such situations. "Tell me," Hugh replied, his voice deliberately calm and measured.

She took a deep breath, then informed him.

“Some sort of issue occurred in the dungeon and members of the research team vanished. The College of Magic’s head professor, Christopher Blatt, requested your presence immediately at the dungeon entrance.”

“Did I hear ya right? They vanished...?” For just a moment, the unimaginable news left Hugh dumbstruck. “I’m leavin’ right now. Have the liaison officer head to the branch, but tell the rest o’ the staff to wait here on standby. Don’t breathe a word o’ this to the adventurers still in the guild. If they say sumthin’ to ya, just tell ‘em I’ll explain everything later.”

With those instructions, Hugh swept his cloak around his shoulders and exited the office.

*Vanished? What in bleedin’ hell happened...? Nah, that ain’t important right now b’cause Abel and the rest’re...s’posed to be...down there... Argh, son of a bitch! First, the sea almost takes him and now he’s disappeared in the dungeon... God, I hope we can find ‘em right away... I sure as hell don’t wanna make a second report ‘bout him vanishing...*

Mounted on one of the guild’s horses, Hugh raced toward the dungeon, his mind scattered in a thousand directions.

His thoughts were still in disarray by the time he arrived at the branch office’s temporary pavilion near the dungeon entrance. Nevertheless, as a seasoned veteran of many a battle, the guild master had a trick to force himself to calm down. Hugh inhaled deeply, released the breath, then stepped inside the tent.

Inside, he found Professor Christopher Blatt from the College of Magic, the assistant research director of the Bureau of Royal Magicians, and some professor with a title he couldn’t remember from the Central University. They were the highest-ranking members of each organization’s research team who could be contacted right now.

“Professor Blatt, tell me everything ya know,” Hugh urged.

Christopher obliged with a concise explanation. Everyone inside the dungeon disappeared at the same time, he said. He watched a few of them vanish before

his own eyes. President Clive Staples and one thousand members of the Central University's research team had been on Layer 11. Meanwhile, Advisor Arthur Berasus, the Crimson Sword, and about fifty members of the Bureau's research team had been exploring Layer 10.

Additionally, the adventurers hired in Lune stationed from the entrance to the eleventh layer to secure a supply route were also believed to have vanished. However, exactly what happened to them and the people in Layer 11 remained unknown. The disappearance of the royal magicians' team in the tenth layer had been confirmed based on the response from the magic device they'd been using. For only a moment, a signal had been verified from that device from the fortieth layer.

"Layer 40... Are ya pullin' my leg, man?"

Even Hugh was stunned by this information. He too understood that the hundred C-rank adventurers left behind here essentially comprised Lune's full strength now. Under normal circumstances, their combined abilities wouldn't be enough to reach Layer 40, but there was nothing normal about this.

"I was told none of the teams encountered a single monster from Layer 1 to 11. Is that true?"

He sure hoped it was. Because if there were no monsters on Layers 12 and below due to the Great Tidal Bore's effect, then...it definitely *wasn't* impossible to get to Layer 40. The adventurers' guild didn't have any maps of Layers 30 and below, so it would take time to discover the stairs leading farther down. He figured throwing as many people as possible at the problem would solve it.

"It is," Christopher replied. "Which means there's a very good chance no monsters lurk in Layers 12 and beyond."

Yes, a *chance*. A chance they weren't there. But also a chance they *were* there.

"Except the issue is we have absolutely no idea what caused the disappearance. Not to mention that it could happen again, and more than likely *will*. We also don't know if they're still alive wherever they landed. So I apologize, but I simply can't lead my people into such an uncertain situation," Christopher continued decisively.

Hugh had anticipated him saying as much. Because if he'd been in the other man's position, he would have made the same decision.

"Aye, understood. I ain't got the power to command ya and yer people. Which is why I want ya to cancel yer contracts with Lune's C-rank adventurers."

"Hm, we don't have any other choice here, do we? Consider it done and with no hard feelings from the College of Magic."

"Preciate it." Hugh bowed his head in gratitude.

# Beyond the Gate

Abel didn't know what had happened. One moment, he felt his body floating. The next, he was landing on the ground, his surroundings completely different from what they had been. He found himself in a meadow that stretched for ages in every direction...

He looked to his left and right and was a bit relieved to see Rihya, Lyn, and Warren. Not too far away, he spotted Arthur and the rest of the Bureau's research team.

"Rihya, Lyn, Warren, are you all okay?"

"Yes."

"Yup."

Warren nodded.

"Arthur, what about you?" Abel called out to the Bureau's advisor.

"I'm fine. Looks like the rest of my team was transferred too, eh?" Arthur replied while surveying their surroundings.

"What do you mean by 'transferred'?"

"A long time, I experienced the same exact thing in a dungeon in the Western Provinces. I can't rightly tell if we're on another layer of the dungeon or somewhere else entirely. But...I do believe we were forcefully moved." Arthur explained as he approached Abel and his party.

The members of the Bureau's research team picked themselves up and followed naturally after him. Several of them held residual magic detectors.

"Are the detectors working normally?"

"Yes, they are, Sir. I think they're transmitting this location's data to the analysis team on the surface..."

"Which means help might come for us, right?!" Lyn said happily.

“I wonder...” Arthur’s expression was doubtful.

“Something’s clearly bugging you, Arthur, huh?”

“Yes. This space. Rihya, don’t you think it resembles something?”

Rihya the priestess contemplated the advisor’s question while gazing up at the sky. After a short time mulling it over, the answer came to her.

“It feels like a Sanctuary Square...”

Only high-ranking priests and priestesses could use Sanctuary Squares. They were a type of Absolute Defense Magic said to be divine miracles. A Sanctuary Square’s ability to repel all kinds of magical and physical attacks made the moniker of “divine miracle” a fitting one.

However, the fact that this situation resembled a Sanctuary Square meant...

“Basically, you’re saying we’re trapped inside some kind of barrier?” Abel asked.

“The likelihood is high, yes,” Rihya responded. “Although, it’s so massive there’s no telling where the boundary is.”

At the very least then, they were imprisoned in a potentially dangerous location. Even Abel understood that much. For now, they needed to investigate their current circumstances.

“Lyn, do you mind using Probe to see if there’s anything around us?”

“Yooou got it! *Bring to me the pulse and existence of life. Probe.*”

Her spell spread throughout the air and returned information to her.

“A large number of life-forms detected in an area roughly five hundred meters over there. I’d say around a thousand people? Aside from them, there are also fifty additional life-forms I’ve never encountered before now.”

“A thousand people...” Abel muttered.

“Well, the most likely answer is that Clive and his people were dumped in here with us,” Arthur said.

“Seems we were dragged along with the canaries. Neither of us had the time to escape, eh? What a right pain in the arse... At any rate, our only option is to

head in that direction..."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right."

Then the Crimson Sword and Bureau of Royal Magician's research team started walking toward the suspected location of the Central University's team.

Abel and the others found the University's research team when they arrived at the designated spot. They didn't have the time to check on their surroundings, however, because dozens of bursts of fire magic abruptly flew toward the University's group, who looked bewildered.

"Gaaaaahhh!!!"

"It burns, it burns, it burns!"

All hell broke loose. There were few situations in which the phrase applied and this was definitely one of them.

When all was said and done, they were researchers. Moreover, not everyone had a connection to magic. If anything, the majority of them couldn't use magic. It was the norm for researchers excelling in magic to work for the College of Magic instead of the Royal Central University.

This, combined with the fact that almost none of them had experience on a battlefield, meant it was only natural that people like them were unable to handle a sudden attack.

The ones who responded were the adventurers.

"Magicians, set up the Magical Barriers!"

A Magical Barrier was one type of non-elemental magic capable of rejecting many offensive magics. It was an incredibly powerful defensive magic that even novice magicians could use. You could even say it was one of the first spells learned by magicians who went on adventures or into battle.

However, it was by no means durable. For this reason, more advanced magicians often used a method called counter-annihilation, in which they blasted their own offensive magic against their opponent's to obliterate their safeguards. Unfortunately, in a situation like this where so many

noncombatants had to be protected...they had no choice except to use the Magical Barrier spell.

"Shit! What the hell *are* those things?"

"I don't know. I've never seen monsters like those until now... And they *must* be monsters, with those tails and all."

The bipedal creatures measured two meters tall and stood upright. Some wore what appeared to be armor while others were clad in robes. From a distance, they could be easily mistaken for humans were it not for one major thing differentiating them from humans: their large, reptilian tails. A closer inspection revealed faces somewhere between a human's and a lizard's... Perhaps the term grotesque described them well.

Upon hearing the question from one adventurer, the other couldn't provide a clear answer either.

But then President Clive Staples, standing there motionless, eyes wide open, whispered:

"That's a...devil..."

Though he spoke incredibly softly, a nearby adventurer nevertheless heard him. It was a C-rank adventurer, leader of the group hired by Clive in the royal capital.

"Clive, did you just say 'devil'?"

"Y-Yes, I did... I've only read about them in reference literature, but those characteristics match exactly..." Clive said, unable to tear his gaze away from the devils.

"God damn it... There's fifty of them. This has to be a joke."

The leader too had heard various legends about devils. He'd heard that they were antagonists of gods and angels, that magic wasn't effective against them, that humans could never hope to defeat them, that all you would find upon meeting one was...despair.

The adventurers employed by the University's research team fought bravely. While protecting the researchers with Magical Barriers, they timed their

counteroffensive with offensive magic. But just as the legends stated, the devils repelled all their magic attacks.

At that point, only one viable option remained: close-quarter combat. However, since the devils refused to draw near, the adventurers had no choice but to take the fight to them. A hundred meters separated them. It would take more than ten seconds to close the distance. During that time, they needed to get close enough to avoid being hit by the devils' magics.

Did they dodge their magics, block it with their own, or repel it with shields? Each party had the know-how to evade offensive magic and move into melee range through experience. There were monsters that mainly used long-range attack magic, and in some cases, there were commissions to hunt them.

"Let's get a move on, boys!"

"Aye!"

Then the adventurers charged. The magicians protected the noncombatants with Magical Barriers. The priests healed the wounded. The vanguard staked everything they had on their close-range assault.

A distance of one hundred meters, a time span of ten seconds. At most, they could dodge two or three attacks before they made it within arms reach of the devils. As expected, the huge number of adventurers comprising the vanguard succeeded in getting their opponents to engage in melee combat. They succeeded, but...

"Die! Die! Ngh!"

But...the devils were well-versed in melee combat too. They hacked the adventurers' bodies and weapons to pieces. They sent the self-professed power shield bearers flying, shields and all. They slipped through lightning-fast spears and plunged their blades into their wielders.

Amid all this, the devils' rearguard continued their merciless hail of attack spells against the research team. After countless attempts at rebuilding the Magical Barriers, the magicians collapsed to the ground, their stores of magical energy spent.

They were overwhelmed magically and their melee strategy wasn't working.

The situation steadily deteriorated. By this time, the members of the research team capable of using magic, including Clive, erected additional Magical Barriers. But...it was only a matter of time before their front collapsed.



That was the moment when the Crimson Sword and Bureau's research team arrived. The University's team was on the brink of being crushed, their vanguard crumbling and their rearguard depleted of magic. They were now finally close enough to make a visual confirmation of the enemy, which turned out to be...

"It can't be... Devils...?" Rihya the priestess murmured involuntarily.

"Devils indeed. What a rare sight... Looks like the other research team is just about finished. Clive's the only one left to support the remaining Magical Barrier," Arthur said, watching the leader of the University's research team single-handedly keep the safeguard up. Though he could use magic, he was originally a noncombatant and a scholar to his bones to boot. His current efforts, however, clearly proved why he was the school's president.

"We attack from the flank. Prepare to launch the trio cluster attack."

All the members of the Bureau's research team obeyed Arthur's order and started chanting the spell for the specialized long-range attack.

"Fire!"

Their javelin-style magical attack, with its high penetrative power, pierced through the group of devils who continued to assault the Magical Barrier erected by Clive. The single volley incapacitated over ten of the devils, making them useless in combat.

Rihya, who had learned about devils during her education at the central temple, stared in amazement at the unbelievable spectacle unfolding before her eyes. "Incredible... I thought magic wasn't effective against devils..."

"That's not *quite* accurate," Arthur said, a slight smile on his face. "If a trio of magicians focuses on one devil, they can smash through their barrier. However, this method of attack won't work on defensive membranes made of air, like the ones wyverns cloak themselves in."

As commander of his troops, Arthur calmly strategized in his mind even as he smiled on the surface.

*We can take them down. We can do it, but...their numbers are too many. The javelin-style attack consumes a ludicrous amount of magic, so at most, we can fire four rounds...which won't be enough to take them all down. Ultimately then, that means a fight at close quarters, eh?*

After that, the Bureau's research team continued to utilize their trio cluster attacks while closing the gap a little bit at a time. Four volleys resulted in over thirty devils defeated. However, aside from Arthur, all the people under his command were unconscious due to the depletion of their magical energies. The same went for the University's research team. With his own magic draining, Clive too was on the verge of collapsing.

Arthur, who only had a sliver of magic left, and the four members of the Crimson Sword were the only ones remaining that could still fight. Conversely, the devils had roughly twenty individuals left on their side. To make matters worse, at the rear of their pack was a devil possessed of a much larger physique that radiated a presence incomparably more powerful than the rest.

"Well, that thing sure looks dangerous, huh? All right, all we have to do now is chip away at their numbers in close combat. Warren, we're charging in with a single file rush attack."

At Abel's instruction, Warren braced his giant shield in front of him and started running. Hidden behind his body and shield, Abel, Lyn, and Rihya followed in a single line. From the devils' vantage point, all they would see was a massive shield bearing down on them.

Because of his huge build and equally large shield, Warren's opponents always underestimated his movements as slow and dull. Nothing was further from the truth. His top speed rivaled Abel's and he boasted a practically inexhaustible supply of stamina. Even his physical strength surpassed an enormous ogre's. Although he was an adventurer, he was also known as the Kingdom's number one shield-user, and he hadn't earned the acclaim lightly.

Naturally, he controlled the speed of his single file rush attack to account for

not only Abel but also Lyn and Rihya. Even then, it took less than twenty seconds to close the distance of one hundred meters. Warren's shield repelled every attack aimed at the party during that time.

When he reached the devils, he used the momentum of his charge to blast through their vanguard. Abel sprung out from behind him and rushed into the opening created by their party's shield. Lyn and Rihya followed quickly after him and hit their targets with close-range spells in what could be called an impromptu duo cluster attack. Warren once more stepped into the gap, blew the devils away with his shield, secured a bridgehead, and proceeded to widen it.

With Warren at the center, Abel to the right, and Lyn and Rihya to the left, the Crimson Sword plowed through the enemy. To avoid being taken by surprise from the rear, they advanced in a fan shape from the point they broke through the line.

Among them, Abel was the fastest at exterminating the devils. He let their swords glance off his and cut their heads off when they lost their balance. But a few of his opponents posed a challenge because of their abnormal proficiency at swordsmanship. Out of all the monsters he'd fought until now, they were the most dangerous by far.

After the Crimson Sword launched their attack, the devils' rearguard switched their targets from Clive to them and Arthur. The more they broke their line, the more focused their magical attacks became. As tough as he was, even Abel felt the weight of exhaustion pressing down on him as he fought at close range while simultaneously evading their spells. It was worse for Lyn the magician and Rihya the priestess, who couldn't maintain the Magical Barrier and use offensive magic at the same time.

Perhaps a certain water magician might be capable of the feat, but... No, wait, said water magician had never actually used the Magical Barrier spell... Moreover, no technique had yet been established in the Central Provinces to allow a person to activate multiple types of magic concurrently.

This meant the only way to fight was to switch between short bursts of defense and offense. And on this occasion, the two women were forced into an

impromptu duo cluster attack style. Normally, this would have gone wrong immediately, but both Lyn and Rihya had been trained through countless battles in the past.

Because the B-rank party's name, Crimson Sword, wasn't just for show.

The second they launched their single file rush attack and engaged in melee combat, the four of them laid twelve devils to rest. The party, however, was at its limit. The moment Lyn released her Air Javelin in tandem with Rihya's Light Javelin, the younger woman collapsed, her magic completely depleted. This marked the start of their downfall.

"Lyn!" Abel shouted when he saw the sight from the edge of his vision.

"Lyn has run out of magic. Warren, cover us!" Rihya exclaimed and pulled Lyn's body to retreat.

Effectively using his own body as a shield, Warren planted himself in front of them to prevent the enemy from giving chase. The Crimson Sword had used up their supply of magic potions by the time Lyn depleted her own store of magical energy. Rihya's magic was almost nil at this point too. She barely had enough left to erect one more Magical Barrier.

Six devils remained, one of which seemed to be the boss. Though it stood upright on two legs and possessed a reptilian tail like the others, it was a head taller than its brethren. And that head sported two horns. Not to mention the intellectual aura it gave off, despite being a monster... Almost like it was saying it could handle them without much effort.

Unfortunately, besides the boss, three of the others felt completely different to Abel from the ones he'd defeated so far.

"The boss and those three plus two small fries, huh..."

"Abel... That boss might be a demon prince..." Rihya whispered from behind Warren's shield.

A pause, and then, "What?"

*Rihya what the heck are you talking about, that's impossible, devils are bad*

*enough, but a demon prince, seriously what the heck are you talking about Rihya, aha ha ha ha ha ha.*

Losing his grip on reality, Abel suddenly wanted to blurt those words out. But he understood she wasn't joking.

"The left and right eyes are different colors...which is a trait unique to a demon prince."

Upon closer inspection, he discovered she was right. The right eye was red, and the left was gold.

"Let me see if I remember this right... A demon prince is the state before awakening to demon king?"

"Correct. As you said, Abel, a demon prince has the potential to awaken as a demon king. Only four exist simultaneously and only one of them will become the demon king. So I was taught in the temple."

"I've heard something like that before. They're...strong, right?"

"I believe no records exist of anyone other than heroes defeating demon princes..." Rihya said, a fine tremor slipping into her voice.

The current hero supposedly lived in the Western Provinces, but...the Central Provinces hadn't been made privy to the particulars. Only one hero existed in each generation.

"For now, I'll take out the ones who aren't the demon prince. Don't worry"—Abel paused—"is what I'd like to tell you, but I know you will anyway. But who knows? Something unexpected could happen. For example, this barrierlike space could be torn apart. So don't give up hope yet."

"Abel..." Rihya said, her voice pleading, but Abel simply grinned in response, then once more faced the devils.

Two regular devils, three strong ones, and a possible demon prince. Abel wasn't under the impression he could beat the strong ones even if he fought them one-on-one. That was even truer of the demon prince...whose depths of power he couldn't fathom at all.

What a hopeless situation...

*Wait, no. This might actually be better than the time the gryphon stood in front of us...*

The monster that had suddenly descended in front of him and Ryo on the journey back from the Forest of Rondo... Abel decided he did in fact find this situation more preferable than that. When he did, he felt the unnecessary tension leave his body.

“I’ll start with the two weaklings first...”

He charged explosively at the two regular devils. The one he targeted swung its sword sideways at him. He bent forward to dodge the slash then used that momentum to bring himself within arm’s reach so he could stab its hearts from below. He felt the magic stones shattering. From his earlier battles against them, he learned that their magic stones rested near their hearts and, like any other monster, they died when their magic stones were destroyed.

Abel pulled his sword out of the defeated devil, then used the energy of the movement to spin around and decapitate the second one. Experience had taught Abel that he had to either destroy the devil’s magic stone or decapitate it to take it down in one blow.

Now he could finally face his final challenger. Except something unexpected happened. The demon prince raised his hand and fired his magic at Warren’s shield. Warren went flying backward, shield and all, along with Rihya and Lyn who he’d been protecting behind him.

A scream tore out of Abel: “Rhiya!”

“We’re fine! All three of us are fine!” she shouted back at him.

Why did the demon prince do such a thing? He found his answer right away. The demon prince subdued his three bodyguards and stepped forward with sword in hand. It seemed he wanted to duel Abel in single combat.

“So you blasted them away to secure the arena for us, huh? Man, devils sure are reckless.”

He didn’t think the demon prince could understand him, but Abel said the words nonetheless.

The demon prince seemed to smirk the slightest bit.

Well, there was no way such an inferior creature would think of engaging in single combat, so...perhaps this was its way of showing respect to a strong opponent? Or maybe it was simply amusing itself out of boredom? Abel didn't know.

Nevertheless...

*Damn, I'm lucky. To suddenly be able to fight the demon prince, who I couldn't have even reached at all without taking down the three underlings first. Though whether or not I can win is another problem entirely...*

Ever alert, Abel gripped his sword firmly, hands steady. The demon prince hadn't yet raised his sword, its blade still hanging from his right hand, but Abel knew his opponent hadn't dropped his guard. It was a thin blade, different from the other devils' swords. Not at all huge. The blade measured a meter long and taking into account a devil's physical strength, he could easily imagine the demon prince swinging it with incredible speed.

The demon prince was the one who broke the oppressive silence. He closed the distance between them in an instant and slashed up at Abel from the lower right.

*So fast!*

Since the speed was faster than expected, Abel realized he couldn't dodge the sword, so he blocked it with his own from above. Technically, he *tried* to block it but found himself blown back instead.

*Inhuman speed coupled with inhuman power. This is bad.*

The moment he realized he couldn't fully block the sword, he had willfully jumped backward himself, which meant he wasn't hurt at all. No injuries whatsoever, but...he also couldn't picture himself winning.

This time, his opponent raised his sword overhead.

*Oh, damn. Oh, no. This isn't looking good for me. I managed to avoid the shock of the first attack by jumping backward because he swung up from the bottom. But there's no way I can do that if he swings at me from above.*

An enemy capable of plunging his opponent into despair simply by raising his sword... Under normal circumstances, Abel would be the one doing exactly that.

*It's less good sword technique and more speed and power. But he doesn't move like an amateur either. I guess it makes sense he'd be confident in his abilities. Otherwise, why bother holding back his minions and challenging me to a one-on-one duel?*

Abel took up his own sword and steadily closed the distance between them.

However, at that moment, more than ten magic spells raced from the side toward the demon prince. The magicians in the group of adventurers hired by the University's research team somehow managed to amass a modicum of magical energy through their forced rest and now used every last bit of it to fire together at the demon prince, the enemy boss.

Whether from his own carelessness or intense focus on his fight against Abel, the demon prince took a direct hit from the attack magic. The magicians ran out of magic once more and fainted the instant they unleashed the spell. It might have been a blessing that they never knew the outcome.

Why?

Because their spell didn't inflict a trace of damage...

"All those magics...repelled..." Rihya whispered. She, Warren, and Lyn had been blasted to an area near the royal magicians.

"Though the trio cluster attack works on regular devils, magic might be an ineffective weapon against that thing..." Arthur remarked almost absentmindedly despite being pale and on the verge of exhausting his magic.

The devils reacted violently. The three underlings blasted ranged fire magic spells one after another at the University's research team.

"Ngh..."

Nobody had enough magic left to erect a Magical Barrier. Neither the University's research team, the Bureau's, nor the Crimson Sword...

Arthur, who had no way to stop the devils' attack, bit his lip and endured.

Rihya's knees buckled and she collapsed to the ground. Tears spilled

uncontrollably from her eyes.

Though the situation had become dire, Abel hardly noticed in his single-minded concentration on the battle in front of him. He knew the demon prince would rush him with sword held high. He only had one chance.

And his opponent did just that—faster than before, but not unexpected. The downward stroke came faster than the demon prince's movement. It was what Abel had been hoping for.

*“Sword Skill: Zero Turn.”*

The technique where he dodged the enemy's attack at the last moment by rotating his right leg forty-five degrees on an axis then using that momentum to thrust his sword into the enemy's unguarded left side. There was no other technique that fit the term “special move” more perfectly.

Abel's sword cut in from the demon's left and...stabbed nothing but the air. His opponent had moved his upper body just the slightest bit backward to dodge the attack.

“No way...” The words slipped out.

This was a fatal opening in a sword fight. The demon prince used the back of his empty left hand to hit Abel on the jaw from below. Abel scrambled to avoid the full brunt of the blow by simultaneously moving his upper body away and leaping backward to create some necessary distance between them. But the punch nevertheless grazed his chin, leaving his brain feeling a bit scrambled as his head wobbled around. He almost certainly had a concussion.

A weakness in the structure of the human brain that couldn't be compensated for with training. So...he was unable to stand back up from where he landed. He barely even managed to hold on to his sword. Abel gripped it tightly at the ready even as he braced himself on one knee on the ground. He glared at the demon prince who approached leisurely.

“Abel!” Rihya cried from far away.

*I'm sorry, Rihya. I don't think I can survive this...*

But here, for the third time, the battle took another turn. The ceiling cracked and chunks of rock fell. Even the demon prince and his trio of underlings looked up, confused by the sudden occurrence.

Abel turned his gaze upward as well, only to see a lone water magician descending from above. Ryo's figure, as if cloaked in glittering shards of ice, looked like something out of a fairy tale.

Then his familiar voice rang out:

*"10-layer Ice Wall."*



# Ryo Gets Serious

Let's rewind time a bit.

Natalie ran out of the Bureau's pavilion situated by the dungeon's entrance and headed toward the adventurers' guild. Specifically, her destination was the guild's dormitory. From a regular person's perspective, her speed wasn't anything special. But for her, it was most likely the first and last time in her life where she broke into an all-out sprint. Abel's words looped endlessly in her head.

*"Natalie. If you ever find yourself in a pinch and need someone to save you, but we're not around to help, I want you to rely on Ryo."*

She was most definitely in a pinch now.

When she burst into Room 10 at the guild's dorm, she found only Ryo inside. He was conducting an alchemical experiment. For the first time, he had succeeded in creating an intermediate-level potion. Using the wound herb as its base, he created the potion by adding the magic copper ore his roommates had mined.

The first time Ryo saw the recipe, he'd thought, *Should I really mix an ore into something that will be drunk?* But the magic copper ore was ultimately simply a catalyst, meaning it needed to be extracted from the potion at the end... The trickiness of this step in the process explained why there were no adventurers who crafted their own potions.

Natalie flew into the room as Ryo was basking in the triumph of his success.

"Ryo, help us!"

Those were the only words she could squeeze out of her straining lungs. After she did, she stooped over with her hands resting on her thighs, her breath sawing in and out in shallow pants.

Ryo turned around in surprise when the door slammed open and stared at the girl he'd recently met, who also happened to be the only other water magician

he knew besides himself. “Na-Natalie, what’s wrong? Here, have a cup of water first then talk.”

He generated an ice cup full of water in his right hand and gave it to Natalie. It was a very unusual sight, but right now, Natalie didn’t have the mental leeway to understand this. She downed the liquid in one long swallow. A little calmer now, she could breathe deeply again.

“Ryo, Abel and the others disappeared in the dungeon. Please help us find them.”

He stood up immediately, put on his usual robe and cloak, then hung the Michael-made knife and Murasame from his waist.

“You can tell me everything on the way there. Let’s go.”

And with that, they walked quickly out of the housing annex. Though Natalie was completely exhausted from her mad dash, she knew this wasn’t the time to slow him down, so she gritted her teeth as she kept pace with Ryo. But...she stumbled as soon as they exited onto the main avenue.

“Gah,” Ryo said. “I’m sorry. You ran all the way here, didn’t you? I should have been more considerate. Here, get on. *Cart*.”

He produced an ice cart measuring two meters long. It was of the same design he’d used to carry Abel home when he washed up on shore. It was easy to use on streets as level as those of Lune.

“U-Um...”

Yet Natalie found herself confounded in myriad ways. The biggest issue was how conspicuous it was. Children stared at the Cart, their eyes sparkling with excitement. Women were spellbound by the Cart’s radiant light reflecting off the ice. One would need to be incredibly bold to ride it, but her companion didn’t wait for her to respond.

“You don’t have enough strength left to get on, hm?”

He stepped behind her, grasped her waist with both hands, and lifted her onto the Cart.

“Ack...”

It all happened in the blink of an eye. Then Ryo took off running. Naturally, the Cart sped along behind him. That was how the magic worked.

“Eeeeeeeek!!!”

Natalie shrieked at the suddenness of it all.



Her explanation during the trip was incoherent. No wonder, considering how abruptly she'd been plunked into the Cart and subjected to its high speeds. Even so, she managed to convey the bare minimum:

A total of fifty-four individuals comprising the Crimson Sword and Bureau of Royal Magicians' research team had been mysteriously transferred elsewhere within the dungeon. Their magical equipment indicated a high probability of the group's current location being Layer 40. Simultaneously, there was a very good chance over one thousand members of the Royal Central University's research team had also been transported while investigating Layer 11. However, they had no information whatsoever about their whereabouts.

"I think I understood the gist," Ryo said. Upon arriving at the dungeon entrance, he dissolved the Cart. Natalie landed on the ground when it disappeared.

"Since we're on the subject, why did you come to me, Natalie?" Ryo asked. He had been wondering about it. To put it bluntly, the only reason she had been on his mind was because he didn't know any other water magicians. Otherwise, she had only been an intermediary to deliver her teacher's letter to Abel. They hadn't met at all since then and yet she had nevertheless come straight to Ryo.

"Abel once told me to depend on you if I found myself in an unthinkable situation with no other options. He said you'd definitely help."

"Oh, I see. Abel said that..."

Those were the only words he said, but even Natalie understood the resolve in his voice.

"Right then, I'll return before you know it."

With that declaration, Ryo headed toward the dungeon entrance. It had been sealed off, which made complete sense since no one knew what had happened inside. Two adventurers stood there as sentries, having accepted the job from the guild.

"I'm heading inside," Ryo said, trying to pass right through.

"No, you aren't. We were told not to let anyone enter the dungeon."

“I’m a D-rank adventurer. *Ice Wall.*”

He put up an Ice Wall between himself and the adventurers in order to prevent them from capturing him, thus securing himself a route inside the dungeon.

“Wh-What the hell? A transparent wall? Hey! You can’t go in there!”

Putting their shouts behind him, Ryo jogged down the hundred steps leading to the first layer.

In the great cavern of Layer 1.

“*Active Sonar.*”

The Pulse spread throughout the water molecules in the vicinity, hitting matter and sending back a response.

“There’s nothing here, after all.”

The data that had been transmitted up until yesterday stated that nothing existed through Layer 9. Active Sonar was simply Ryo’s means of confirming that.

Even though there weren’t any monsters, each level of the dungeon was still incredibly vast. The complexity of the layout meant it took a decent amount of time to travel from one staircase to the next. Not to mention the guild didn’t even have maps of any layers below 30, so the locations of the stairs weren’t even certain.

With these conditions in mind, Ryo began wondering how long it would take until he reached Layer 40... Then he came up with an idea to reach the bottom. The method was featured often in anime and manga... He felt like he’d definitely seen it in some kind of media!

There was one major problem though—the extreme hardness of the dungeon’s walls and floors. Another possible issue lay in its tremendous regenerative ability... Then he remembered the soldier ants. When he’d told Abel about seeing soldier ants on Layer 1, his friend explained that the monsters made their way up there by digging shafts.

If an ant could dig a hole, then a human should be able to as well! The task might have been difficult for a normal person, but Ryo could do it. Because at the end of the day, he was a water magician.

*“Abrasive Jet 6.”*

He positioned the jets at the vertices of a regular hexagon and started drilling so that the hole’s diameter measured two meters. Then, when he rotated them sixty degrees clockwise...the floor fell out. Without hesitation, he jumped into the newly created two-meter-wide hole.

The distance to the floor below was roughly ten meters... As long as he positioned himself properly for the landing, he figured he wouldn’t get hurt, though there was a chance of injuring his legs. To mitigate that risk, he would blast Water Jets from the soles of his feet to nullify his momentum just before he hit the ground.

Of course, it wasn’t easy, but it was a breeze compared to propelling himself forward by generating Water Jets down the whole length of his back. Plus, there was the fact that producing the streams from his feet had saved his life countless times by now...even if most of those occasions had been during underwater monster battles.

Ryo used this method to descend smoothly up to Layer 39. He found it extremely odd that he hadn’t encountered a single monster on his journey down.

*“Be that as it may, it’s not my job to think about the reason.”*

What he needed to do right now was find Abel and the others and bring them back safely to the surface.

*“Layer 40 is right underneath... Active Sonar.”*

The Pulse spread throughout every corner of Layer 39...and went as far as the stairs leading to 40. Just as he was about to walk down them, the Pulse abruptly cut off.

*“Hm? I wonder if there’s some sort of barrier...”*

At this point, Ryo recalled the information Natalie gave him. They had

received a response from the fortieth layer for just a moment, but then it had abruptly ceased.

“Not knowing what’s happening down there makes me very uneasy. But I don’t have a choice, so...”

After murmuring those words, he chanted the spell he’d been using until now.

“*Abrasive Jet 6.*”

A section of Layer 39’s floor fell through the hole he made. He jumped in. He had felt the slightest bit of resistance while drilling the opening. Along with it, he felt as if the world had suddenly flipped upside down.

*Reminds me of my battle with the akuma, Leonore... What did she call it again? A cloister? Except it doesn’t feel nearly as...dense as hers, I suppose. Then is this a defective cloister?*

When he passed through the barrier-like thing and looked down, he saw a grotesque creature rushing toward Abel, who, even as he knelt on the ground, held his sword at the ready.

*Can he not stand up? If that’s the case, I’ll just have to give him the opportunity.*

Ryo chanted.

“*10-layer Ice Wall.*”

An Ice Wall appeared between Abel and the grotesque creature, separating them. Ryo himself landed between the thing and the scorched corpses of hundreds of people.

*They must be...part of the University’s research team... That’s horrific.*

With that thought, he started walking toward Abel. Nobody said anything during this time, including the grotesque creatures.

“Abel, are you hurt?”

Even Ryo sometimes said common-sense things.

“I’m fine... But why are you even here, Ryo...”

“To save you, of course. Why else? What I’m more curious about is why you

can't stand even though you're not hurt... Ahhh, you have a concussion or something, don't you? To think you of all people would be done in by a concussion... Absolutely unheard of, wouldn't you say?"

Abel didn't know whether to cry or laugh at Ryo's words. So he did neither, instead choosing to rein in his emotions. "You talk too much. I just tripped a little."

"A swordsman who trips... On second thought, that might actually happen a lot." Ryo thought back to his sword fights with his master, the Dullahan, and recalled how easy it had been to lose his footing in the wetlands. "Anyway, a lot of folks are apparently worried about you, so let's get you back to the surface."

"I'd like nothing more than to do just that, but ya know..." He looked pointedly at one of the grotesque creatures.

"I'll take it down. You have no objections, right?"

"No, Ryo, wait. That's a demon prince!" Abel shouted.

"A demon prince? As in, a demon king's child? Abel, please save jokes like this for a more appropriate occasion. There's no way anything demon-related would be that weak."

"A demon prince is a monster destined to become a demon king in the future...or so I've heard. Which means they're ridiculously strong!"

"Oh, so it *is* basically a demon king's child? No wonder it seems so weak then."

For whatever reason, they weren't on the same page... Nevertheless, Ryo turned to face the demon prince. And that was when the devils too finally came to their senses.

The demon prince's trio of underlings intended to punish the one who had interfered with their leader's duel. Earlier, they had burned to death the adventures hired by the University's research team for trying to intervene with their magics and now they executed the same punishment mercilessly by unloosing six blazing arrows at Ryo.

*Icicle Lance 6.*

He countered each of their projectiles with his ice spears. Having never learned magic from anyone else, he didn't know about the very existence of the spell called Magical Barrier. This was why he either repelled attacks with Ice Wall and Ice Shield or countered with offensive water magic spells just like now.

### *Water Jet 3.*

He deflected their attacks and immediately responded with his own. A Water Jet appeared behind each of the three minions. When the streams slashed horizontally through their necks...three heads rolled to the ground. Simultaneously, the three bodies collapsed, blood spurting from the stumps of their necks. The whole thing took only a few seconds from the instant they launched their fiery arrows.

No one understood what had happened. Even Abel, an elite swordsman.

*I barely managed to figure out Ryo intercepted their attacks with his usual spate of ice spears. But...what the hell went down after? How did they end up decapitated? I don't get it!*

Needless to say, Abel wasn't the only one who didn't get it. The one most perplexed by the situation might have been the demon prince. At the very least, he understood that his subordinates had been defeated in an instant through some unidentified means.

Hatred burned in his eyes. Though his expression hadn't changed at all when the normal devils were killed, he was clearly enraged at his trio of underlings being eliminated. His baleful stare focused on Ryo, whose reaction was a bit...

"You should know that I've gotten used to that kind of stare by now. Is that a sword you're holding in your right hand? Hm..." Ryo pulled Murasame from his waist and generated its ice blade.

The demon prince's expression hardened when he saw that.

"All right, demon prince or whatever you are," Ryo called. "Strike me down if you dare."

His words were taunting, but his posture was flawless. It seemed the demon prince understood this, as he remained standing with his sword raised high, unable to move easily. In response, Ryo also lifted his blade overhead.

He rarely took this jodan stance. The one he excelled in was seigan...wherein the wielder held their sword at chest height with the tip of the sword pointing at the opponent's eyes. It was the most basic stance, allowing the user to move easily, both offensively and defensively.

However, the jodan stance indicates the user's intent to go fully on the offensive. As is evident, you can't block or deflect your opponent's attacks with your sword. In other words, you have to dodge without using your sword. It offers zero defense, which is exactly why it's considered a fully offensive stance.

Maintaining his jodan, Ryo shuffled forward, steadily closing the gap between them. At first, the demon prince retreated a bit, but he soon stopped and resolved to engage his opponent. And then... The monster shortened the distance in an instant, bringing his sword down.

"Too slow."

Ryo evaded the demon prince's strike by taking only a diagonal half-step forward with his right foot. Then he circled around the off-balance demon prince and cut his head off from behind. The monster's rush and swing had both been incredibly fast...but he had expected something more formidable because...

"Leonore was much faster..."

Indeed, Leonore's charge might as well be called a Breakdown Rush. With the propulsion from her air magic, her charge seemed to approach the speed of sound. Same as the attack once demonstrated by the one-eyed assassin hawk. So for Ryo, who'd expected something on that level, the demon prince's rush turned out to be too slow.

Abel was dumbfounded.

*What the hell was that...*

Everything he just witnessed differed fundamentally from the swordsmanship he'd learned and continued to hone. Ryo's footwork, the way he balanced himself, and of course the sword itself!

But he understood there was nothing ordinary about Ryo's swordsmanship. Abel suspected it wasn't an innate talent... Instead, Ryo had acquired his skills

through a combination of enormous amounts of practice, unthinkable levels of training, and fearsome experiences with actual combat. It was only a single stroke of his sword, but it wasn't difficult for a swordsman of Abel's caliber to understand the vast amount of information packed into it.

Abel returned to his senses five seconds later. After processing this additional chain of unexpected events, he turned toward Ryo. Then, just as he was about to thank him, he noticed something. The fact that the decapitated demon prince hadn't fallen to the ground. Ryo realized it too.

"Still alive even with your head cut off... Well, that's a bit worrying, hm?"

Ryo jumped backward, creating distance between them.

"Your persistence is awe-inspiring, but... But a demon king is much more powerful. At the very least, someone as weak as you isn't fit to be one. Though I guess saying all this is meaningless since I very much doubt you understand my words."

Even as Ryo spoke, the demon prince picked up his fallen head and placed it back on top of his neck. His flesh made a hissing sound when the parts connected again.

"Your regenerative power isn't terrible either... In that case, why don't we test out how far it can go? *Abrasive Jet 256*."

The two hundred and fifty-six streams of water containing ice abrasives erupted around the demon prince and sliced through everything in their random paths. Ryo's current trump card, which once (presumably) chopped up Leonore the akuma. Back then, it hadn't dealt the decisive blow in their battle because of her abnormal regeneration speed. However...

This time, Ryo heard a *crack*, like something hard breaking, from within the random orbits of his jets. In that moment, even as he tried to regenerate himself from the fragmented state, the demon prince's body completely collapsed and stopped moving.

"I broke its stone..." Ryo said, realizing the sound of something hard breaking had been the demon prince's magic stone.



He had failed to collect the demon prince's magic stone, but the three underlings' magic stones should still be intact in their headless bodies. After making sure, Ryo strode toward Abel.

"Thanks, Ryo. You saved my life." Abel bowed his head respectfully in gratitude.

"No, it wasn't a big deal. But buy me dinner one night at the canteen and I'll consider your debt settled."

Abel clapped Ryo on the shoulder with a laugh. "Okay, okay, I get it. I'll treat you every day for a week. How's that?"

"Ow, that hurts. You're as strong as an ox, Abel. And I won't forget your promise either!"

Just then, the rest of the Crimson Sword and Arthur approached Abel.

"Abel... Thank goodness..."

Rihya hugged him tightly with a tearful expression. The dam broke when she wrapped her arms around him and she started sobbing. Warren stood next to them, cradling the still unconscious Lyn in his arms. He bowed his head at Ryo.

"My name is Arthur Berasus and I'm with the Bureau of Royal Magicians. I'm currently acting as its research team's advisor on this expedition. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your help."

And with that, he too bowed his head at Ryo.

"Oh, please don't worry about it. The only reason I even came here was because Natalie of the Bureau asked me to. I'm just glad I made it in time. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined something like this even happening."

Ryo's gaze panned over the royal magicians who still hadn't fully recovered from their magical depletion and the charred corpses of those burned to death by the devils. "Those are the bodies of the University's research team, aren't they..."

"Indeed... I just wasn't...strong enough..."

"I realize it'll be impossible to carry their bodies back, but I think we should at

least take mementos or something.”

“My people should regain consciousness soon enough, so I’ll have them do just that,” Arthur said, looking at the group of royal magicians.

“Ryo, let’s go grab the devils’ magic stones.” With Rihya still by his side, her eyes swollen from crying, Abel made the suggestion to Ryo.

“I’d like some of the proceeds from the sales to go to the deceased’s families.”

*Sheesh... Abel really isn’t cut out to be an adventurer. ‘Those of us who are still alive will make sure to spend like crazy for all of you who are dead!’ I feel like that’s more along the lines of something an adventurer would say.*

Despite being an incredibly new adventurer, Ryo had quite a condescending attitude.

*That’s just like him though, so I suppose there’s no helping it.*

Even now, his arrogant attitude didn’t change. Still, he kept the words in his mind because he suspected saying them out loud would anger his friend. Then he realized something Abel had said that he couldn’t overlook.

Ryo surveyed the battlefield, staring at the fallen grotesque creatures scattered everywhere. “Did you just say ‘devils’ right now? Those are devils then?”

“Yeah,” Abel replied. “This is our first time encountering them too. It’s been centuries since devils were last seen in the Central Provinces... At least that’s what everyone *believes*. We have no idea why they’re here of all places.”

*Huh. I guess akuma and devils are two different things... Then Fake Michael appended an entry of the former instead of the latter to The Monster Compendium. ‘Strength: runs the gamut from weak to strong (It’s child’s play for the strong ones to lay an entire city to ruins)’, which makes complete sense to me now... If my battle with Leonore hadn’t been contained within the cloister, the city of Lune would have suffered tremendous damage.*

Thinking about all that, Ryo suddenly remembered something.

“Oh, right, this reminds me. Earlier, there was something strange when I used

a probing spell on Layer 39. It was located at the stairs, so I say we inspect it on the way back because it might be related to this incident.”

The barrier-like structure surrounding Layer 40 had disappeared after Ryo defeated the demon prince.

*What did it feel like again? Less of a barrier and more a defective cloister... The one that appeared in Lune must have used the solar eclipse to exist. Leonore the akuma even said she had no control over the restrictions... That subspace... I had just assumed it was a kind of bridge connecting Lune and somewhere else, but...I really don't know to be honest. There simply isn't enough information, is there?*

When you don't understand something, it's best to stop thinking about it. Ryo believed in this solution wholeheartedly.

The royal magicians regained consciousness and set about gathering keepsakes from the members of the Royal Central University's research team. The Crimson Sword, Arthur, and Ryo collected the devils' magic stones.

“These magic stones... They're black...”

Though Ryo's words were quiet, Arthur nevertheless heard them and responded because he was the most experienced out of everyone there. “This is the first time I actually managed to get my hands on devils' magic stones, but I never would have guessed them to be black...”

“Arthur,” Ryo said. “I get the impression you've either seen a devil before or fought one. Am I wrong?”

“No, you're right on the mark, Ryo. I fought one in the Western Provinces back in my youth as an adventurer...” A faraway look entered Arthur's eyes, like he gazed upon bygone days. “I couldn't beat it though.”

Normally, the color of a monster's magic stone corresponded to its elemental attribute. Fire magic meant red, water meant blue, and so on. Then did black mean...dark magic?

*But those three shot fire arrows, didn't they?*

Thinking back to the battle only accelerated Ryo's lack of understanding about

all this.

“Ryo, approximately two hundred years have passed since the Central Provinces’ last encounter with devils. Records about them no longer exist, not even in the temples,” Rihya said.

“Devils are said to appear on any given day without warning. The phenomenon is so mysterious that there’s ongoing debate in the temple organization to conduct research into whether they can use space-time magic.”

“Space-time magic!”

Space-time magic was a classic isekai fixture!

*But Fake Michael told me that magic fell into the elemental - fire, water, air, earth, light, dark - and non-elemental categories... I’m almost positive he didn’t mention anything about space-time magic...right?*

“Does space-time magic actually exist?” Ryo asked.

Unexpectedly, Abel was the one who answered him: “The two most well-known space-time magics are Infinite Storage and Transfer. They operate exactly like they sound.”

“That’s fantastic!!! I would love to be able to use it one day...”

Abel looked incredibly uncomfortable upon hearing Ryo’s response. “About that... As far as I know, there’s only one person in the Central Provinces capable of using time-space magic. Baron Hagen Benda of the Empire.”

“Oh ho, you don’t say? If I had Infinite Storage, I could take home not just monsters’ magic stones but also their whole carcasses and use them for parts. And with Transfer, I can move easily to hunting grounds or even go home. How very convenient!” Ryo exclaimed, excitement coloring his voice as he imagined various scenarios.

Abel’s expression grew even more pained. “Yeah, pretty much what every adventurer wants. But Baron Benda is a citizen of the Empire, and...there’s no way the Empire will let one of its own with powers like that act on his own...”

“Huh? What do you mean...”

“As a military liaison, Baron Benda is constantly transporting arms and

provisions for the imperial army. They basically treat him like a very handy tool..."

Even Ryo felt sorry for the man after hearing that. It made sense for any military organization to desperately desire abilities like Infinite Storage and Transfer, but to restrict someone's freedom over it? How deplorable.

"Baron Benda is the only one who can use both of those space-time magics. His father could also use them, but Hagen himself couldn't while he lived. The moment the previous baron passed away, the current baron became able to use Infinite Storage and Transfer. People call his abilities less magic and more a family curse."

"I see. If only one person in the current generation can use them, then they're not really secret arts passed down from father to son... Really does feel like a curse then, hm?"

Abel suddenly froze when he heard Ryo's words.

*Only one person in the current generation... Sounds like something I heard recently...*

Then he remembered after mulling it over for a bit.

*Ah, right... Heroes. Only one Hero in each generation.*



Far off to the west of Lune, more than four thousand kilometers as the crow flies, a party of seven, fully geared, waited.

"It's here!"

At the magician's shout, his companions readied their weapons.

A rectangular space roughly fifty meters in front of them was covered completely in black. It measured five meters high and four meters wide. If the members of the Kingdom of Knightley's Royal Central University's academic research team had been there, they might have identified it as the exact same structure that President Clive Staples had named The Gate.

A beautiful woman stepped out from this particular Gate. At a height of one hundred and seventy-five centimeters, the beauty possessed an outstanding

figure... But if you looked closely, you would see tiny hornlike protrusions and a thin, black tail.

It was Leonore the akuma.

"Hmph. I dropped in to see what all the fuss was about and it turns out to be...an artificial altar, eh?" Leonore said, walking toward the altar. Her attitude conveyed a blithe disregard for everyone gathered there. It was as if she didn't even see them.

"Halt, demon king," a swordsman shouted. "This is where you die."

At around nineteen years of age or so, he was most likely the youngest among the party. Even so, he was, in a sense, the party's leader.

"Hm? Demon king?" Though Leonore had intended to ignore them, she couldn't very well overlook those words. "Did you whelps just call me 'demon king'?" She faced the party of seven for the first time.

"This altar was built at great cost, with many sacrifices. All know that lighting a fire on it will bring forth the demon king!" bellowed a man in his prime—a clergyman, judging by his appearance.

"Which means," Leonore asked, curious, "*you* were the ones who deliberately tried to summon this demon king or what have you?"

"My name is Roman and I'm the Hero who will defeat the demon king!" the young swordsman answered.

"He-ro, you say? What does it mean again...? Aha, the Hero!" Leonore cackled then. The word 'ghastly' described the sound perfectly. "If you're the Hero, then you must be strong, yes? Entertain me. Can you do that? Will you do that? Only one way to find out, eh? Come, 'tis time to fight!"

Thus, in a land far to the west, the battle between Leonore the akuma and the Hero's party began as a product of misunderstandings and coincidences.

*"Sacred Armor."*

*"Enchanted Weapon."*

*"The Wind's Protection."*

“Evil Resistance Up.”

“Strengthen.”

Each chanted spell enhanced Roman the Hero’s abilities.

A faint smirk playing on her lips, Leonore watched it all. “I’ve been told the way humans fight is quite boring because of their reliance on ranged attack magic. Yet...I see you’re all willing to stake everything on that Hero, eh?”

“Only a Hero can defeat a demon king. And so Roman shall do exactly that by besting you!” replied a scout who didn’t participate.

“I see, I see. Well, I suppose it *will* be quite fun to cross blades.”

In her mind, she revisited the battle in the cloister against the magician. *What was his name again... Ah, yes, Ryo. I enjoyed myself thoroughly then. Certainly never imagined I’d be sliced up into bits like that. I’m interested to see what kind of sport a Hero will provide.*

While she reminisced over the memory of her clash with Ryo, the Hero finished his preparations. When she saw that, Leonore pulled a sword out of nowhere. “Now then, Hero or whatever you call yourself, I find myself feeling impatient. I am more than ready, so strike me at your leisure.” She beckoned tauntingly at him using the index finger of her empty left hand, the sword in her right.

“Don’t underestimate me, demon king!”

With the recklessness of youth, the Hero, Roman, closed the gap between them in a single rush and attacked, but Leonore easily evaded the strike he’d put all his energy into. She did the same to every single blow after and easily at that. Only evading, never using her blade to take the strikes.

“Ngh!”

Despite his best efforts, Roman couldn’t land a hit at all. He had never experienced a situation like this before.

“Hm...” Leonore the akuma huffed under her breath and, for the first time, deflected his rightward slash with her sword and repelled him.

“Hrgh.”

Though off-balance, he somehow managed to avoid her counterattack by bending his upper body. Then he took a huge step back to create some distance between them.

“Now ‘tis my turn to go on the offensive.” She closed the gap between them in an instant and plunged her blade through his stomach. “What?”

The Hero’s first move was a charge followed by a thrust, so she simply followed his lead and mimicked him. However, the blow, which she intended to use to keep him in check, ended up piercing right through him.

“Boring... How incredibly boring.” She drew her sword from Roman’s stomach and shook it once to get rid of the blood.

“Y-You...”

“You are of course free to attack me, but don’t be surprised when I return the favor. Shouldn’t your highest priority right now be to save this pup you call a Hero?”

Having lost all interest in the Hero’s party, Leonore stalked toward the artificial altar. A large crystal-like object the size of a human head adorned it.

“This is a fine sacred jewel indeed. Though the fight was a dreadful bore, acquiring such beauty means my time coming here wasn’t wasted.”

The jewel disappeared when she placed it on her hand.

“Wait, demon king...”

Owing to the clergyman’s healing magic, Roman the Hero recovered enough to stand on his own two feet again.

“Ah, yes, you’ve reminded me. Let me correct you on that point. I’m not a demon king.”

“Nonsense. To boast so much power... If you’re not a demon king, then what are you?!” a magician, a woman this time, screamed at her.

“What am I, eh... Interesting question. All I can say is that I’m not a demon king. In any case, don’t you think combining your powers should be enough to defeat the current demon king? Besides, there are humans just as powerful as me. Yes, what an entertaining battle that was. I’d like to experience a repeat of

it." Leonore smiled as she once more recalled her clash with Ryo.

"You're not...the demon...king..." Roman groaned.

"Correct. My name is Leonore. Hero, become stronger. At the very least, 'tis your duty to become the strongest among the humans. What good is a Hero otherwise?"

"There's someone stronger than I...?"

"I'd wager around ten thousand times stronger than you. Your devotion to your title is yet lacking."

With those parting words, Leonore walked inside the Gate. It disappeared at the same time. When it did, all that remained were the Hero's party and an altar now bereft of its sacred jewel.



"Something's coming."

Ryo was the first to notice. When they heard those words, the Crimson Sword and Arthur stopped collecting magic stones and prepared for battle again.

"They're human, not monsters. But...there's quite a lot of them..."

Three minutes after he informed them, Abel and the others saw it with their own eyes.

"Aren't those...Lune's adventurers?"

"I believe you're right, though I think I see adventurers from other cities too."

Abel and Rihya realized most of the approaching group consisted of Lune's D-rank adventurers.

"They must be the ones Clive and his people hired, the ones who secured the supply route from the surface to Layer 11," Arthur said. He guessed the adventurers' identities almost immediately. The group also included the individuals acting as escorts the University's research team contracted in the royal capital.

"Which means it wasn't just the folks from Layers 10 and 11 who were forcibly transferred..." Abel said, standing up and raising a hand.

When they saw him gesture, the approaching adventurers let out a roar of welcome. They didn't seem to have fought at all during their trek here, but their unease from being tossed into an unknown location was clear. Their relieved cheers essentially blew away that fear.

They asked roughly one hundred of the newly arrived adventurers to assist with collecting both the devils' magic stones and mementos from the University's research team. Once these tasks were accomplished, everyone was finally able to begin the return journey.

Three hours had passed since Ryo stormed the dungeon.

"It'd be a good idea to check whether or not any other adventurers were dumped down here..." Abel murmured, glancing at Lyn.

She shook her head in answer. "I'm sorry, but I can't use Probe just yet. I need more time to recover."

"Then why don't I utilize my water magic to try?" Ryo suggested. "It's a bit of a challenge, but I think I can make it work."

Abel nodded. "Thanks, man, I appreciate it."

"*Active Sonar.*"

Ryo's Pulse spread throughout the water molecules in Layer 40's atmosphere. After some time, it reached the farthest wall and rippled back to him.

"There's no one else besides those of us here."

*Except for...whatever gave off the weird response by 39's stairs... Did it die? Become inactive? Because the response now is completely different from the one I detected earlier using Active Sonar... Hmm, there's no point mentioning it now. I suppose we'll all see for ourselves soon enough.*

For the moment, he decided to say nothing about the change.

"All right, let's head out."

At Abel's command, everyone started walking toward the surface.

At the stairs leading up from Layer 40 to 39, they found a jet-black crystal ball

the size of a human head with cracks running through it. Beside it lay a lump of sand, like something had broken off.

"I've never seen anything like it before," Arthur said. "What in blazes is this?"

No one there had any idea what it could be. When they checked the residual magic detectors that went with them during their forced transfer from Layer 10, they found traces of magic emanating from the object until just moments ago.

"Well, the good thing is that the barrier's gone and it looks like the data we just fetched is being transmitted to the surface again, so I reckon that's something."

With that, Arthur put the black crystal ball-like object into his bag.

Ryo asked if it was actually okay not only to put something completely unknown so easily into his bag, but also take it back up to the surface...

"Ah, this is called a barrier bag," Arthur reassured him. "It blocks magical energy from within and without. As for why I'm taking it back with me, well...think of it as the sole evidence of our experience down here."

The Bureau advisor left Ryo feeling bemused with that extremely weak reasoning.

After that, the group continued their walk to the surface through the monster-free dungeon. When they climbed the stairs up to Layer 11 from 12, they found twenty C-rank adventurers waiting there. They had been commissioned by the guild master, Hugh.

"Abel! Welcome back!"

The one who raised his voice the loudest was Rah, the swordsman who also adored Abel like he was an older brother.

"O-Oh, hey, Rah. Sorry to spring this on you, but do you mind helping us carry the royal magicians' things?"

"Of course! Leave it to me!"

Rah and his party, Switchback, headed off to help the Bureau's research team carry the largest load.

The group, now including the twenty C-rank adventurers, maintained their steady pace toward the surface. Abel somehow found himself walking next to Ryo, who was near the head of the procession.

“Ryo, seriously,” he said so quietly it was almost a whisper. “I can’t thank you enough for what you did.”

Ryo shook his head in exasperation. “Abel, would you give it a rest... We already decided you’d pay me back with a week’s worth of dinner.”

“I know, I know, but...”

“Then prove it to me. If you really *are* that grateful, I want you to give me information I think is extremely vital.”

Ryo’s sudden demand flustered Abel. “S-Sure, as long as I know what it is...”

“Do you remember how we stopped at Kailadi before coming to Lune and we ate curry there?”

“Curry...? Oh, you’re talking about kari. Yeah, I remember.”

Abel’s pronunciation of the word was truly exquisite.

“Well, you said there was a great curry restaurant in Lune too. So please tell me where it is!”

“Really? That’s it? Piece of cake. I’ll take you there myself and treat you.”

“Whoo-hoo! I’m holding you to that, okay? It’s a promise, okay? And if you break it, I’ll chop you into even smaller pieces than I did the devil back there! I’ll make mincemeat out of you!”

Abel’s face tensed as he recalled the sight of the demon prince hacked to bits. “That’s...not...funny...”

“You have nothing to worry about as long as you keep your promise, Abel,” Ryo said with an emphatic nod. Abel laughed in response.

Various leaders waited at the dungeon entrance for the group to return, including people like Guild Master Hugh and Christopher Blatt, head professor

at the College of Magic. In truth, the moment Ryo defeated the demon prince, the barrier cloaking Layer 40 disappeared and data transmissions to the surface resumed from the residual magical detectors. That was how they were able to determine the group was safe and on their way back.

“Well done, folks,” Hugh announced, his voice carrying far. “Well done. We got food ‘n’ drinks set up for ya. The first thing ya wanna do is relax. Take yer time. Ya can tell me the details in a few days.”

Within, however, Hugh wasn’t nearly as calm as he appeared.

*God Almighty! Praise the heavens for Abel’s safe return... I can’t believe it. I almost wanna pinch myself. I really thought it was the end o’ the line for me this time! Why the hell does he keep disappearing so dang often? Last time it was smugglers, this time the dungeon... I sure hope he’s got his fill o’ the dungeon now. I don’t see any reason he needs to go back down there, right? The lad’s an accomplished B-rank, so he can just stick to jobs on the surface. I’ll give him permission to do just that!*

Hugh’s mind was in absolute shambles. When he spotted Ryo, he rushed over to him and thumped him heavily on the shoulder.

“Ryo. The hell were you thinkin’ shakin’ off the guards like that and chargin’ inside...”

“Urk... I’m sorry...” Ryo couldn’t argue since Hugh had only stated the facts.

Luckily for Ryo, Arthur came to his rescue. “Now, Hugh,” he said. “Don’t be like that. We only survived thanks to Ryo. So take it easy on the boy, will you?”

“Huh? Oh, is that how it was... I see. Well...good job... But, no, wait. I won’t be settin’ a good example if I let him off completely... Then again...”

“All right, how’s this? I’ll tell you everything down to the smallest detail, so come with me to the tent, Hugh. Which means Ryo’s free to leave, right?”

“Ahhh, just hold on a dang second... Ryo, you and I are gonna have a little chat later. Got it? But, well...you *did* save them, so I should thank you at the very least. Ya got my thanks.”

Hugh called out to him as Arthur dragged the guild master deep inside one of

the tents.

“Phew... Thank goodness for Arthur.”

Ryo was grateful to Arthur for helping him avoid an excessive scolding. He decided things would be just fine here without him, so he immediately started walking toward the adventurers’ guild.



Inside the tent.

After pouring water into two cups, Hugh handed one to Arthur and took a seat. “Arthur, I need ya to tell me what happened on Layer 40. Don’t leave out a single detail.”

“You’re right. Suppose I’ll start from the moment we were transported.” Arthur sipped. “We were suddenly moved to Layer 40. So were Clive and his people. They’d been working on Layer 11 at the time. What’s more, they ended up right in front of the devils.”

He made the report in short sentences, like rattling off an itemized list.

“De-vil? Devils, huh? Wait, ain’t devils the ones who show up in the Temple’s stories?”

“That’s right. Them.”

Hugh was shocked. And no wonder. There had been no encounters with devils in the Central Provinces for the past two hundred years. Two centuries meant eight generations ago. His grandpa’s grandpa’s grandpa’s grandpa’s generation... It was so far in the past it almost made him dizzy to even think about it. Tales from that time period were basically legends at this point...

Most folks only knew of “devils” as the creatures from the Temple’s tales, but that was the extent of their knowledge.

“There were fifty of the bastards. An additional three were stronger than the riffraff. And a demon prince. No doubt on that score.”

“Demon prince... That’s the one that’ll end up a demon king, right? Can’t rightly believe all o’ ya met one and lived to tell the tale... Beggin’ yer pardon. Ya all survived *b’cause* of yer and Abel’s talents, eh?”

Hugh shook his head in awe because normal folks would never have survived. However, Arthur shook his own head and refuted the guild master's remark.

"Not quite... I won't deny that Abel was amazing. Didn't expect less of the lad. Without him, we would have been annihilated. But even *he* was on the brink of being killed by the demon prince..."

"Huh...? Then how... Don't tell me..."

"You got it. Because Ryo showed up."

The sight of Ryo's dramatic entrance through the ceiling of Layer 40 had left even Arthur flabbergasted and he'd experienced a great many things in his long life. In the first place, he'd never heard of anyone boring their way through the dungeon's floors. Even more mind-boggling was the fact that Ryo had descended all the way down to the *fortieth* layer...

Preposterous! Absolutely absurd. Truly.

Arthur was acquainted with a topflight water magician himself. Several of them, in fact. But he suspected not a single one of them could punch through a dungeon's floor. Neither fire magicians nor air magicians could pull off the feat either.

In truth, earth magicians were incapable of it as well. Attempts had been made in the past and each one had failed, so this was a well-established fact. They had managed to shave off just the slightest bit of the floor...and even then, it had grown back after a short time. That was simply how the dungeon's floors and walls were.

The young man had made the impossible possible by manipulating water magic in a way Arthur had never heard of or seen before. And so easily at that.

"Hugh. What exactly *is* that lad called Ryo..."

Arthur had grappled with this exact question the whole time he'd watched Ryo fight the devils. Naturally, no satisfactory answer had been forthcoming.

"How am I s'posed to even answer that... The only thing I can tell ya is he brought Abel back to us from the south side of the Malefic Mountains..."

Then Hugh told Arthur about Abel's return journey.

“I see. So *that* is Abel’s friend, hm...”

“Aye, ‘friends’ is a good way to describe the two.”

Arthur had known Abel since he was a small child, so he was well aware how extremely special it was for the young man to make friends after he declared his independence and went off on his own. The news also delighted him.

While Rihya, Lyn, and Warren were Abel’s most valued companions—irreplaceable ones, at that—they still weren’t exactly his friends. A friendship must be a relationship between equals and, unfortunately, his companion’s various circumstances prevented them from ever standing on equal footing with Abel. It would never occur to them to try either.

Though there were a few people in the royal capital Abel was on good terms with...Arthur wasn’t sure even they could be called friends... Then there were the younger adventurers who held a great deal of respect and affection for Abel. Those weren’t friends either.

Abel might have been able to form a friendship with the White Brigade’s Phelps, but the advisor had a feeling this wasn’t what the other young man wanted. Regardless of Phelps’ friendly demeanor, he essentially saw Abel as a ruler.

So amid all this was the young man Ryo, whom Abel had called “friend.” This was an incredibly pleasing turn of events for Arthur. Not to mention how idiotically strong the boy was!

In this world—no, in any world—might is right. No matter how just you are, if you don’t have the strength to push your truth through, no one will accept you. You’ll find yourself overthrown by your opponent’s strength. It’s not about good or evil, it’s just the way it is.

Realizing the mental tangent he was going off on, Arthur gave a small shake of his head and cut off the train of thought.

“Ryo’s terrifyingly strong. Well, he was at least based on what I saw. Strong enough to kill a demon prince in an instant.”

“He...what?”

The words simply did not make sense to Hugh. He knew Ryo was strong. Abel had said so along with others. But to kill a demon prince instantly...?

“Is...is that even possible?”

“He literally did it in front of us, so it’s pointless to discuss whether it’s possible or impossible now, eh?” While Arthur spoke an undeniable truth, Hugh struggled to accept it. “He did the same thing to the demon prince’s trio of underlings,” Arthur continued. “And all at once too. Though I still have no idea how the hell he did it.”

The only thing Arthur could do was laugh ruefully. On their trek back to the surface, he’d asked Abel if he knew how Ryo had done the impossible, but the lad had been just as baffled.

“Abel called Ryo an anomaly and now I think he’s right.”

“Feel like that’s an understatement at this point...”

“You have a point, Hugh, but not much we can do about him, eh? As far as I’m concerned, the most important thing here is for that anomalous water magician to keep being friends with Abel, which I hope means he has no reason to turn against our country. In your position, I reckon you feel the same, right?”

“Aye. I’d rather Lune avoid makin’ an enemy o’ him too.”

Hugh exhaled deeply then.

“Ryo being friends with Abel makes him an ally, but there *will* be trouble if some fool of an aristocrat tries to interfere with the boy. Which is why I don’t plan on including Ryo’s name in my report. You understand what I’m saying, don’t you, Hugh?”

“I do, Sir. I’ll leave him off my report too then.”

Thus, Ryo avoided being caught up in the nobles’ power struggle. For now.

The day after Abel and the others returned from the dungeon’s Layer 40. Ryo had been running outside the city since morning. Of course, he ate a filling breakfast. He’d been feeling restless for whatever reason since yesterday’s battle, so he’d decided to run to exorcise the sentiment. At first, his three

roommates ran with him, keeping pace. But...the distance between them widened steadily until they all dropped out, one by one.

“Honestly, Nils, you need to get it together. How can you be part of the vanguard if you give up so quickly? You can take your time, just keep running.”

“Ryo...the problem...is...your stamina...”

The other two were completely wiped out, but Nils the swordsman started running again, albeit slowly and mostly out of stubbornness.

“Good! That’s the way. Nice and easy. The vital thing is to keep your body moving.”

And with that, Ryo sped up and ran ahead.

“R-Right...”

No one heard Nils’s response.

# At the Training Center

Afternoon. The three were unanimous in their refusal to eat, saying they just couldn't do it. Resigned, Ryo searched alone for a place to eat in, but...nothing called to him. None of the restaurants made him want to say, "I want to eat this!"

He was famished, which was no surprise considering he'd been running nonstop since morning... Unfortunately, his stomach didn't know what it wanted... When he made his way down the main boulevard and found nothing of interest, he turned onto a side street near the east gate.

Normally, he wouldn't enter this area, but he happened upon a distinct aroma purely by coincidence. An alluring one of various spices, the strongest of which were cardamom and coriander... It was curry! Tempted by the scent, he stepped into a restaurant. It didn't specialize in curry as its display noted dishes like Hamburg steak, spaghetti, and more.

"Welcome!"

A middle-aged woman inside called out to him. When he surveyed the place, he found only one other customer inside, probably because the lunch hour had already ended a short while ago. The customer had platinum blonde hair and green eyes that widened as she stared at Ryo.

The elf woman acted a few moments later. She used her left hand to beckon him while she carried a spoonful of curry to her mouth with her right. He walked toward the hand as if lured by it.

"S-Sera... Hello."

"Hello to you too. I had no idea you knew this shop too, Ryo..."

"Not at all. It was just a coincidence. The scent of the curry drew me in."

"Oh ho! A fellow curry connoisseur, I see! If you want to eat curry in Lune, this is most definitely the place. Here, sit next to me." She patted the chair next to her, inviting him to take a seat.

When he sat down, she resumed eating. It wasn't long before the proprietress brought water.

"Here you go. What would you like to order?"

"Curry, please."

"How spicy would you like it?"

"S-Spicy?"

He hadn't expected this...

"We can make it mild, medium, or hot."

"Then medium."

Sera nodded momentously at his words. "Ma'am, another medium-hot curry for me too please!"

"You got it! Two medium-hot curries coming right up."

With that, the woman headed back to the kitchen.

Ryo stared at Sera, surprised by her order of seconds.

"E-Elves have a very fast metabolism, you know!" she blurted after noticing his expression. "Don't think I'm a glutton!"

"Nobody said you are..."

A flustered beauty making excuses? What a charming sight.

She cleared her throat and forcefully changed the subject. "By the way, Ryo, might I ask where you're living?"

If you're going to change the subject, ask where they live. The tried-and-true approach.

"I'm staying at the guild's housing annex."

"The housing annex? Oh, the place where you can reside within three hundred days of registering as an adventurer, yes? But the fact that you were able to use the northern library means you must be at least D-rank or higher...right? Did you perhaps race up the rank hierarchy by completing jobs at a fast pace?"

“Not quite... I was able to register as a D-rank thanks to the rank-up system.”

He was a little embarrassed that he'd been able to register as a D-rank without doing anything.

“A rank-up registration, hm? Incredible. I can tell from a glance that you're strong, Ryo, so your registration makes sense.” Sera nodded several times, apparently convinced.

“This is the first time anyone has told me they can tell I'm strong simply by looking at me...”

“Really? I suppose that just means those around you don't have a discerning eye. Nothing you can do about it though.”

As she spoke, an alluring scent drew near.

“Here's your medium-hot curry. Enjoy!”

The plate the proprietress set in front of him was...exactly the kind of curry he used to eat in Japan. Not Indian or Javanese curry. The same thick curry with its variety of spices and wheat flour... Japanese curry itself!

“I can't believe it...”

Of course Ryo loved Japanese curry. There was nothing wrong with Indian curry, but Indian curry was its own food and, in his mind, it was different from what he thought of as “curry.”

Moved by the sight of the Japanese curry before him, he scooped a bite up with his spoon and tasted it.

“So delicious...” he murmured in wonder, the words slipping unbidden from his mouth as soon as he swallowed.

“Yes, it very much is. I couldn't agree more!” Sera said with an enthusiastic nod, as if the experience was happening to her.

His spoon didn't stop moving from that point on. He didn't devour it greedily though. Instead, he approached his curry deliberately. This was probably the best way to describe it.

Words are only a hindrance while eating delicious food, so the two of them

dedicated themselves solely to eating. When they finished...the most sublime expressions of satisfaction spread across their faces.

“That was so good.”

“Indeed it was.”

If a sculpture were to be made of the two of them at that moment, it would surely be titled “Satisfaction.” Once they paid their respective bills, they walked out together from the Fill-Up Station. This was when Ryo discovered the name of the restaurant he’d just eaten at...



“Oh, Sera, I’m curious about something. I haven’t seen you at the guild even though you’re an adventurer. Why is that, if you don’t mind my asking?”

The question had always been on Ryo’s mind. Though he himself didn’t spend every single moment of his day at the guild, he did often take advantage of the adjoining canteen, which is how he realized he’d never seen Sera there.

“Ah, yes... Well, I was in the capital for work until quite recently. Moreover, I’m on a long-term commission, so I have no reason to go to the guild anytime soon.”

“A long-term commission?”

“I’m a swordsmanship instructor for the city’s order of knights under Margrave Lune’s command.”

“You don’t say!”

When he noticed how loud his surprised shout was, Ryo looked around hurriedly to make sure he hadn’t disturbed anyone.

“I’m quite strong despite my appearances, you know?” Sera said, peering up at his face.

Her mannerism and expression could destroy entire worlds...

*Oh, no. This is bad. She’s so amazingly captivating...*

Through sheer force of will, he averted his gaze from hers.

“Considering the nature of my job,” she continued, “the lord mayor has

graciously allowed me to live in the building next to the order's dormitory."

*The lord mayor... That's the margrave too. Which reminds me... I don't know what sort of person he is.*

"Ah, Ryo. Do you have plans now?"

"No, not really... I thought I'd go back to my room and conduct some more alchemical experiments..."

"What was your goal again? To create a golem, right? If you aren't opposed to the idea," she said out of the blue, "how about a mock battle against me? Ryo, when you walked into the Fill-Up Station, you looked deeply unhappy. Almost as if your thirst for battle hadn't been slaked."

She hit the nail on the head. Ryo himself understood that the cause of his restlessness was his unsatisfying fight against the demon prince yesterday. He'd begun his morning by jogging to sweat his stress out. The fact that Sera had sensed it too clearly meant his efforts had failed.

"If you're with me, you can use the knights' training center. The area is protected by a magical barrier that's always active and excellent priests are on hand in case of injury. Most run-of-the-mill adventurers will never get the opportunity to enter it. So what do you say? Would you like to join me for a bout?"

There was no way he could refuse an invitation like that from a beautiful woman.

"Yes, please."

On the way there, Sera told him many things about the knightly order. The original instructor was a man by the name of Max Doyle, a licensed master of the famous Hume School of swordsmanship in the royal capital. While Max taught the knights the style, Sera gave them practical experience through mock battles. This was how they divided their roles.

"Max is extremely good at teaching, so even complete beginners who join the order become quite skilled within a year. That's why the skill level of this city's knights is so high," she explained. "Neville Black, the knight commander, is on very friendly terms with the guild master, so they occasionally drink and discuss

things together. The order of knights and the adventurers' guild are the city's two biggest forces. In other towns and cities, these two organizations can be at odds, but that's not the case in Lune. Although I wouldn't say they're bosom buddies here either... Hmm, the best way to describe them would be rivals. I suppose the reason they get along is because their respective leaders have a good relationship."

"So," Sera continued, "due to the relationship between knights and adventurers, I'm not subject to any criticism simply because I teach the knights despite being an adventurer myself. I have a lot of time to myself as well, allowing me to go to the library and Fill-Up Station whenever I please, so I'm quite grateful for the present circumstances."

In short, she happily talked about a variety of topics on the trek to the training center.

The mayor's residence and the knights' dormitory was located in the northernmost part of the city. The entrance to the area was engraved with the margrave's coat of arms, which featured a doe. Naturally, security was strict, and entry by the general public was restricted.

Having said that, since Sera was the knights' instructor and also lived in the mayoral residence, she was allowed to come and go as she pleased because everyone knew her.

The gatekeeper bowed respectfully in greeting. "Welcome back, Madam Sera."

"Thank you, Nash. This is Ryo, an adventurer. We'll be using the training center for a mock battle now. Would you please take care of the formalities?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Ryo, may I see your guild card?"

The gatekeeper performed his necessary obligations and they entered the estate grounds without any issues.

The knightly order's training center was a separate area from the regular training grounds. Compared to the latter, they had a relatively free run of the center for activities such as mock battles. You could call it a smaller version of a

Roman colosseum.

Just as the clock tower tolled three in the afternoon, Sera and Ryo entered the center's waiting room. Priests and priestesses waited inside in case the worst occurred.

"We'll be using the training center shortly to conduct a mock battle. Please be on standby." Then Sera proceeded to the center's arena. "Ryo, let's use the weapons reserved for drills. All the blades on the weapons in this mock armory have been dulled, so choose whatever strikes your fancy."

She picked a sword similar to the slim one hanging from her waist.

Ryo had always used Murasame, which was less of a sword and more of a katana. Among the Japanese swords in existence, it most closely resembled the Mikazuki forged by Munechika. It went without saying that this armory didn't have any katana, so he chose a weapon most like one in terms of length and balance.

And that was when he suddenly realized something.

"Sera, how did you know I use a weapon? From all appearances, I should look like any normal magician."

Indeed he had no weapons in plain sight. Both the Michael-made knife and Murasame weren't visible from the outside because they hung from his belt underneath his cloak, yet she'd known from the start that Ryo could fight in close combat with a weapon. Even Abel hadn't known until Ryo told him so when they'd first arrived in Lune.

"Hmmm," Sera hummed. "Perhaps from your gait and the way you move your body? And...I'm also someone who can use both magic *and* swords."

Then Sera was most likely a superior magician...probably air magic. He made the assumption based on the classic fantasy trope of elves specializing in air magic.

"In any case, shall we begin?"

They faced each other across a distance of twenty meters in the center of the arena.

“Ryo, are you ready?”

“Yes. Feel free to strike whenever you wish.”

“As you wish!”

As soon as she spoke, she was gone.

*So fast!*

In an instant, Sera had rushed within arm’s reach to deliver an incredibly fast strike. Instead of retreating, Ryo quickly countered with a thrust of his sword. He targeted her arms, striking before Sera could muster the proper speed and strength for her attack. Without a counter like this, a physically strong person could break their opponent’s sword with the power of their swing.

But she removed a hand from the sword’s hilt and parried with a horizontal, one-handed swing. Ryo shifted his balance backward to evade the attack, swaying. His feet remained planted on the ground. He shifted his center of gravity forward again and slashed. Sera dodged it completely and struck back-to-back.

He avoided her first swing and then, while dodging her second, he slashed his blade up at her. She evaded with a light backstep.

This all took place in the span of a few seconds. They both took a moment to regroup.

“Amazing, Ryo!” Sera said, all smiles. Her delighted voice expressed her genuine joy.

“Not at all. If anything, you’re too fast, Sera.”

Terrifyingly fast, in fact. The demon prince from yesterday couldn’t even begin to compare. She moved as fast as the speed of sound, like the akuma Leonore and the one-eyed assassin hawk. It was scary how quickly she could penetrate his defenses.

“But you dodged! There’s no one in the order who can dodge my charges.”

With that, she looked pointedly around them. Ryo followed her gaze and saw around a dozen knights sitting in the stands.

“Your reactions tell me you’ve experienced similarly fast rushes in the past, haven’t you?”

“Yes... A bit.”

“I see... Then I won’t hold back anymore!”



“Wai...”

Before he could even finish the word, she charged again. This time, she moved at supersonic speed, which meant the speed of her sword was...

*Faster than before!*

Sera swung her sword five times faster now. To no one's surprise, it was impossible to dodge continuously at this speed. It was even harder to handle her from the front. When he blocked her sword at its fastest point, he was shocked to discover how heavy it was.

*How can she bear its weight despite her delicate frame...*

That thought would most definitely anger a woman if he said it out loud.

During their first clash, he'd been able to counterattack after deflecting them. This time, however, he found himself completely on the defensive. He managed to thrust and parry occasionally, but those times only served to keep her in check.

But a Ryo dedicated to defense was an iron wall. Because in the end, neither the one-eyed assassin hawk nor Leonore the akuma had been able to penetrate his impregnable defense. That was just how powerful his defense was. However...

*Ugh! This is tough. Every hit feels like Master's...*

Even that iron wall was starting to crumble. If speed was the only factor at play, then Sera surpassed the Dullahan known as the Fairy King by a very slim margin.

*She's using air magic, isn't she?*

While there wasn't a rule against using magic, there would normally have been no opportunity to use magic in a sword fight conducted at such speeds. If your focus waned for even a second, you would be killed in an instant. As quick as Ryo was at generating his magic, it was impossible even for him at these speeds.

Except...

*Except Sera's using magic. She's using air magic to increase her speed. Whether it's her swings, her footwork, or even to move her entire body...*

What a terrifying level of magical control. Saying she used magic as easily as she breathed was a vast understatement. It was deep-seated and instinctual, like the steady beating of a heart... That was the height her control of magic had evidently reached.

Sera had very clearly mastered the fusion of air magic and swordsmanship, much more so than Leonore the akuma. With her air magic amplifying the force of her blade, her slashes were abnormally heavy.

An opponent who surpassed him in speed and power...required extraordinary tactics to defeat... But Ryo didn't want to use them. He finally had the chance to test himself against such a skilled opponent. He didn't want to squander this valuable experience...

In hindsight, it felt like his skills had been deteriorating since his last session with his master, the Dullahan. So it would be tremendously good fortune for him if he could beat himself, almost literally in this case, back into shape with this clash.

A shift occurred in the atmosphere. It started out subtle, but Ryo soon realized that the destruction of his iron wall was imminent. Until now, he had endured her onslaught by the skin of his teeth, but it came as no surprise that he was about to reach his limit. His sword too looked worse for the wear after deflecting her impossible attacks countless times.

*This is definitely not looking good for me...*

After bearing the brunt of a dozen more of her slashes... *Krak*. It broke. He ran out of steam as he attempted to let the sword glance off Sera's rightward slash. Instead, he was forced to take the full weight of her swing and in that instant, the blade broke, leaving her blade to rush toward his neck in the next moment. There, it stopped.

"I lose."

Cheers came from the stands, but they didn't matter to Ryo.

"You're incredible, Ryo!" Then Sera jubilantly threw her arms around him.

"Uhhh..." His mind plunged into panic mode at the sudden and unexpected embrace.

"Oh, I'm sorry..." Blushing, she released him. But she immediately grabbed both of his hands with hers and shook them exuberantly up and down. "You did superbly well handling my Wind Robe-infused sword!"

"No, more like you're the amazing one for mastering the technique, Sera."

That was Ryo's honest opinion. To speed up all of your body's movements using air magic... Though simple, the idea was virtually impossible in reality. Even if you did conceive of it, the first and biggest hurdle was giving it concrete form. After *that*, the only way to even execute it was to have superior magical control. It was impossible otherwise. Without a doubt, a normal person would run out of magical energy even attempting it.

"Because I practiced a great deal. I'm more impressed by your unassailable defense. What in the world even is that?! It's clear you expended a great deal of effort to master it...but how?"

"My master trained me in the art of the sword."

"Your master?"

"Yes, the one who gave me this robe..."

Sera's eyes widened. "Wait. Is the Fairy King your sword master?"

"Huh..." Ryo was stunned to learn she knew about the Fairy King's robe. "How did you know?"

"Well... Um, I suppose you could say elves are essentially half fairy. I can tell the robe was given to you by the Fairy King because it has characteristics unique to the species. I can also tell something else: the Fairy King must have taken a liking to you if he gave you that robe. Although initially I just assumed it was because he liked your magic. To think he's your sword master too... Frankly, there's something amusing about the Fairy King having taught you how to use a blade instead of magic."

"I remember someone else who said almost the exact same thing a long time

ago..." Once upon a time, Lewin the dragon mentioned something similar with a laugh. "Is it really so strange then?"

"Hm, not strange exactly..." She looked indescribably troubled. "How shall I put this... The Fairy King is a legendary individual, so...let's just leave it at that I suppose."

Just when she was about to continue speaking, someone called out from the stands.

"Madam Sera, it's almost time for your practice session with Lord Alfonso."

When Ryo glanced in the direction the voice came from, he saw a young woman shouting at the top of her lungs.

"Ahhh...already, huh?" She waved the young woman over to them.

"Apologies, Ryo, but I have some work to attend to."

"Can I ask who Lord Alfonso is...?"

"The lord mayor's grandson. I believe he reached the age of majority last year. The mayor lost all his children, so Alfonso is in line to succeed him. He used to be such a useless boy, but I took him in hand and disciplined him... He tried to rape me and I repaid him by breaking his shoulder with my sword."

An elf who could say something so frightening in such a casual way stood before him...

"And *he*'s going to be the next mayor...?"

"Don't worry. When the mayor first hired me, I told him very clearly I'll kill the boy if he tries something like that again on the estate. So just letting him live is a blessing."

Her smile was blindingly lovely... If you only looked at the smile, it would be impossible to imagine what she was saying. Ryo decided to be on his best behavior.

At this point, the woman who'd called out to Sera arrived in the center of the arena.

"Reilitta, this is Ryo. He's an adventurer. He's important to me, so make sure you see him out properly. Right then, I'm off to training."

And with that, Sera reached the exit in a single leap and left the training center. She must have used air magic.

Left behind were Ryo and Reilitta. Since Sera had been the one to introduce him, the woman was still standing there with her eyes wide and mouth open in surprise.

“Um...”

“Oh! Pardon me!”

She came back to life with a gasp after hearing Ryo speak. “I work as a maid on the estate. My name is Reilitta. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I’m Ryo, an adventurer. Nice to meet you as well.”

“Please allow me to escort you to the gate. Follow me.”

Reilitta started walking. But she kept whispering words to herself, almost like a chant. “He’s important to her, he’s important to her, he’s...”

Ryo didn’t hear her.



On their walk to the gate after leaving the training center, a passing carriage stopped in front of them. When the door opened, the man who stepped out was...

“Well, if it ain’t Ryo himself. Fancy meetin’ ya in a place like this.”

“Guild Master...”

...Hugh. Having finished making his report to the mayor, he was on his way back to the guild.

“You headin’ to the lodge, right? I’d like to talk to ya, so hop in.”

“Um...”

Frankly, Ryo had no desire to board the coach because of what happened yesterday...

“Young lady, tell yer boss I took him back to the guild m’self.”

At this point, Ryo had no way out.

"Thank you very much, Reilitta. I'll be fine with the guild master, so you can return to your duties."

"Understood. I'll inform the mayor."

Then he stepped up into the carriage. Hugh was the only one inside.

"Thank you for inviting me."

"No problem. Take a seat over there."

Once Ryo sat down, Hugh rapped on the coach's wall. The vehicle started moving at his signal.

"I'm sure ya know what I wanna talk 'bout, dontcha? What went down yesterday and all."

"Yes, Sir..."

Yesterday, Arthur had come to Ryo's rescue. That was clearly impossible today... So he girded his loins, ready for anything.

"Now, now, no need to tense up like that. I heard everything from Lord Arthur, 'specially how if ya hadn't made it in the nick o' time, they'd have been wiped from existence. 'Course I'm grateful too on that score. So ya have my thanks."

Seated as he was, Hugh still bowed his head respectfully.

"No, don't worry about it," Ryo said, flustered. "I just charged in on my own..."

"Regardless. Ya saved Abel's hide *twice* now. Having said that...it wasn't well done o' ya to fly past the guards. As a guild member, ya can't just do things like that out in the open and as the guild master I can't let it slide either. So yer gonna take on a commission as yer punishment."

"A commission?"

"Yes, sirree. You ain't accepted a single job here on the surface since yer registration, right?"

When he thought about it, Ryo realized Hugh was right. Well, he really didn't have to think all that hard in the first place.

"That's very likely, yes."

"Not 'very likely,' boy. It's *fact*," Hugh declared. He had checked before visiting the mayor, so he knew it was true. "In any case, it ain't like I want ya to take on any urgent jobs. Yer gonna do three o' 'em in the next two months. I leave the choice in yer hands. That's good enough as a punishment, dontcha think?"

It was certainly a much lighter punishment than Ryo had anticipated.

"Uhhh... I know I shouldn't push my luck, but I have to ask... Are you *positive* it shouldn't be a tougher penalty?"

"Aye, I am. This way, no one loses out."

The guild benefited because jobs would be completed. Ryo benefited because he could build up his track record. As for Abel and everyone else who was rescued, they benefited too because they could continue taking on commissions like normal—probably? Well, no one would lose out at least.

"Oh, yeah, Ryo. Why *were* ya in the mayor's estate?"

"Ah, just a mock battle..."

Though Ryo spoke jokingly, Hugh's eyes widened at his words.

"D-Don't tell me ya destroyed the facilities... Please. Everything's fine, right?"

"Gosh, Guild Master, I'm hurt you think I would do such a thing." Ryo had taken Hugh's words as a joke and brushed him off accordingly, but the lack of a smile on Hugh's face said he wasn't joking at all. "It was just a mock battle with dulled swords, Sir. There was no chance of anything like that happening."

"I-I see... As long as nothing went wrong then," Hugh replied, looking genuinely relieved. "Aye, we'll leave it at that."

That was when the carriage finally arrived at the guild.



Magical Training Center Number 3 was located on the outskirts of the Debuhi Empire's capital. At present, the magic division of the imperial army was conducting military exercises. Each group consisted of twenty individuals. If the

Kingdom of Knightley's royal magicians saw the sight, their faces would twist in shock.

First of all, not a single imperial magician chanted a spell out loud. Moreover, the power of their offensive magics was in a completely different league than the ones the Kingdom's magicians were familiar with. On *top* of these two factors, they executed their magics while on the move instead of remaining stationary. As they ran, they shot fireballs at their comrades and negated incoming fireball attacks with air slashes...

Six people watched over the military maneuvers:

Fiona Rubine Bornemisza, commander of the Imperial Magic Division.

Oscar Luska, second-in-command of the same.

Marie, Fiona's adjutant.

Jurgen Barthel, Oscar's adjutant.

And the commanders of the two companies currently fighting each other in the military drill.

Of the six, Oscar's gaze was the most unsparing as he watched the proceedings unfold.

"So this is the most they're capable of right now..." he murmured quietly to no one in particular.

The two company commanders standing behind him heard anyway and a cold sweat trickled down their backs. They suddenly seemed apologetic as well.

"I don't think there's a need to be so pessimistic considering how far they've come in only half a year." Though Division Commander Fiona's tone was gentle, her eyes were anything but as she observed the mock battle.

"You make a fair point, Commander. These two plus the other two companies make for a total of four... I'm simply concerned about how long it will take them to form a cohesive division at this rate. In any case, I suggest we end today's training exercise here."

"Yes, agreed."

With Fiona's words as the signal, Oscar called a halt to the drill by firing a tri-colored magic shot that resembled a signal flare from his hand. The company members on the training ground turned toward the stands upon seeing it and stood at attention. Save for one, who fell to the ground from exhaustion.

"Idiot!"

The person who shouted the word remained a mystery...

Immediately, an extremely thin flame arrow brushed past the fallen magician's right cheek and pierced the ground.

"Eeek!"

The collapsed individual let out the involuntary shriek because Vice Commander Oscar had loosened the flame arrow from his hand.

"You fool! Don't drop your guard just because the battle reaches its end. You need to focus *exactly* when you think it's over or else you'll pay for your carelessness!"

Every single member of both companies responded in unison: "Yes, Sir!"

"The division commander would like a word now. Listen closely," Oscar said, nodding slightly to Fiona.

"Well done on today's training exercise. You've improved since the last one, but I can't say I'd award you passing marks yet."

At her words, the magicians' military postures stiffened even more.

"Tomorrow, the vice commander and I will be departing for the Kingdom of Knightley's port city of Whitnash upon His Imperial Majesty's decree. We'll return in two months' time and conduct another drill then. I fully believe you'll show us even more progress at that time. Dismissed."

In response, everyone present pressed their right fists over their hearts in the imperial salute. Though there were barely fifty of them, which wasn't a large number by any means, it was easy to see why they were the best of the best.

After Division Commander Fiona and the other three top-ranking officials retired to her office, the members of the imperial army's magic division set

about cleaning up the training center. There was no one here foolish enough to cut corners. Training smoothly every day increases your strength, thereby allowing you to survive on a real battlefield. Everyone here knew this from actual experience.

And in order to make sure their training proceeded smoothly, they always needed to maintain the facility. However, talking among themselves wasn't necessarily prohibited during this task.

"Cripes, who the hell actually sits down the second training ends?"

"Seriously. I thought we were dead where we stood when it happened."

The topic of discussion was Oscar's super thin, white, flame arrow.

"It-It's not like I *wanted* to sit down, you know..."

"Fortunately for you, the Vice Commander was feeling nice today. Last time someone collapsed like that...I think it was a guy from the third company and he had both legs shot through, right?"

"Yeah. The flame arrows pierced his thighs, burning his legs from the inside out or something... Bet that hurt real bad, huh?"

Everyone shuddered as they recalled the sight.

But they misunderstood one point. While it was true that the flame arrows plunged through both of the company member's legs, the arrows were specifically designed not to burn anything other than their points of contact. So his legs hadn't burned from the inside out. In fact, he had been healed right away by healers on-site then and even now he dedicated himself to his own training without any issues. Of course, these kinds of stories always wound up being exaggerated.

"Anyway, we'll get stronger as long as we keep doing the training, and being stronger means survival. The most important thing is to take our jobs seriously."

"Yeah, you're definitely not wrong."

"Though there's something I've always wondered... How strong do you think the vice commander actually is? Maybe we could take him on at our current levels..."

“Are you really that stupid? He might as well be in another dimension compared to us. Even if every single member of the division attacked him as a group, he’d wipe us out in an instant. Same goes for the commander, who said she’s no match for the vice commander. So...you get the idea.”

“Damn... I guess his nickname ‘The Inferno Magician’ isn’t just for show, huh...”

“Honestly... Why must Whitnash be so bloody far?” Fiona muttered as she spread open a map depicting the entirety of the Central Provinces in her office.

“There’s no avoiding it, my lady, considering the imperial family is always invited to attend the port opening festival the city hosts every five years,” replied Marie, Fiona’s adjutant, as she poured tea for the commander.

“Indeed. Conrad is attending as a representative of the imperial family, but...why did His Majesty order me to go with him...” Prince Conrad was the third son and Fiona’s older brother. With a quizzical expression, she puzzled over the problem for some time before turning to Oscar, who sat in his usual chair.

“Master, what do you think?”

“Your Highness... How many times have I told you to stop addressing me in such a manner...”

“It’s just the four of us here, so don’t fret.”

The four in the room were Division Commander Fiona, Vice Commander Oscar, and their respective adjutants, Marie and Jurgen. Fiona and Oscar trusted them the most among their subordinates.

Oscar exhaled deeply. “Well, I know less than nothing about the intricacies of politics. I’m merely a magician.”

Staring intently at him, Fiona nodded emphatically. “I sensed something was off the moment you started speaking in such a stilted way. The question, Master, is *why* you’re being so formal.”

“Because...we’ll be spending the next two months with other royals and

nobles. I thought it would be prudent for me to recall my manners while I still have the chance now... Unlike you, Your Highness, I'm not nearly so skilled at adapting to different social situations."

"Ah, I see... I hate to say this, but I'm almost positive the imperial family, my father included, have resigned themselves to your, shall we say, usual manner of speech," Fiona said.

Her regretful tone stunned Oscar. He looked at her, then at Marie, and finally at Jurgen. They all wore similar expressions of sympathy directed at him.

"What a waste of my bloody time and energy..."

"Excellent, you're back in good form, Master. Being true to yourself suits you best. When I heard you speaking so formally at the training center, it made me feel antsy for some reason."

"I know you won't believe me, but I used to speak right proper back in the day... Hell, I can do it now too whenever I'm in the imperial castle... Guess I should just give it up during drills though."

Rueful chuckles escaped from all four of them upon him conceding defeat.

"Back to your original question then. I haven't the foggiest what His Imperial Majesty's thinking. Since there's no ocean in the Empire, maybe he just wants you to enjoy the view... I know there's no way that's right though, so I repeat: I haven't the foggiest what's going through his mind."

"Hm... I suppose we'll find out in due time." Head tilted slightly, Fiona ruminated on a number of things.

Despite his comment, one idea occurred to Oscar. *Wonder if His Majesty intends to spill blood while Her Highness isn't in residence.*

Emperor Rupert VI doted on Fiona, his youngest daughter. Fiona Rubine Bornemisza. Commander of the imperial arm's magic division and also the current emperor's fourteenth child.

Rupert VI had three sons and eleven daughters. All eleven princesses were lovely, but Fiona's beauty stood above the rest. She inherited her striking red hair and deep blue eyes—as well as her pale, pearlescent skin—from her

mother, the first empress who had already passed on to the next world. Despite her relatively short stature of one hundred and sixty centimeters, she possessed a mature, sublime figure belying her eighteen years of age.

Fiona rarely attended social functions such as balls and whatnot because she preferred to devote herself to learning the arts of magic and sword. Raven, a treasured blade gifted to her by her father the emperor, always hung from her hip as she dedicated herself to the strictest training she herself sought. Ever since being appointed as the commander of the imperial army's magic division at seventeen, she had thrown her heart and soul into reviving the unit, meaning her already rare appearances at dances and such became even rarer.

Originally, the Imperial Magic Division existed as a ceremonial unit consisting of magicians who had once served in the imperial army or court and retired from the front lines. It had remained so for two centuries, but when Rupert VI appointed Fiona as the division's commander, he discharged all its members at the time and ordered her to reorganize it as a battle-ready unit.

Six months had passed since then. The division still numbered less than one hundred and twenty members in total. By the standards of the imperial army, it was barely more than a battalion. Yet its members had proved their tremendous strength time and time again under Fiona's leadership.

Of the eleven princesses, she was the only one who manifested an unusual level of magical power. Furthermore, she controlled the elements of fire and light—offensive fire and healing light, both of which she could now manipulate at a high level.

As a father, Rupert VI loved his youngest daughter dearly. But as an emperor, he also loved her as a rare magical combat asset. It was only natural that both of these things were true.

At the same time though, Oscar thought His Majesty didn't like subjecting her to any grotesque sights precisely *because* he loved her so much. It made sense that a parent would never want to expose their children to such terrible spectacles, but from Oscar's perspective, the emperor was even more protective of Fiona compared to the other princesses. Which was why he wondered if something bloody would go down in the Empire during her visit

abroad... For example, a purge of aristocrats opposed to the imperial family... Such were Oscar's musings.

# First Escort Mission

Three days after the fight against the demon prince, all four of Room 10's residents were in the guild's canteen eating breakfast.

"The day's finally here! Our first job as bodyguards!" Nils the swordsman exclaimed.

"Nils, you need to calm down. Otherwise, you won't have enough energy for the actual work," Ryo cautioned. Nils wasn't making many inroads into his breakfast, which was unusual for him.

"I'm just glad you're accompanying us, Ryo," Eto the priest said as he ate his meal in a way that hinted at his good upbringing. "Now we'll be fine no matter what happens."

Amon, the apprentice swordsman and the only F-rank adventurer among them, couldn't conceal his excitement either. "This experience will also mark my first time working together with another party."

"As long as we do our jobs the way Abel explained last night, I'm sure we'll be fine. Despite his appearances, he *is* the leader of a B-rank party, meaning his advice comes from a wealth of experience."

The four of them happened to run into Abel last night as they ate dinner at the canteen. He had been kind enough to explain to them the fundamentals of escort-type commissions.

"If they hired ten of you as escorts, then you're probably looking after five wagons. Could be up to seven depending on circumstances, but the basics are still the same. The general setup is to have three of you up front with the lead wagon, three with the last one, and four spread out through the middle of the convoy."

"So I take it that means we can't rest *in* the wagons, hm... Unfortunate."

"Right in one. Besides, you never get tired, Ryo, so you can just keep walking."

Not to mention the wagons are always loaded down with stuff, meaning there's never a time when the escorts will be able to get on anyway. Back to the formation. It can change depending on the party composition, like the number of priests or ranged jobs like magician and archer. You're with Delong and his people this time, right? They're basically vets at escort-type jobs, so you can leave the logistics to him."

As far as their own supplies, the four of them had no issues on that front since they learned what to take in the beginners' seminar.

"Dang, that class for novices is no joke..."

Nobody heard Abel's mutter.

After finishing breakfast, the four of them headed toward the rendezvous point a little earlier than dictated.

"More importantly... Are you three absolutely *sure* you want to name your party 'Room 10'?"

Ryo had asked them this same question countless times since yesterday. With Nils and Eto's promotion to E-rank came the ability to name their own party, but they'd chosen Room 10 as the name.

"Yeah, for sure. It represents us perfectly, right?" Nils said, his confidence making it clear who had come up with the idea in the first place. Though it would have been easy to figure out it was him even without his remarks.

Eto smiled ruefully as he watched the byplay between Nils and Ryo. Amon looked vaguely uncomfortable, but he didn't contradict Nils either. Because, despite their grumbling, Nils was the backbone of Room 10.

The only hard-and-fast rule in place for party names was that slandering someone was prohibited. For example, Abel the Idiot definitely wouldn't be allowed as a party name. The guild also forced parties to change their names if they tried to submit anything related to the king or the royal family. It was similar to how, on present-day Earth, the word "Royal" couldn't be used without permission in places like England.

So, since the regulations were relatively lax, there was a wide variety of party

names, even for adventurers affiliated with the city of Lune.

The Crimson Sword.

The White Brigade.

The Red Dragon and the Blue Wolf.

Lord Kreis and Comrades.

The Armored Brigade.

Let's All Become Blacksmiths.

Coffee Maker.

Switchback.

Devil.

And more...

Speaking of that last party, after the forced transfer incident in the dungeon a few days ago, the guild might or might not have had a word with them about their name... Of course, they had only chosen the name because it sounded cool and tough. Not a single one of them were adherents of devils or anything along those lines. No one even knew if a religion devoted to devils actually even existed...

On this particular occasion, Room 10 was working together with Coffee Maker, led by D-rank adventurer Delong.

They still had over half an hour left until the appointed meeting time, but six wagons were already lined up near the southern gate. When they drew near, a man, a merchant by the looks of him, approached them.

"You must be the adventurers who accepted this escort mission, yes? My name is Hugo and I'm in charge of the trade group that commissioned this job. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Amon sighed quietly in relief. He'd been a bit worried the merchant would be the domineering sort. Next to him, Ryo was the only one who noticed.

"I'm Nils of Room 10. These guys are Eto, Amon, and Ryo."

After introductions smoothly concluded, a voice came from behind them:

“Oh, you’re all early.”

When they turned around, they saw six adventurers walking toward them.

“And these are the members of Coffee Maker, who will also be accompanying us.”

Hugo was well-acquainted with the other party on account of the numerous past occasions on which they accepted escort jobs with him.

“Hello, Delong. I’m looking forward to working together again.”

“Been a while, Hugo, and same here. So you four must be Room 10, right? Abel mentioned you all. Let’s do a great job together, all right?”

It seemed Abel had laid the groundwork for them after leaving them last night. Despite his appearances, he was quite good at maneuvering behind the scenes and just generally being considerate.

Room 10’s four residents responded politely in turn.

“We’re looking forward to it as well.”

Good greetings are essential. Greetings are the ultimate, versatile communication tool because you can build rapport with others just by saying hello!



The merchant caravan’s destination on this occasion was the Kingdom of Knightley’s largest port city, Whitnash. Located southwest of Lune, a one-way stagecoach journey took two days. This particular escort job was a round-trip journey, so two days to get there, nine days in Whitnash, and two days back for a total of thirteen days. The nine-day stay was considerably longer than a usual merchant caravan, meaning the time they spent working was much longer, which was why each of them would be receiving five gold coins as compensation.

But they were exempt from any bodyguard duties while in Whitnash. Since they could while away their time freely, the job overall wasn’t an overly taxing one. Very agreeable terms for a commission geared toward D-and E-rank

adventurers.

While Room 10's three party members had been lucky enough to land this job, they still had the issue of filling the tenth roster spot. Ryo had joined because he'd gotten a craving for fish. It had been some time since he last enjoyed seafood.

It had been extremely difficult to obtain fish during his time living in the Forest of Rondo. On the verge of death in his battle against the bait ball... Knocked unconscious by the giant snapping shrimp's attack... Almost killed by the kraken-like monster... Those were his memories of the sea.

*Wait a second. The last time I ate fish...could it have been when I was still alive on Earth...?*

His complexion paled upon realizing this terrifying fact. While he grappled with reality, Coffee Maker's Delong called out to him.

"Ryo, you're with Gunn and John from my party. I'm assigning the three of you to the rear wagon."

Before he knew it, their positions in the caravan had been decided.

"All right, everyone, we're departing."

The procession took off, with the lead wagon going first. Although "took off" was an exaggeration since the adventurers were walking and the wagons carrying goods moved at an incredibly leisurely pace.

Gunn of Coffee Maker wasted no time making conversation with Ryo as they paced alongside the caravan at its tail end. "Hey, Ryo," he called. "You're a magician, right? What's your element?"

"It's water."

"Water, huh? Pretty rare attribute. I don't even know if there *are* any water magicians in the guild either... John, do you know one among Lune's adventurers?"

"No... Pretty sure there aren't any. I know fire, air, earth... And healers are light anyway... I can't think of any water or dark magicians."

"Then it's no wonder I'm the only water magician people ever meet lately..."

Gunn burst out laughing at Ryo's woebegone remark. "But yesterday Abel told me you're amazing, Ryo, so I got high hopes for you."

"Yeah, I almost didn't believe the things he said either."

Thanks to Abel, it seemed he wouldn't end up being an object of ridicule.

*Abel's a wonderful person. I'll treat him to a meal next... Ah... Speaking of food, I sure hope he hasn't forgotten his promise to buy me dinner for a week...*

Ryo recalled the promise they made in the dungeon... Even though *he* was the one who'd actually forgotten this whole time.

"Oh, I was curious about something. We're free to do whatever we want during the nine days at our destination, yes? That's a very long time, isn't it?"

"Did no one tell you? The timing of this merchant caravan deliberately coincides with Whitnash's port opening festival held once every five years. If I remember right, the festival lasts a week and we'll be there for that entire span."

"A festival?! Sounds like fun!"

"Yup, it sure is. They go all out too since it only happens once every five years. There's all kinds of things to do and see, so lots of folks from other countries visit too. We don't have to work while we're there, plus the trading firm secured our lodgings, making this job insanely cushy. No complaints from us, that's for sure."

Gunn and John were certainly in a very good mood.

"Not to mention how well-maintained the highway is between Lune and Whitnash. It's regularly patrolled too, which is why bandits hardly ever appear. Now do you get why this kind of job is perfect for D-and E-ranks?"

"Then how in the world were we lucky enough to be put on such an easy job...?"

"Yeah, about that... The issue was the thirteen days. Almost half a month... Most of Lune's adventurers rent rooms there, right? So spending money on a place they won't be using for almost two weeks is...well, it's a waste. That's why

jobs with long durations still aren't popular. But that's where you and Room 10 come in. Since you all live in the guild dorm..."

"Even if we leave Lune behind for a long time, we don't have to worry about losing money on lodging, right?"

"Bull's-eye."

The six members of Coffee Maker collectively owned a house, so they didn't have to worry about commissions with long durations.

*Coffee really has it all figured out, huh... No wonder they're pros at work like this. Oh, right.*

"Um," Ryo said. "Do you mind me asking how you came up with your party name?"

All Ryo could imagine was the machine back on modern-day Earth that brewed coffee automatically. On top of that, the party leader's name was "Delong," which was awfully similar to a famous coffeemaker Ryo's company had... All of the employees had loved the thing because it always made delicious coffee, so of course he knew about it too.

"Ah, that's our leader's doing."

"Yup. His grandpa was a famous adventurer and I'm pretty sure his party's name at the time was Coffee Maker..."

"What was his grandfather's name...?"

"Delonga, I think."

Ryo nodded deeply in understanding.

Incidentally, he had yet to drink a cup of coffee in Phi since his reincarnation...



The next day, they encountered a group of people who seemed to be repairing something on the side of the road. At the head of the caravan, Delong had explained to Nils and the others various points about escort-type jobs, so they readied themselves in case the strangers were bandits or some such...

"Ah, those are the Blacksmiths. They fix broken down carriages and whatnot."

“Blacksmiths?” Nils muttered, his head cocked in confusion. What were blacksmiths doing here?

“Yeah. The D-rank party in Lune. What was their official name again? Let’s All Become Blacksmiths.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of them.” Nils knew it too since it was such an odd name. If he’d said this part out loud within earshot of Ryo, the water magician probably would have responded with something like, “I don’t think you should be casting stones considering you named your party Room 10.”

“Hey, folks! Just passing through!” Delong called out to the blacksmiths on the side of the road, giving them a heads-up as they walked past.

“Hm? Oh, hey, Coffee,” one of them replied without stopping his work. He and the four others—all five of them were large, brawny people—were repairing a damaged wheel on one of the three wagons. The worried merchants who owned the vehicles watched from nearby. “Y’all heading to Whitnash too? Heard they’re launching some fantastic ships, so make sure you check ‘em out.”

“Now you know those five are the Blacksmiths,” Delong said. “Aside from the priest, the rest of them are frontline attackers, but they’re all very skilled in smithing.”

“So they’re blacksmiths *and* adventurers?” Nils asked.

“Yup, they are. He mentioned something about ships being launched, right? They were probably traveling to see them when they ran into the trade caravan in trouble. I’m guessing they stopped to help the merchants. Anyway, those guys enjoy doing that kind of stuff.” Delong chuckled. “Probably Abel’s fault there are so many good-natured adventurers like them in Lune.”



Two days later, their group arrived at the port city of Whitnash without incident. Thus Room 10 completed the first half of their first escort job.

“Everyone, this is the inn we’ll be staying at,” Hugo explained. “We reserved two rooms that will fit three people each and one room that will fit four. Please check in at the front desk. We’ll be departing for Lune at nine in the morning

two days after the port opening festival ends, which is ten days from now. You're free to spend the time as you'd like until then."

When he was finished, Hugo—who was in charge of the trade firm—went off to conduct negotiations with his fellow merchants.

"Nils, you and your guys are good with the four-person room, right? We'll take the other two rooms," Delong said.

"Yes, of course."

"Excellent. See you all in ten days then."

And with that, Coffee Maker proceeded to the front desk.

"Ahhh," Eto sighed as soon as they entered their room. "I'm glad we made it here without any issues."

They'd been somewhat nervous these past two days on account of this being Room 10's first escort job. Ryo was no exception either as he felt fatigue settling in.

"How about we take a walk around the city while we eat?" Nils suggested.

Everyone agreed and left their room to sate their hunger.

Since the port opening festival would start the day after tomorrow, the entire city was bustling with energy. It wasn't just the main avenue but various side streets and back alleys lined with stalls. The four of them ate a variety of things as they strolled around.

"This is...fish and chips, isn't it?" Ryo trembled, overcome with emotion. "So tasty..."

"I can't believe it..." Eto said next to him. "I'm actually eating a devilfish's foot..." He smacked his lips with relish as he ate a chargrilled dish resembling octopus feet.

"The ground shrimp in this croquette makes it taste even more delicious," Amon said, thoroughly enjoying his own meal.

By his side, Nils savored the flavor of the grilled squid he held in both hands.

“I think I could get addicted to this whole-roasted mini kraken. The sweet sauce really takes it to a whole ‘nother level.”

In the end, the four residents of Room 10 didn’t enter a single restaurant that night. Instead, they filled up on all kinds of foods sold at various street stalls.



The next day, the entire city was in the throes of its final preparations for the festival kicking off tomorrow. Flurries of visitors from within the country as well as abroad entered the city one after another. One particular group stood out among them. They were from the Debuhi Empire and an especially luxurious carriage within their procession attracted a great deal of attention... It sported the imperial family’s crest on the door.

“Rand, is there a problem?”

“My apologies, Your Highness. It seems there’s some sort of delay with the Monarchy of Kufaris’s procession ahead of us. Should I investigate?”

“No, it’s not our problem, so I don’t care. It isn’t my place to intervene in another nation’s affairs. Let us wait. I’m in no rush.”

With that, the third imperial prince, Conrad Stein Bornemisza, settled deeper into the carriage’s sofa cushions. “So this is what the sea smells like,” he murmured quietly, detecting the salty scent wafting in from the windows. “It feels nostalgic for some reason.”

*How amusing to find this scent nostalgic when there are no oceans in our empire. His Majesty’s dearest wish is to claim the sea for his own. I believe it’s been the same for his predecessors too... But as soon as we do, I’m sure that will come with its own host of troubles.*

The carriage started moving forward again at this point.

“Your Highness, we’ll head directly to the mayoral residence where we’ll be staying.”

“Much obliged, Rand. Should make things easier since we have a meeting, hm?”

“Tis as you say, my lord. After the conclusion of your talks, his lordship will be

hosting a banquet tonight as well.”

As the Empire’s representative, Conrad’s schedule was jam-packed with events.

A hint of sadness touched the smile on his face. “Well, I suppose it is what it is.”



That night, the city held an eve festival while the lord of Whitnash hosted a banquet in his residence.

“Forgive me, Fiona,” Conrad said. “I know you’re not used to settings like this one and yet I still dragged you here... You must be exhausted, right?”

“Conrad, please don’t worry about me.”

The third imperial prince spoke to the eleventh imperial princess as they accepted greetings from the procession of attendees.

“Lord Roxley will be retiring for the night after this, so we’ll take the opportunity ourselves to withdraw to our respective quarters. We still have much to do starting tomorrow and for the duration of our stay, so make sure you rest well tonight, Sister.”

With that parting remark, Conrad changed locations, accompanied by visitors from other countries intent on greeting them. This would make it easier for Fiona to slip away when the time came. Ever a tactful prince, Conrad was.

Not long after, Lord Roxley took his leave, sent off by everyone in attendance. Following his departure, Fiona and a number of the other guests did the same.

“Welcome back, Your Highness.”

Fiona tumbled onto her bed the moment she returned to the room provided to her.

“Your Highness,” Marie, her adjutant, rushed to caution her. “That is conduct unbecoming for a lady. We’ve been over this before.”

She had been assigned the role of maid for this trip. Adjutant to the

commander, maid to the princess. She was a skillful individual capable of executing both duties flawlessly.

“But Marie... I’m exhausted.”

“Yes,” she said, “that is extremely clear from the fatigue oozing from every pore of your body.” She lifted Fiona and started undressing her.

“I’m so glad Conrad told me I can retire for the night... Once more I realize that I really am *not* suited for events like those. My office and the training center are a thousand times better.”

Sighing, Fiona changed into her loungewear. Normally, maids assisted their mistresses for all changes of attire, including loungewear, but this particular imperial princess spent so much time as an army commander that she preferred to tend to herself. In fact, a maid helping her was only a hindrance...

“Because Prince Conrad has always had a soft spot for you, my lady.”

“While I do agree that he’s a kind man, I think there’s something more at play on this occasion. I’m almost positive my presence right now is a nuisance to his work.”

“I very much doubt he thinks of you as a nuisance!” Marie shrieked.

“Ack, sorry. I should have phrased that better. My brother and I are representing the imperial family on this official state visit. That means the responsibility falls on us *both*. So if I say something inadvisable and inadvertently commit the Empire to something... Well, you know that will just cause trouble for us. *That* is why I think he told me to retire early.”

“I see now. To think His Highness would show such foresight...”

“Truly, I couldn’t agree more. Even though we’re only three years apart...” Fiona shook her head a little then. “He really is amazing.”

“And so are you, my lady!” Marie said, doing her best to cheer up the superior officer she so respected and admired. “You have a way with the sword and magic unrivaled by others!”

“Yes, I suppose a woman whose strong points are sword and magic is interesting in her own right,” Fiona said with a laugh.

# The Port Opening Festival

The weeklong Whitnash Port Opening Festival commenced with an announcement at the main event area in the city's central plaza.

"That's...Abel, isn't it?" Ryo said.

"Yes," Eto confirmed. "There's no mistaking him..."

"I can't believe he's seated in the visitors' section," Amon added. "Amazing."

"He really is awesome!" Nils said.

As standing-room spectators, they had a good view of the guests' seats, and no matter how they looked at him, one of the visitors was almost certainly Abel. Instead of his usual adventuring outfit, he wore formal attire that made him appear quite dignified.

"He's proof that clothes really do make the man."

Ryo's rude mutter was drowned out by the noise of their surroundings, meaning the members of the Room 10 party didn't hear him either.

"That woman sitting there with him is incredibly beautiful, isn't she?" Amon said, looking at the visiting dignitaries' section.

"Oh, the redhead?" Nils replied. "She sure is."

"I know I already mentioned this, but I need to remind you again that she's an imperial princess. Nils, that puts her even more beyond your reach than Miss Nina."

Eto mercilessly hit Nils right where it hurt.

Nils shook his head dramatically. "No, you've got it wrong. I don't want to *be* with her or anything. I'm just appreciating her beauty is all."

"What if there was a chance you two *could* end up together, Nils? What would you do then?"

"I'd be happy as a clam, of course," Nils said, going along with Ryo's without

batting an eye.

Eto sighed in exasperation while Amon smiled wryly.

“Aw, come on, don’t be like that. Since I was born as a man, the least I can do is aim high!”

“Before that though, you have to beat Abel. So good luck, Nils!”

“Uhhh, I dunno about that...”

Just when Nils suddenly seemed discouraged about aiming for the top, someone called out to the four of them.

“Aha! Fancy meeting you here, Ryo and company!”

Ryo found Lyn from the Crimson Sword there when he turned around. Behind her were Rihya and Warren.

“How fortuitous that we were able to meet despite this crowd.”

Upon hearing Rihya’s voice, Eto went from exasperated to nervous.

“M-Miss Rihya...”

“The fact that you three are here means...that really *is* Abel in the visitors’ section, isn’t it?”

Ryo still found it hard to believe it was Abel.

“Yes. He’s here as Lune’s guild master’s proxy. But the guild master himself will arrive tomorrow, at which point Abel will be relieved of his duty,” Rihya explained.

“Situations like these occur sometimes, wherein B-rank adventurers represent the guild master. Usually, Phelps of the White Brigade fulfills the role on behalf of Lune, but at the moment, he and his party are busy with their mission transporting food supplies, so the job ostensibly fell to Abel.”

“What do you mean by ‘ostensibly’?”

“Abel never disappoints, huh? He really is the coolest.”

Nils, not one to get stuck on details, praised the man he deeply respected.

“I think the guild master’s true motive in sending us here is to separate us

from working with the Bureau on their dungeon mission. It's his way of exacting revenge on Master Hilarion in the capital after what happened not too long ago."

The Crimson Sword went down into the dungeon with the royal magicians' research team because of a letter from the individual named Hilarion. And then they ended up battling the devils. So it came as no surprise that Hugh might have a thing or two to say to Hilarion considering the guild master almost lost a few of Lune's most valuable fighters.

While those thoughts ran through Ryo's mind, Lyn growled low in her throat as she gazed intently at the visitors' section.

"Grrr," Lyn murmured. "The barrier enclosing them is definitely made from air magic... It's so very thick."

"Huh?" Eto asked, surprised. "That's air magic? It isn't just a normal Magical Barrier?"

"It is indeed air magic. I guess a more accurate description would be a defensive membrane rather than a true barrier. Similar to the type wyverns always construct around themselves."

"The lord of Whitnash possesses a secret treasure capable of creating a defensive air membrane. It's been passed down in his family line for generations. I heard it consumes a great deal of energy though, making it inefficient, which is why he hardly ever uses it... But considering the presence of an imperial prince and princess, it certainly wouldn't do for war to break out should bad actors succeed with their sabotage... So the artifact's inefficiency is a poor excuse for not using it in this particular case, hm?"

Ryo and his friends were astounded by Lyn and Rihya's revelations.

*Acts of terror would definitely be awfully problematic. For example, a world war with a prince's assassination. Here's hoping nothing bad happens.*

In his heart, Ryo fervently wished for world peace.

"But isn't that princess the commander of the Imperial Magic Division? Which means her right-hand man is here too..."

“Yes, I do believe you’re right...”

There seemed to be a hidden meaning to Lyn and Rihya’s exchange.

“Is he dangerous?” Ryo asked them curiously.

“Yup. The vice commander is the Empire’s vaunted Inferno Magician.”

“Whoa, why does that sound so cool?”

The two women didn’t hear his whisper on account of the noise increasing around them.

“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 in a single strike. A third states he annihilated a town where a rebel army barricaded itself in a single assault.”

“I’ve heard those rumors too,” Eto asked, red-faced. “Are they actually true though?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. But people insist all of it is true. And if everything *is* true...he certainly isn’t someone we want to involve ourselves with, hm?”

Ryo privately agreed with her. Though the man’s nickname was cool, he swore to himself to stay away from him.

Abel was busy with official duties until Hugh’s arrival tomorrow, so the remaining three members of the Crimson Sword said goodbye after telling them they planned to enjoy the festival themselves. Room 10’s members would be doing the same.

“All right, guys! Today, we’re gonna eat until we explode!”

“Hear, hear!”

Normally, E-and F-rank adventurers weren’t flush with coin. But the members of Room 10 were different because...

“Boy, am I glad we didn’t screw up Ryo’s commission to mine the magic copper ore.”

...thanks to the reward of three hundred thousand florins each received from completing the job, they had money. Nils had bought a pocket watch soon

after, but it only cost about twenty thousand florins, so his coin purse was still pleasantly heavy.

“Ah, excuse me.”

“Oh, not at all. I’m sorry too.”

When Ryo turned around ready to strike out and enjoy the festival, he almost bumped into someone behind him. Luckily, both of them reacted super quickly and avoided a collision.

“Sir, will you quit dawdling? We still have so much to buy for the commander.”

The words filtered into Ryo’s ears as he walked away.



“Damn it, man, you know I can’t handle crowds...”

“Oh, so is that the excuse you’re going to use with the commander? You know as well as I do how excited she must be waiting for us. She’ll definitely cry if she doesn’t get a reward of at least fish and chips from you after enduring the visitors section for so long.”

Vice Commander Oscar, also known as the Inferno Magician, and Jurgen, his adjutant, had been tasked with purchasing and bringing back delicious foods for Commander Fiona from the stalls.

“I seriously doubt she’d ever cry over something like that...”

Their noisy surroundings drowned out Oscar’s quiet words, so Jurgen didn’t hear him.



“Let’s see, let’s see. We have whole-roasted mini kraken, super thin crispy pancakes, and a bowl of fried foods... We’re still missing the fish and chips though. She said not to bother coming back without it... Aha, we can buy it there. And look, we’re lucky enough to get a short line right now. Off we go, Sir.”

With that, Jurgen got in line at the food stall.

“You really are the hardworking type, eh, Jurgen...”

It went without saying that Oscar also liked tasty food, but not so much that he was willing to stand in line to eat some, which was why he was a fish out of water in situations like this one. Unfortunately for him, his participation was mandatory for this particular “mission.”

“Sir, please make sure to keep the food we already bought warm. Can’t have it getting cold! Otherwise, the commander will be devastated.”

The task was child’s play for the man known as the Inferno Magician. And...the only one in the whole wide world who could use said Inferno Magician in such a way was Princess Fiona.



“Oh, pardon me.”

“No problem.”

The exchange, similar to another one not far from them, occurred outside the seating area for the visiting dignitaries. This time, it was between the Debuhi Empire’s third prince, Conrad, and Abel, acting as the Lune guild master’s proxy. They had both stepped down from the platform at the same time.

“If I recall,” Conrad said, “you’re Lord Abel and you’re representing...Lune’s guild master, wasn’t it?”

“That’s correct, Your Highness. My name is Abel. *Just Abel* at the moment,” Abel said pointedly, noticing Conrad’s expression.

“I see. Apologies for staring. You strongly resemble someone I met once.”

“Is that so? I’m sure it’s just a coincidence. Perhaps my doppelgänger.”

“Will you be here as a proxy for your entire stay?”

“No, only for today and the festival’s last day since the guild master will be arriving tomorrow. I believe a number of meetings and such have been scheduled for all officials from the second to the sixth day?”

“Indeed. Rarely do state leaders, guilds’ top brass, and the lords in the area come together like this, so naturally, our itineraries are crammed full of conferences and whatnot.” Conrad shrugged and shook his head in a “what can you do” gesture.

“My condolences then.”

“Lord Abel, I’m sure when you return home... Ah, my apologies. Ignore me. I’m simply talking to myself. My younger sister is here with me as well, but I’m leaving enjoyment of the festivities to her.” A cheerful grin accompanied his words.

“Oh, yes, she was sitting in the same section as us earlier. Lady Fiona, commander of the Imperial Magic Division.”

“Does her title bother you after all, Lord Abel?”

For a moment, only a fraction of a second, a sharp glint flashed deep in Conrad’s eyes, but Abel didn’t miss it.

“I must confess I have no idea what you’re referring to, Your Highness. Though I suppose if the commander is here, then naturally, the vice commander accompanied her too, yes? The one nicknamed Inferno Magician...”

“Well, I can neither confirm nor deny since that’s classified information for the military...”

Despite Conrad making a pretense of sidestepping the question, he very much had no intention of hiding the fact that the Inferno Magician, Oscar Luska, was also in attendance. Because everything he said and did was political maneuvering, a show of force. That was how the Empire operated.

“Ah, I have much to discuss with the lord of Whitnash, but I’m sure we’ll meet again soon.”

With that parting remark, Conrad walked away from Abel.

“Ugh, I really can’t deal with him...” Abel mumbled to himself. “I’ll never be good at stuff like this, huh?”



“Haaa, I’m so tired,” Fiona said, collapsing onto her bed.

“Your Highness, please stop acting in such an unladylike fashion. This is the second time in as many days I’m having to scold you,” chided her adjutant-cum-maid Marie, just like she had the previous night.

“It’s not my fault! You have no idea how annoying it is to sit like a proper princess while everyone watches me like a hawk!”

“There’s no helping it. After all, you are without a doubt a princess, my lady... Having said that, you should be used to being the center of attention considering how often members of the division stare at you when you’re working”

“They don’t count. I know their faces and they know mine. But having so many people I don’t know watching me like this feels... I don’t know...”

“Unpleasant perhaps?”

“Awkward.”

“I see... As expected, I truly don’t understand what you mean, Your Highness.”

Even as she conversed with Fiona, Marie helped the princess out of her dress and hung it up so it wouldn’t wrinkle. Fiona then promptly changed into the attire she always wore as division commander.

“Ahhh, these clothes really are the best. Functional and easy to move in.”

While they chatted, a knock sounded on the door. The pair that had been sent to shop around had returned.

“We’re back, Your Highness.”

“Bloody hell, I’m beat.”

Adjutant Jurgen and Vice Commander Oscar, afflicted with a sense of fatigue.

“You too, Vice Commander...?”

“What do you mean?”

“Her Highness said essentially the same thing when we retired here after the ceremony...”

With a shake of her head, Marie began preparing tea for them all.

“I-I just can’t handle crowds. That’s all.” For whatever reason, Oscar spoke in a blustering tone.

“Let me tell you, Marie, he almost crashed into someone. Almost. I don’t even know how he didn’t.”

“Yeah, that was close. I was afraid I’d drop all the food I was carrying if we did. But the only reason we didn’t wasn’t because of me. It was the other guy. He reacted *very* fast and moved to avoid me. Pretty amazing for someone who looked like an adventurer and a magician.”

Oscar reheated the food as he thought back to the encounter.

“All’s well that ends well. Anyway, let’s eat.”

Fiona’s words kicked off the Imperial Magic Division’s tea party.



The second day of the port opening festival.

“I heard there are some shops near the port too.”

At Amon’s words, Room 10’s quartet headed toward the boardwalk. Up until now, they had launched their very own conquest against the stalls lining the main boulevard, but today, they would go in another direction entirely. What wouldn’t change was that most of the dishes still revolved around seafood.

“No, it can’t be... Is the sauce on this salt-grilled fish...smoked soy sauce...?”

Ryo was moved by his first experience with soy sauce since leaving his life on Earth behind.

“This rolled fried flour batter is called a...kuh-rape? The sweet toppings are scrumptious.”

Eto enjoyed a crepe that appeared from who knows where under a sign celebrating the food’s debut in this country.

"I'm loving this pairing of roasted tuna fillet with a mouthful of rice." Amon kept going back for more pieces of what looked to be sushi made with roasted, fatty cuts of tuna.

Nils's cheeks were stuffed with bites of the candied apple-like abble. He gripped two skewers in each hand. "I can't get enough of this abble coated in the hardened sweet syrup!"

As they ate things other than seafood, the four of them moved to get a look at the fast ship, *Rain Shooter*, on display at the harbor. Ryo was the one who'd been keen on seeing it, so he'd convinced the others to go with him, although they hadn't been all that interested in the first place. But now, upon seeing its elegant exterior, they couldn't look away.

"It's...beautiful..."

"What an eccentric design."

"I'd love to see it in action on the open water."

Nils, Eto, and Amon were spellbound.

"Hey, you guys think this is the ship they were talking about on our way to Whitnash?" Nils added absentmindedly.

Coming in at thirty meters long, its form was that of a trimaran. It had one large hull at the bottom, which touched the water in the center, and smaller hulls lower on either side, making it more resistant to rolling than a catamaran with two lower hulls. Naturally, no one in this world had ever heard the terms trimaran, much less catamaran. Taking this fact into account, the *Rain Shooter* was a groundbreaking ship.

But that wasn't the only thing that fascinated Ryo.

"It doesn't have any sails..." he whispered.

"No oars either," Eto added.

It was neither a sailing vessel nor an oar boat. Of course, it wasn't a screw ship either.

Amon tilted his head thoughtfully. "I wonder how it moves."

While the three of them considered the ship's mechanisms, Nils approached someone nearby who seemed to be part of its crew. "Excuse me, can you tell us how this boat works?" he asked.

"Yeah, I get that question a lot." They smiled cheerfully. "Air magic propels it. A jet of air is blown backward above the waterline while water magic operates below the sea."

An unbelievable jet and waterjet hybrid!

"Does that mean air and water magicians are part of the crew...?"

"No. Some kind of alchemy using magic stones supposedly. I don't actually know the details myself either."

Then the crew member went back to work.

"Wooow."

It was anyone's guess who uttered that sound of amazement...

"I *really* want to see it cutting through the waves," Eto muttered.

Nils looked around and spotted a signboard. "Look, it says they're launching it tomorrow afternoon for the visiting dignitaries."

"Oooh."

The four of them became even more excited at the prospect of yet another fun event. Then Nils found something else and started reading it.

"What is it, Nils?"

"Looks like there's some kind of contest tomorrow morning... The '30th Two-Man Boat Race, Adventurers' Division.' And as of this morning, there are still slots open to enter..."

"Why is there an adventurers' division though?"

Eto, Amon, and Ryo spoke in unison.

"Let me see what it says... 'Participation isn't strictly limited to adventurers (the use of magic is prohibited), but oar attacks are allowed in the second half, so sturdy individuals are preferred.'"

“This race sounds insane...” Ryo blurted without thinking.

“Sign-ups are at the tent over there, huh...”

“Nils, are you *actually* thinking of entering?” Amon asked.

“First place winner receives three hundred thousand florins, second place gets one hundred thousand...”

“No way!”

Ryo and Eto observed Nils and Amon on the verge of losing to the power of money.

“Ryo... Money is a scary thing, isn’t it?”

“Eto...let’s pray for their well-being.”

After that, the Nils-Amon pair successfully applied for the last open slot.

“Oh, they’re doing target shooting.”

“Target shooting?”

The game involved shooting at a target floating on the sea from the port.

*But the scale of this version of target shooting is very different from one at a typical festival back on Earth...*

In this game, the farthest target bobbing on the open water was a hundred meters away. It seemed incredibly difficult to hit, which explained why no arrows had reached it yet while the nearer target, only thirty meters, bristled with arrows.

“We...don’t have a single archer among us, huh...” Nils mumbled as he gazed at the other three’s faces.

“Wait,” Ryo said. “Doesn’t Abel know how to use a bow...?”

“He sure does. I saw him fire a bunch during the Great Tidal Bore and I gotta say, he was incredible! So good it’d be easy to mistake him for a pro archer.”

“Nah, I’m nowhere near that good.”

Nils froze when he heard Abel’s voice coming suddenly from behind him. Eto

and Amon looked surprised too. Ryo was the only one unfazed since he'd noticed him. In fact, he had deliberately turned the conversation to his friend *because* he realized he was walking toward them.

"Are you alone, Abel? Where's the rest of your party?"

"Probably wandering around checking out the stalls... GuilMas finally showed up not too long ago, which means I'm free from all that official work..."

He held a whole-roasted mini kraken in one hand. It looked just like grilled squid back in Japan.

"Ah, that sure is tasty, huh!"

Nils had eaten the same thing yesterday. His voice pitched with excitement when he realized that he and the person he admired most shared the same taste in food.

"Yeah, it really is. There's a *ton* of delicious food for sale, huh? I'm kinda worried folks will go broke."

"That just means you have an opportunity to demonstrate your generosity! 'It's my treat, so eat whatever you want!' Go on, try saying it."

"Yeah, no. Not in a million years."

While they chatted, next to them, Eto and Amon took on the challenge of the target shooting game. One turn cost fifty florins. Hitting the target one hundred meters away would net you five thousand florins. The closest target at a thirty-meter distance also returned a respectable five-hundred-florin prize. They each bought five arrows, and, dreaming of getting rich quickly, aimed for the farthest target.

"Here goes!"

They fired with spirit, but...not a single arrow found its mark. They all fell short.

*I just realized I've never actually used a bow... Compared to me then, I think they're both amazing for even making their arrows fly any distance.*

After being impressed by Eto and Amon, Ryo turned to Nils.

“Nils, you don’t want to try it?”

“Heh heh heh. You’re in for the shock of your life, Ryo, when you hear I’ve never even touched a bow.”

“I actually *am* shocked because that’s exactly what I expected.”

Beside them, Abel shook with mirth, attempting to stifle his laughter.

“Abel, it’s not that funny.”

“L-Look, I tried really hard not to laugh, okay? Phew. Sorry, sorry. I’m not laughing *at* you or making fun of you. You just remind me so much of my old self that I couldn’t help cracking up...”

“I take it that means you weren’t very good at using a bow then?”

“Understatement of the century. Like Nils, I’d never even touched one cuz the sword has always been my one and only.” He thumped the sword in its sheath slung across his back. “But that won’t fly once you become an adventurer, so...you know how my party doesn’t have any archers? Well, that’s why I started practicing like crazy with a bow.”

In the meantime, Eto and Amon returned from the target shooting game, having exactly nothing to show for their efforts.

“It’s not easy using a bow, huh?”

“I didn’t even get close.”

The two young men sounded hopelessly disappointed.

“Abel, time for you to show us your mettle now. Please show your juniors how a veteran uses the bow,” Ryo said, trying to rile him up.

Abel scowled in displeasure. “No, I’m good, since I’m a swordsman and all...”

“You can do it, Abel. I know you can.”

While Ryo and Abel argued, Nils, for whatever reason, went off to buy a single arrow.

“Here, Abel.”

*Only one arrow... Nils, you’re raising the bar too high by telling him to hit the*

*target in one go.*

Even Ryo felt a little sorry for Abel now, but Abel's expression remained unchanged as he took the bow and arrow from Nils. He quietly got into position, nocked the arrow, then fired.

"Whooooooooaaaaa!"

Cheers erupted. The arrow pierced the target, bobbing and swaying a hundred meters out on the sea, in a splendid display of his skill.

"You really are the star of the show..." Ryo whispered unthinkingly.

"Oh, wow, oh, wow, oh, wow."

"So *this* is what it means to be a B-rank adventurer..."

"Abel, you are so freaking awesome."

Amon, Eto, and of course Nils were all incredibly excited. Abel was the calmest despite being the one who hit the mark. He returned the bow to the vendor and collected his winnings. A huge cheer went up when he did.

"I was wondering what all the noise was. Of course you're the reason, Abel," Lyn said as she and the rest of The Crimson Sword appeared.

"Oh, Abel, I see you've been liberated from your official duties, hm?" Rihya added.

Behind them was Warren, carrying lots of things.

"Guys, seriously... Why do you have so much stuff? Did you buy up all the stalls? Jeez."

Abel's face twitched at the mountain of items the two of them had forced Warren to carry.

Rihya harrumphed primly. "A woman's life is complicated, ergo she requires a great many things."

"Exactly. I couldn't have said it better myself." Lyn smiled ruefully. "Never mind that most of the shopping was just Rihya doing it as stress relief."

Then she leaned over to whisper softly to Ryo: "Rihya's been in a terrible

mood without Abel.”

“I see...”

That made complete sense to Ryo.

“All right, Nils, time for the four of us to check out what’s happening over there. Abel, thanks very much for showing us how talented you are.”

“Uh, sure. Anytime. See you guys around.”

Then Rihya grabbed Abel’s arm and dragged him toward the main street.

“Abel is a god among men!”

“And Miss Rihya...is a goddess.”

“Maybe I should learn how to use a bow too.”

Nils, Eto, and Amon remarked in turn. Though, by this point in the story, it probably isn’t necessary anymore to point out who said what.



“This alluring aroma... Could it be...” Ryo murmured.

“It smells great. The spices really stir up your appetite, don’t they?” Eto said.

Nils nodded. “Oh, yeah, I’m hungry.”

“But you were holding candy abbles in both hands earlier, Nils,” Amon said.

All three were drawn in by the captivating scent drifting toward them from across the street. When they peeked inside the restaurant...

“Seafood curry!”

...Ryo shouted excitedly at the unexpected discovery.

“Curry indeed. We can get it in Lune too, but I’ve only had it a few times in my life since it’s so expensive,” Eto said as he sniffed appreciatively. It was a rare sight.

“All right, we’re eating here, guys. Or else I’ll die from starvation.”

“The smell definitely makes my stomach growl too. This will be my first time eating curry.”

Nils sat down and Amon did the same. Bursting with high expectations, the latter browsed through the menu.

“I’ll have the seafood curry.”

“Hm. The house curry for me.”

“A huge serving of the beef curry for me!”

“I’ll have the chef’s special, the super extra spicy curry.”

Ryo, Eto, and Nils gave their orders one by one. Amon, the last to do so, chose the super extra spicy curry for his first curry challenge... And upon hearing his order, the other party members of Room 10 trembled in fear.

“A-Amon, don’t you think you’re going a bit overboard with the challenge...?” Ryo said.

“You *do* realize it isn’t just extra spicy but *super* extra spicy, right...?” Eto said.

“Don’t worry, Amon. I got your back. I’ll take care of your things after you die!” Nils said.

They each cheered Amon on in their own way.

“I love spicy foods, so I think I’ll be fine,” Amon said, his expression extremely nonchalant.

All of their curries looked delicious as the waiter set down their plates in front of them. If the Fill-Up Station’s curry in Lune was the embodiment of Japanese curry, then this curry might be considered “slightly Javanese style Japanese curry.” It tasted wonderful. Any curry above average was delicious!

As for Amon, whom they all worried about...

“This is so incredibly good! The spice level isn’t overwhelming either. It hits you at just the right moments.”

The curry was *very* well received. After hearing Amon’s comment, Nils decided to try a bite...which almost sent him to the afterlife then and there.

“Don’t worry, Nils. We’ll settle your affairs after you die...”

“Must be intensely fiery, huh?”

Ryo and Eto were both interested in the heat, but they contented themselves with merely spectating. After all, curiosity killed the cat...and the saying was particularly apt in this situation.

Amon ordered another plate of the super extra spicy curry because he enjoyed it so much. Nils, having experienced the dish's tremendous heat firsthand, shuddered in response.



That night, three shadowy figures stirred in the darkness of Whitnash.

“Status report.”

“Everything is going smoothly. We’re clear to proceed anytime after the fourth day.”

“When will most of them gather?”

“The garden party on the last night. It’ll be held in the courtyard of the lord’s residence.”

“Outside, huh? Convenient for us. We’ll carry out the plan then.”

“Understood.”



The third day of the port opening festival arrived. With it began Nils and Amon’s battle in the boat race. Full of energy from the moment they woke up in the morning, they headed toward the site for the 30th Two-Man Boat Race, Adventurers’ Division.

A shocking sight awaited them there.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Piss off. That’s *my* line.”

Dan, resident of the guild dorm’s Room 1, had also entered the race. Ryo and Eto could see the exchange from their seats in the spectator stands too.

“That’s definitely Dan, isn’t it?”

“Nils isn’t backing down, huh?”

Their suspicions were confirmed by Nils's aggressive attitude. Dan's minions sat a bit of a distance from the two of them. As far as Ryo remembered, they should have all been men, but he noticed a girl among their group now.

*Wait, what? Isn't that...the girl Dan saved in the dorm's courtyard...? I guess she's part of his party now? She looks really worried for him, so don't tell me she's in love with him...*

Puzzled, Ryo cocked his head slightly.

"Something wrong?" Eto followed Ryo's gaze. "Are those Dan's people?"

"Yes. Do you see the girl with them? She's the one he saved before."

"Oh ho, you don't say! That's Sasha from Room 2. I know her, since she's a priest like me. Even though she's still only sixteen years old, she's already quite talented. The others in Room 2 were scouted by different E-rank parties. I'm almost positive Sasha should have been too... But based on what I'm seeing now, I guess she joined Dan's party, hm? As far as I'm aware, they've never had a priest in their party, so adding her to the roster will make their party comp really well-balanced."

Ryo wasn't surprised to learn that Eto was tuned into the dormitory's grapevine. While they talked, the boat race competitors got ready. The rules were simple. Every two-man pair boarded their boat provided by the race organizers with their two oars each, rowed out to buoys four hundred meters offshore, circled around it, and returned.

There was only one wrinkle: the moment competitors passed the buoys, other teams could attack them with their oars.

The use of magic was prohibited along with boarding other boats. Both feet, from heel to toe, must also remain inside their respective boats at all times. On top of that, participants weren't allowed to use any weapons other than the oars. They could, however, use their own bodies.

Simple rules, yet violent. The event was immensely popular among the people, and the thirtieth race signified a tradition spanning roughly one hundred and fifty years...

The thirty boats lined up at the start line. Then the ringing tones of the fanfare marked the start of the race! All thirty pairs of oars sliced into the water at once. For the first leg of the trip to the buoys, no one could attack the others, so they focused single-mindedly on making it there.

But let's pause for a moment here and consider the situation. A two-man boat... Everyone knows what they look like from pictures and videos, even if they've never actually ridden in one... Then do you know which direction the rowers face? That's right, they row with their backs facing the direction of travel.

Do boats exist that don't function like this? Yes, but there certainly weren't any of these available here! The race was supposed to be pure entertainment, so its goal was to create an exciting spectacle of marine combat for spectators to enjoy.

Basically, one person rows and the other gives directions... That was how the race organizers explained the race to the participants and provided suitable boats. However...things usually didn't go as planned. If you row without seeing where you're going alongside other people doing the exact same thing...it's inevitable you'll crash into each other.

Boats began smashing into each other. Other boats ran aground. Contestants shouted angrily. In short, a hellish battlefield swirled out of control on the open water.

If anyone went overboard, all they had to do was get back on to their boats under their own power and they could resume the race. But if they fell into the water unconscious, they would need to be rescued by event staff on standby in the ocean, in which case they would be automatically disqualified. What a horrifying image painted on the sea.

"I'm so glad I wasn't snared by the money..."

"Eto, they might need a priest's powers, don't you think?"

"Ahhh, I'm out of commission at the moment... Unfortunate, isn't it."

Even as Ryo and Eto winced and exclaimed in surprise in the stands, they couldn't take their eyes off the unfurling pandemonium.

In seats some distance away from those two, four imperial citizens watched the chaos in similar rapt attention.

“This contest is even tougher than what I expected,” opined Fiona, an imperial princess and commander of the Imperial Magic Division.

“The inability to use magic definitely isn’t making things easier either.”

“Well, if they allowed magic, the race would be over in an instant...” Adjutant Jurgen and Vice Commander Oscar sounded unsettled.

“Master... You *do* know that not everyone is capable of using magic as powerful as yours, right?”

“Maybe, but at the very least, I’m not wrong in your case, Commander.” Oscar countered Fiona’s remark with his own, his tone annoyed. They addressed her as “Commander” instead of the usual “Your Highness” because they didn’t know who might be listening.

“At any rate, they’re only allowed to use oars to attack, so this discussion is moot.” Marie, adjutant-cum-maid, settled the fruitless argument. “That aside, I see you’ve grown quite partial to that food called a ‘crepe,’ Commander. You ate some yesterday too.”

She sounded surprised as she watched Fiona enjoying the delicious-looking crepe. Though Marie had been looking after the princess for almost two years now, this was the first time she’d seen the girl obsess over food. Her lady didn’t dislike any foods, but she didn’t have any particular favorites either. At least that had been Marie’s impression...

“Because it’s outrageously yummy. I would love to put it on the canteen menu at the training center...”

“Absolutely not,” Oscar said without hesitation.

“M-Master, please, I’m begging you...”

“The training center is a place strictly dedicated to training and military exercises. The canteen menu has been carefully selected to include only healthy items. Confections do *not* fall into that category.”

Despite Oscar's rank as vice commander, he was also her mentor, so his word was law to Fiona. Yet she simply couldn't give up on the matter of crepes.

"Then I'll just summon a crêpier to the castle..."

Oscar didn't hear her soft whisper. Or perhaps he only pretended not to hear...

"W-Well, I think we're all agreed on and thankful for the multitude of delicious food stalls here, right?" Jurgen said, doing his best to soothe ruffled feathers and move the conversation along...



The battle on the sea below reached its climax. The two lead boats were neck and neck in their race to surpass the line of buoys.

"That's...Nils and Amon, isn't it..."

"And the other boat is Dan's..."

Ryo and Eto sipped on freshly squeezed orange juice and abble juice as they watched the contest unfold from their seats in the spectator stands. Bound together deeply by fate, Nils and Dan fought for the lead. Well, both boats worked hard to make that happen.

Amon rowed while Nils stood in the boat. Refusing to be cowed, Dan also stood up. And the two adventures glared at each other. Nils shouted something and Amon responded by picking up their boat's speed, bringing it within crashing distance of Dan's.

Then oars started clashing. Smack, thrust, smack, smack, smack...

"I think Nils and Dan are both amazing for being able to fight like that on top of a rocking boat."

"No wonder they're swordsmen!"

Ryo and Eto couldn't be the funny men of their respective duos without their straight men to play off of.

Despite both Nils and Dan being E-rank adventurers, the two swordsmen's fight was nevertheless fierce. Each had already smashed one of the other's oars,

so they were both using their second oars. Even as they duked it out, their two boats inched forward little by little, but other boats overtook them in their desire to avoid the senseless combat.

The audience wasn't paying attention to the actual race though because they focused totally on Nils and Dan.

"Hell yeah! Hit him! Knock his ass into the water!"

"That's what I'm talking about! Feint to the right and shove his ass in!"

"Hit him from above, man! From above!"

"Smash a hole in his boat and sink it!"

"Forget the oars and just use your swords! Cut 'im down!"

"I can tell from the way they move that they're both swordsmen! So one of them should just slash the other one down diagonally from the shoulder and back up!"

The spectators shouted out all kinds of things. And then both of their second oars broke at almost the same exact time as they smashed against each other.

"Whooooa!"

The crowd went wild. Now that they were both empty-handed, naturally, the only option was to...punch each other's lights out! Unfortunately for them, their jabs didn't quite land considering each young man was on a different boat with a different rocking rhythm.

Ultimately, Nils and Dan were swordsmen and they understood that. Out of nowhere, they gripped each other's hands and began a contest of strength. A lock-up, to use a professional wrestling term. Two wrestlers confident in their strength with arms locked tightly together in the center of the ring. A battle of wills between two men. Neither would move, yet the scene had a mysterious fervor that excited the audience.

And it was the same on the open sea. There was no clear winner or loser in their lock-up. They were evenly matched. This only made the audience even more excited.

"Ack, the lead boat crossed the finish line..."

“I’m pretty sure our boys will end up either second to last or dead last...”

Eto and Ryo hadn’t been fired up at all by Nils and Dan’s contest of strength. Of course, as fellow party members, they would always root for Nils. And...that was all there was to it. What more could be said at this point?

Then disaster suddenly struck. Though their upper bodies and clasped hands didn’t move, their legs were another story entirely. As they braced themselves on top of their swaying ships...well, less ship and more rowboat...their boats could no longer withstand the pressure of their standing stances and they both broke.

*Splash.* All four were tossed into the sea. A team’s boat breaking meant automatic disqualification. The event staff set out immediately to rescue them. When they arrived to collect the two pairs, they found Nils and Dan still grappling with each other...

“The tournament organizers would like to present special awards to the two teams who roused up the audience. Everyone, please give them a round of applause.”

Nils and Amon along with Dan and his partner happily accepted their special awards. Each team received a prize of ten thousand florins.

“Nils, Amon, congratulations.”

“I’m just glad you two made it back safely.”

Ryo and Eto clapped for them, genuinely pleased for them. Though Nils and Amon both had complaints about their performance...the prize money put smiles on their faces. The terrifying power of money on full display...



Later that same afternoon, the unveiling of the trimaran, *Rain Shooter*, took place. Nils and Amon wasted no time in converting their winnings to food for the four members of Room 10. Clutching all kinds of different food, they snagged a perfect spot by the dignitaries’ seating section to view the ship’s official launch.

"The heck are ya laddies doin' here..."

Lune's guild master Hugh spoke in a very low voice to Ryo and his roommates from his seat all the way at the edge of the guest section.

"Because this is the best place to see the ship," Ryo replied.

It was a very reasonable and precise response, but it also wasn't what Hugh had expected when he asked.

"Is-Is that right..."

Exhausted from the endless series of meetings and talks since yesterday, Hugh accepted his response without protest.

"All right, another question... What the hell's Nils starin' at that's makin' him practically drool?"

Hugh wanted to know why Nils stared at the dignitaries' seating area with such intense concentration.

"He's just gazing at that beautiful imperial princess."

"I see... Make sure he don't try 'n' make a move on her or else we're gonna be looking at an international crisis."

"Do you think the Inferno Magician would burn him alive?" Ryo asked while recalling what Lyn and Rihya had mentioned about the man.

"Oh ho, look who's in the know. Aye, the Inferno Magician is her subordinate and he's here too. Baron Oscar Luska is his name. He's a former adventurer, a commoner elevated to the aristocracy on account o' his achievements."

During their conversation, the *Rain Shooter* entered the harbor and sluiced leisurely through the water in front of the seated dignitaries.

"Wow."

"How beautiful."

"Truly a revolution in shipbuilding."

A shower of praise came from all over. Room 10's four members were no exception.

“Man, it’s gorgeous...”

“It almost feels like it’s flowing, hm?”

“I sure would love to take a ride on it.”

“I wonder why they went with the jet-waterjet hybrid.”

Though Nils, Eto, Amon, and Ryo’s comments differed, they were united in their admiration of the vessel. Even Ryo’s...that counted as admiration too. Then, from next to them, came a certain guild master’s remark.

While somewhat tactless, it too was unmistakably admiring: “The three hundred seventy billion florins they spent makin’ the damn thing sure wasn’t for show...”



On the fourth day of the port opening festival, instead of the food stalls, the four of them attacked the restaurants of Whitnash. Their assault consisted of...buying food and eating it while walking around exactly as they had done on the previous days.

They were stuffed after they finished lunch, which meant they finally had the leeway to turn their attention toward things other than food. The alley off the main avenue they wandered down now wasn’t all that narrow either. This was a characteristic of Whitnash, to have streets wide enough all over the city for wagons and carriages bearing goods to travel down. Therefore, there were quite a few businesses with their products on display under the eaves of their shop buildings.

And one store in particular drew all four pairs of eyes...

“A shop selling only bows and arrows? How unusual,” Amon remarked.

Eto and Ryo nodded in agreement.

“All right, boys, we’re going in.”

Nils opened the door and entered bold as you please.

The collection of items inside was definitely worthy of a shop specializing in bows and arrows. Dozens of bows and crossbows were on display. Regular

bows were situated prominently in the forefront to catch customers' eyes, but there were a great many crossbows farther back in the store too. Ryo realized there were more crossbows in total.

The crossbow is a long-range offensive weapon in the form of a bow set on its side atop a wooden base. It demands much less skill from its user compared to a regular bow, so anyone can fire it. If you slot the arrow in, aim at a target, and pull the trigger, it generally launches the arrow in the direction you want it to go.

However, the crossbow has one striking disadvantage: its inability to fire in quick succession. Moreover, unlike a regular bow, even if you become an expert with the crossbow, this doesn't improve the weapon's weakness all that much... No surprise, considering recocking the bowstring each time you have to fire is an awful nuisance.

Nils, Amon, and Ryo wandered around the shop, clearly enjoying browsing the goods. But their fourth, Eto the priest, stared intently at a crossbow.

Curious, Ryo approached him. "Eto?"

"Ryo, if I had one of these, do you think I'd be useful too?"

Eto had been brooding over something for a long time now. That something was the question of how he could contribute in battle next to Amon and Nils.

Close-range combat was difficult. Attack magics were also limited. In which case, he could provide support attacks from mid-to long-range. The issue though was how long it would take him to become proficient at using a bow. He'd realized this a few days ago during the shooting game...

But with a crossbow... While there was no denying it couldn't fire quickly, its ability to provide cover fire was nothing to sneeze at. Especially during close-range combat when arrows suddenly come flying at you from an enemy far away... What's more, once you're made aware of their presence, the knowledge always lingers in a corner of your mind. In other words, you can no longer concentrate on the melee battle at hand.

So, not only was the damage physical, but mental too. The arrows put you on edge, making you constantly think, "It's coming, it's coming." It was very

effective at chipping away a person's ability to concentrate.

"Are you young'uns looking to buy crossbows?" a seemingly good-natured old man said as he walked out from the back of the store. A single glance at him told them clearly he was an artisan. In fact, his aura might even proclaim him a master at his craft.

"I am," Eto replied, bowing his head. "I was thinking I could use a midrange one as support."

It was obvious that he'd thought of a precise way to assist his party and he was determined to follow through.

"Aha, the priest, eh? Aye, then in your case, a crossbow would do you better."

Nodding, the old man spoke. Then he inspected Eto's body from top to bottom. Of the four of them, he was the most slender.

"Pardon me. Forgot to introduce myself. I'm Abraham Louis and I own this shop. I'm gonna let you in on a little secret. I actually finished up an interesting prototype not too long ago. It might be exactly what you boys are looking for. Come on inside."

With those words, Abraham Louis headed to the workshop in the back of the shop, and the four followed.

Before Ryo could join them, his eyes fell on something. Watches. Five pocket watches and one...wristwatch? Neither the wristwatch nor pocket watches were anything like the twenty-thousand-florin pocket watch Nils had bought. A single glance was enough to tell someone these were masterpieces. What made them even more astounding was the lack of alchemy in their creation. In short, they were all purely mechanical designs...

The back of the shop looked like a veritable archery range.

"I shouldn't have expected anything less from a bow specialist..."

From next to him, Eto nodded in agreement with Ryo's murmur.

Abraham Louis went to a nearby table, picked up an item resting on top of it, and walked back to them.

"Here's the rapid-fire crossbow I finished this morning."

It was a small crossbow that could be mounted on a person's arm, where it would extend from their elbow to their wrist. On top of it was a box measuring five centimeters high and as wide as Eto's arm, with a lever.

"By placing arrows in this box, you can shoot a series of them at a fairly fast rate."

Abraham Louis placed five small arrows in the box then set the crossbow on his left arm. He aimed for a target fifteen meters away and pulled the trigger with his left hand. The first arrow hit dead center. He pulled the lever down once easily with the same hand. That was all he did.

"Pulling the lever stretches the bowstring and slots the next arrow from the box automatically into place."

"Wooow."

All four were impressed by Abraham Louis's explanation.

Then he fired the second arrow. This time, he pulled down the lever immediately and shot a third. He repeated the process to reload and fire a fourth and then fifth time.

"Incredible..." Eto murmured, so astonished that the words had practically slipped from his mouth.

"Considering its size, this is its maximum range... I'd say fifteen meters is the limit. But assembly and disassembly are simple, making it fairly portable. The most important thing is its rapid-fire ability, just like you saw now."

"A true repeating crossbow..." Ryo whispered, basing his guess on his knowledge of Earth's weaponry. The repeating crossbow, also known as the Zhuge crossbow, has appeared since ancient times in Chinese history. He had never heard of one this small. Nevertheless, it felt familiar in a way.

Resolved, Eto turned toward the smith. "I... I'd very much like to buy this, but...may I ask the price?"

"Thank you very much," Abraham Louis replied with a grin. "Never would have thought a customer like you looking for a crossbow in particular would show up in my shop the day I finished this thing. Must be fate... Ah, 'scuse me,

got a little off track there. You want to know the price, right? Let's see... Since it's a prototype, I'll sell it to you at cost. Eight gold coins or eighty thousand florins. What do you say?"

"I'll buy it," Eto said immediately. When he went to take the money out, three hands suddenly thrust forward, each holding two gold coins on their palms.

"Huh?"

"This is for the sake of the party, right? So let us do this much for you."

"Works out perfectly to twenty thousand florins each."

"You don't even need to worry about it because I can just extort more from Abel!"

Eto was surprised, Nils looked matter-of-fact, Amon nodded, and Ryo...though he said something so awful, he probably meant it as a joke. Definitely a joke. Most likely a joke...hopefully...

Once the purchase of the rapid-fire crossbow was complete, Abraham Louis recommended Eto practice with it in the archery range. Though even beginners could use it effectively when compared to a regular bow, it still required a certain degree of skill. Eto listened attentively to Abraham Louis's explanation then practiced countless times. Thirty minutes later, he could fire successive bursts of arrows as quickly as the smithy had earlier.

The old man and Eto's three party members observed from nearby. Ryo suddenly thought of something and turned to Abraham Louis.

"Excuse me, but do you also make watches in this shop?"

"Nah, not officially. That's just a hobby."

"Well, it's about the five watches I saw... Not a single one was crafted using alchemy, was it?"

"Oh ho, you got a good eye, son! You're exactly right. They're all mechanical-style watches." He walked into the workshop and came back holding one of the pocket watches. "This here's my latest creation. I succeeded in including a perpetual calendar, minute repeater, tourbillon, shock-resistant parachute, and

self-winding mechanism.”

“Wooow...”

It was gloriously beautiful. Like the universe itself had been crammed into something the size of a fist... Or, as if the structure of the world itself had been incorporated into it... Everything about it was perfect. A perfect device that could be created by an imperfect human. No...it could be created precisely *because* mankind was imperfect. The culmination of imagination. Truly a genius’s masterpiece...



The fifth day of the port opening festival.

As usual, the four of them walked around eating all kinds of things in the morning and visited one of Whitnash’s long-established eateries in the afternoon. When they stepped out of the restaurant, they heard the sound of lumber being struck.

“I wonder if someone’s making something?” Eto asked.

“Sounds very energetic, doesn’t it?” Amon commented.

When they looked in the direction from which the noise came, they saw five men repairing the broken wheel of a wagon. The owner of the vehicle stood next to them, bowing his head and thanking them profusely over and over again.

“Wait, what? Didn’t we witness the same thing on the journey here?”

Ryo thought back to a scene that resembled this one.

“Sure did. It’s the same people,” Nils said with a nod. “They’re the D-rank party from Lune, Let’s All Become Blacksmiths.”

“Oh, right, I’ve heard of them,” Eto said.

“No wonder they’re so good at repair work,” Amon said.

“So,” Ryo wondered, “we’re all just going to ignore the party’s name?”

A very sensible question. Was Ryo a person of common sense...? Or were names like these perfectly normal to adventurers...? A difficult problem to

solve.

“I think it’s fascinating that they can do woodworking too despite being blacksmiths.”

Ryo imagined blacksmiths as folks who created a variety of things using iron. But the blacksmiths in front of him were skillfully crafting a wheel. Considering how swiftly their hands moved, it was clear that this group of men were more talented than the average person at carpentry too.

“They’re handy guys, huh?” Nils replied. “Adventurers *and* blacksmiths at the same time... Crazy...” Nils replied. “I remember Delong saying that they all had frontline combat jobs, besides one of them being a priest.”

“Well, they all *do* have powerful builds.”

Ryo nodded thoughtfully. But one of them was astounded by Nils’s words.

“One of them is...a priest...?”

They were *all* indeed built very well. *Including* the priest. So perhaps it came as no surprise that the slender Eto, also a priest, was stunned by the revelation.



On the sixth day, the four members of Room 10 focused on restaurants instead of stalls for their food adventure. They ate at every notable establishment they could find... You could say they practically ate their way through the city’s roster of restaurants.

Then, finally, the seventh and last day of the port opening festival arrived. The entire city would be reveling in a closing festival that night to mark the end of the main event.

A garden party was scheduled to be held in the courtyard of the lord’s residence. As soon as the morning began, the estate saw quite a few people going in and out to decorate and make the necessary preparations. All in all, including tradesfolk and attendants brought by each country’s representatives, there were a great many unfamiliar faces there. Holes in their security were inevitable.

Even so, the hours ticked by quietly and peacefully until night without any problems—not counting the hustle and bustle of the port opening festival itself, of course.

Room 10's troupe realized something after lunch that day.

"Uhhh, guys," Nils said nervously. "We haven't once stopped by the adventurers' guild since arriving here..."

"Ah..." Eto hummed, speechless.

"Wait, do we *have* to drop in at a guild every time we visit somewhere?" Amon asked.

"I suppose we'll have to ask the veterans for the answer, since Amon and I only recently became adventurers ourselves," Ryo asked, curious. It hadn't been mentioned in the guild's beginner seminar.

"It's not a rule per se, but guilds like to know where adventures are in case they need to send out notifications or something. Also, if you're planning on taking jobs in whichever town or city you're in, it's better to let them know, which will cause fewer problems later on..." Nils said. Explanations like this were usually Eto's job, but Nils continued nonetheless. "Why don't we go now? It's not like I'll know anyone there anyway, but still. We'll stop by, take care of the formalities, then get back to eating! Good plan, right? That seafood pasta spot we saw on the backstreet behind the northern boulevard will still be waiting for us when we're done. Phew, glad I remembered before my obsession with the restaurant made things worse."

"A million thanks to Lyn and the others for telling us about it."

And then Room 10's four party members set off toward Whitnash's adventurers' guild.

Whitnash's adventurers' guild was huge. It wasn't as large as Lune's since that city was considered the largest on the frontier, but it was still fairly big for the Kingdom of Knightley's biggest port city. There were many adventures and commissions.

"I think this is my first time seeing a guild this big besides Lune's..." Eto said, impressed.

"Yeah, same," Nils agreed.

Despite the late afternoon hour, many people were inside the building. Lune's guild was usually deserted at this time.

"I wonder if the festival has anything to do with the amount of people here right now..."

Nobody commented on Ryo's strange remark... Because Nils, who'd normally be the first to respond, spotted someone he shouldn't have.

Someone who spotted him at the same time.

"Why the hell are *you* here?"

"Screw you. That's *my* line, asshole."

So went Nils and Dan's exchange, like a pair of thugs squaring off.

Yes, indeed, Dan in Room 1 and his lackeys were in the guild as well. Though Nils and Dan snapped aggressively at each other, everyone else greeted each other politely. Aside from the two of them, the rest considered the incident on the training grounds water under the bridge...

In particular, Amon, who had teamed up with Nils for the boat race, and the scout Dan partnered with in the same contest chatted amicably. Through no fault of their own, the two had been caught up in Nils and Dan's gridlock plus the resulting destruction of their boats and their subsequent fall into the ocean. So a bond of sorts had formed between them.

Then there was also...

"Oh, aren't you Sasha from Room 2? Haven't seen you in some time. How are you?"

"I am and hello to you as well, Eto from Room 10. I'm fine. I hope you've been well too."

...the priest and priestess of their respective parties who greeted each other.

That left Ryo by himself. Since he didn't have any acquaintances among the

other group, he simply said his hellos before browsing through the notice board.

“Wait, aren’t you two from the boat race?”

“Oh, yeah, it *is* them. That was something else, huh?”

“Just so you know, fighting isn’t allowed here. Now that that’s outta the way, come on over and drink with us. It’s all you can drink and eat for adventurers during the festival.”

So *this* explained why so many adventures were in here at this time. Strangely enough, the reason made sense to Room 10’s quartet.

*Alcohol is prohibited in Lune’s guild canteen, but that doesn’t seem to be the case here. I guess it depends on the location, hm?*

Despite his thoughts, Ryo let Whitnash’s adventures drag him along with the others to the guild cafeteria. It, like Lune’s, most definitely did not disappoint. Because...the food was delicious!

“Whoa! This salted fish is fan-freaking-tastic.”

“I can practically taste the sea in this soup.”

“Gosh, this shellfish smells so good roasted like this, huh?”

“I never imagined I’d be able to eat spiny lobster again...”

The four adventurers from Lune thoroughly enjoyed the seafood menu thusly, savoring it much more than their adventures walking and eating through the city.

“How are things proceeding?”

“Smoothly.”

“Did anyone leave the city?”

“The master of Lune’s adventurers’ guild. His proxy is evidently attending the garden party.”

“Good. Then we execute the plan as discussed.”

And the people holding such a suspicious conversation were there too...

# The Inferno Magician

With the sun setting and six in the evening approaching, the garden party at the lord's mansion was set to begin.

"Lord Abel. I see you're attending as proxy again."

"Hello, Your Highness. I am indeed. Our guild master returned to Lune this very morning, so the duty falls on me once more to act in his stead at this garden party." Abel's exasperated shake of his head implied, "Why *me*?"

The third imperial prince chuckled in amusement at the sight. "Be that as it may, I'm sure you enjoyed the festival, yes? I myself had nary a moment to step foot out into the city for the festivities... I knew it would be difficult with my schedule. But...I still held a faint hope for even the smallest chance to enjoy the fun. Alas, it wasn't to be."

"Conrad," someone called out just as he was finishing speaking.

When Conrad turned around, he found Fiona standing there, dressed in her finery for the garden party.

"Ah, you're here, Fiona. Let me introduce you. Lord Abel, this is... Well, I'm sure you already know, but this is my younger sister, the eleventh imperial princess, Fiona Rubine Bornemisza. Fiona, this is Lord Abel, representing the master of Lune's adventurers' guild. He just so happens to be a brilliant B-rank adventurer."

Fiona and Abel greeted each other politely upon the prince's introduction.

"Now then, Lord Abel, if you'll excuse us. I'm sure we'll see each other again soon."

With Fiona accompanying him, Conrad walked away to speak to the lord of Whitnash.

Not only was Abel terribly bored, he also felt forlorn without his usual sword hanging from his waist. Naturally, none of the other guests bore weapons either

since this was a garden party. Not even ceremonial weapons were allowed. The Secret Treasure of the Air Barrier meant flawless security, so...knowing this, no one could object to the rules.

“Oh, yeah, what did Lyn say about it? That it’s as strong as a wyvern’s defensive air membrane, right... But Ryo pierced through that with his super thick ice spear...”

The incident had occurred in the Malefic Mountains when they encountered a veritable wyvern nest on the journey back to Lune from the Forest of Rondo.

“Well, we all know perfection doesn’t exist anyway.”

The lord of Whitnash stepped up onto a platform as Abel muttered to himself. The garden party was officially underway.

One hour passed.

The first people to notice something was wrong were the magicians attending to the lord’s Secret Treasure of the Air Barrier.

“Huh?”

“Is something wrong?”

“My magic suddenly stopped working on it.”

“How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know. But at this rate, the barrier will disappear...”

“That’s absurd!”

No one would learn until later, after everything happened, that the magical supply line to the Secret Treasure of the Air Barrier had been tampered with so that it would burn out after a certain amount of time from its activation... At this moment in time, all they could do was panic.

Although the sudden cessation of magical energy flowing through the object caused the defensive air membrane to vanish, it was the sort of barrier you wouldn’t have noticed in the first place unless you looked carefully. It was a

wisp of a film, the starry night sky in the background essentially rendering it invisible.

Catastrophe struck the garden party's blissfully unaware guests. From outside the residence, a volley of magical attacks, arrows, and lances raced toward the courtyard in which the function was being held.

"Noooooo!"

Screams and angry shouts filled the air. Whitnash's order of knights was present in the courtyard as well, but at a loss for how to deal with the sudden offensive, they were quickly defeated.

"Hide under the tables."

The people who obeyed such voices managed to prolong their lives for a little longer.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of the attack. Only the beginning. When the barrage from outside died down, the hostiles launched a direct assault next. The doors of the mansion flew open and black-clad men surged into the courtyard, cutting down anyone and anything in their path indiscriminately. Knights, guests, butlers, and maids alike.

"God damn it! Who the hell are they? Where are the guards?!"

A few guests yelled things along these lines, but no one had any clear answers. However...they soon discovered the garrison's fate upon entering the building. Aside from the troops in the courtyard, all of the lord's other men had already been killed. The siege had been completed without the knowledge of any of the garden party's attendees. And those killed included not only the lord's men but also the guests' subordinates.

*"Barrier."*

This Barrier was thicker than any other...because the spell deployed Magical and Physical Barriers simultaneously. Thus Princess Fiona continued to protect Prince Conrad. Unluckily for Conrad, a projectile from the initial attack had struck him directly and he sustained a serious wound.

"Brother, I think we can hold out for a little longer if we can make it to the gazebo across the way and use its walls to protect us from behind. Can you walk? You don't have to go fast."

"Yes... I'll manage since you healed me, Fiona."

Fiona was a magician who could use both fire and light magics. Her ability to heal using light magic put her on the level of high-level priests and priestesses, but she couldn't afford to expend a great deal of her magical energy and heal everything because she didn't know how this situation would unfold. She did her best to limit her energy to barriers only as Conrad was the one who had ordered her to do so.

At that moment, his command turned out to be right. Though the intruders had stopped their attack from the outside, they now carried out a direct assault. The few surviving members of the knightly order clashed swords with the villains across the courtyard hosting the garden party.

His wounds were closed, but the blood he lost couldn't be recovered. Even so, complexion awfully pale, Conrad analyzed the situation. "The fact that only the hostiles are flying through the doors of the manse and none of our allies despite this mess tells me it's very likely that they've gained control of the entire estate."

Fiona shook her head slightly in disbelief. "No, that can't be..."

"Fiona, where are your subordinates? Is there any way at all you can contact them?"

Her head jerked up in response to his words. "Yes! Yes, there is! Only...using it means the enemy discovering our location too..."

"We have no choice. At this rate, the situation will worsen rapidly."

She gave a single nod in reply and activated her magic. Five black magic bullets appeared in her right hand. When she launched them up in the air, they transformed into red signal flares that lit up the sky as they exploded.

"They'll come running to us once they spot the signals. Master will come even if he doesn't see the flares."

“Master... Oscar, eh? I’m relieved to hear that then.”

With a faint smile, Conrad slumped against a wall and slid down until he sat on the ground. The gazebo they had escaped to was hard to spot from the garden party’s main area, so there were no knights, other guests, or insurgents here.

*I just have to buy us as much time as possible until Master arrives...*

Except they weren’t given the opportunity. Because the enemy had seen her signal flares too.

“They’re over there!” shouted one of the attackers. He likely regretted those words the second they saw Conrad’s powerful gaze piercing through him.

“I see. So we’re the target of this attack.”

“We’re what...?” Her eyes widened in amazement.

“Fiona, there’s no need to leave any of them alive. We’ll kill them all.”

“Yes, Brother.”

Their foes inched steadily closer.

Conrad started chanting a spell, his voice barely a whisper. When the insurgents stepped within range of his attack, he said the trigger word.

“*Stone Javelin.*”

Stone spears shot out from the ground toward the bandits, splitting just before impact and sending a few of them to the afterlife. Instantly, the ones not targeted by his Stone Javelins ran toward the two royals.

“*Piercing Fire.*”

Fiona didn’t need to chant the whole spell to cast her magic. Four white, extremely thin flame arrows hurtled toward the attackers. When they dodged the arrows from the front, the arrows made a U-turn and plunged into their necks from behind. She blasted Piercing Fire three more times after that, annihilating the enemy’s vanguard.

As far as they could see, there were no more enemies nearby...but they heard a low voice chanting a spell from somewhere.

Conrad's face paled. "No... That's absurd... Fiona, I need you to protect us with everything you have in the front. No, in all directions. Use Sanctuary Square."

*"Sanctuary Square."*

The moment she uttered the words, the soft voice finished the spell and unleashed a magical attack.

*"So I wasn't wrong... It is Bullet Rain..."*

Lyn had used the same spell—one of the most advanced air magics—to deal the finishing blow to the goblin king during the Great Tidal Bore. Its offensive ability was so prodigious that it had pierced through the goblin's king defense like it was made of paper and riddled its body with holes. It was impossible to defend against with normal defensive magics, which was precisely why Conrad told Fiona to use Sanctuary Square, an absolute form of defense said to be a miracle of God.

This spell protected the user against all magical and physical attacks. The ultimate defensive light magic. Evidently, only high-ranking priests and priestesses could even activate it, but Fiona could use it. She'd been able to since an early age...

However, unlike other defensive-type magics, Sanctuary Square consumed a terrifying amount of magical energy. While Fiona boasted magical reserves hundreds of times larger than an ordinary person, she had used Barrier continuously, fired several rounds of Piercing Fire, and ended with Sanctuary Square. Even she understood not much remained of her magical energy at this point.

*Whoever they are, they're powerful enough to use Bullet Rain. If they come at us seriously...then the battle will be incredibly harsh...*

With that thought, Fiona braced herself, ready for anything, but the enemy magician's presence suddenly disappeared. Then she felt others surging forth.

*Three, four...five of them? I can sense them, but I don't know their exact locations.*

*"I don't know this magic."*

The voices were so low Fiona couldn't hear what they were saying. Though Conrad managed to pick out a few words, he himself had never heard of this spell.

"I think...they're mixing earth magic? An explosive fire magic chant seems to be the main part of it? What the hell is this?"

"Earth? Explosive?"

At that moment, Fiona looked directly at Conrad. And detected magic building up in the ground underneath where he sat.

"Brother, look out!"

She hurled herself at him and pushed him out of the way. Simultaneously, she shouted, "*Sanctuary Square.*"

The ground exploded in the same instant. Fire and earth burst forth like a geyser. It blasted Fiona away, but even as she flew through the air, she saw her reliable comrades running toward them through the courtyard.

"Master, please take care of my brother..."



Fortunately for Fiona, when she had launched the signal flares, Vice Commander Oscar, Adjutant Jurgen, and Adjutant-cum-Maid Marie were outside. They saw the red bullets exploding in the sky over the mansion's courtyard.

"Five of them means...rescue. Jurgen, Marie, we're storming the estate."

"Yes, Sir."

For soldiers, their superiors' orders are absolute. While they might usually joke around like old friends, a battlefield situation ensured the lines would be firmly drawn between superior and subordinate.

It was business as usual for the guards at the residence's gate. They knew the three individuals were close aides of Imperial Princess Fiona, not to mention that Oscar was the Inferno Magician, so they let them through without any intensive questioning. The problems started after they opened the doors to the manse and entered.

“What in the world...?” Jurgen said after seeing the carnage inside.

“They’re all dead, aren’t they?” Marie said.

“Clearly, something’s very wrong here. We’re heading to the courtyard.”

At Oscar’s command, they moved forward. When they turned the first corner, they encountered a group of black-clad villains, the sort specializing in unsavory, underworld operations.

*“Piercing Fire.”*

In the lead, Oscar shot over twenty white, incredibly thin flame arrows. It was worth noting that each found its mark right in the foreheads of the thugs.

“That precise control of yours never fails to astound, Sir...” Adjutant Jurgen murmured.

This particular spell had been Oscar’s specialty since his adventuring days. A single strike to the forehead with an arrow of extremely thin, concentrated white flame. The attack reaches the brain and kills the target with minimal collateral damage. For this reason, he’d been able to sell monster and animal parts at high prices.

The three raced down several hallways, defeating groups of hostiles without hesitation, before finally arriving at the courtyard. Here, a hellish picture stretched before them. The dead scattered everywhere, killed by magic, arrows, spears, or in close combat.

“Not Her Highness too...” Marie said, voice trembling.

“No way in hell she’d go down that easily!” Oscar barked. “She might be hurt, so hurry up and find her!”

Marie and Jurgen obeyed immediately, searching for her... Unfortunately, they didn’t find any trace of her. Though Oscar feigned composure to the other two, he was almost crazed with panic and fear in his mind.

*She’s fine. She has to be. Her body isn’t here, so she must be alive somewhere...*

“Vice Commander, I hear the sounds of battle from over there!” Jurgen

shouted.

Oscar didn't even waste time responding. He simply took off running. Jurgen and Marie followed close on his heels. They jumped over a hedge and found...

Fiona being blasted away by a veritable geyser of fire and earth. Despair stained Oscar's expression in that moment, but only for a moment. Even as she flew through the air, he saw Fiona's lips moving as she caught sight of them.

"Jurgen, Marie, protect Prince Conrad. I'm going after Her Highness."

After instructing them, Oscar sprinted away with all his might toward the outside of the mansion.



There was a closing event that night in the city to celebrate the final day of the port opening festival. On modern-day Earth, this would involve something like a fireworks show, but apparently, gunpowder was still uncommon on Phi. At least Ryo himself had never seen it since reincarnating here.

Nevertheless, a huge campfire roared in the middle of the city plaza. Tradespeople tossed decorations used only during the festival into it in lieu of firewood and civilians enjoyed the closing event as they pleased. Finally released from the clutches of the gregarious adventurers of Whitnash, the four members of Room 10 headed to the bonfire on the beach instead of the one in the plaza. Of course, they acquired a variety of foods on the walk there...

"Here's my haul," Nils said. "Four skewers of the whole-roasted mini kraken."

"I bought four crepes for us," Eto said.

"I actually wanted to get candied abbles," Amon said, "but they sold out, so...I sampled these things called octopus dumplings and bought four sets since they were so delicious."

They reconvened now after Eto had suggested they each buy what they like and exchange with each other.

"Hey, where's Ryo? Is he the only one who's late?"

"I feel like I spotted him by one of the candied abble stalls..."

“Really?!”

Eto’s comment excited Amon, who had given up on the sweet treat. Just then, Nils looked up at the sky by pure coincidence.

“What the heck is that?”

He pointed at whatever flew up into the air from the lord’s residence.

“Where?” Eto asked.

“Is that a person?” Amon wondered.

“That’s...that’s the imperial princess,” Nils said just before he took off running toward the beach. Even though it was sand, someone could still die if they fell wrong on top of it. Eto and Amon raced behind him. All thoughts of Ryo vanished from their minds at the moment...

Despite being an adventurer, he had never run this hard before in his life. That was how desperate Nils felt. Even as the sand tried to swallow his feet, he did his damnedest to sprint as quickly as he could without stumbling as he aimed for her landing point.

And then, just as he was practically sliding toward the very end of his mad dash, he barely managed to catch her.

“Jeez, that was way too close...”

A quick glance told him she didn’t have any serious injuries. It was indeed the Imperial Princess Fiona. The fine dress she wore made him think she’d been at a party or something.

“Haaa... Haaa... Nils, is she all right?”

“Yeah, I think so. Aside from being unconscious.”

Amon reached them first, followed shortly by Eto. But they weren’t alone.

“Amon!”

“Yes, I see them too.”

The youngest boy unsheathed his sword and swung at one of the black-clad men. The normal thing to do would have been to ask them who they were, but

considering the appearance of suspicious characters in this place and in these decidedly abnormal circumstances, it was obvious they weren't decent people... Both Nils and Amon came to the same conclusion along with Eto, who reached them late.

*"Protect us against all attacks. Physical Barrier."*

Wielding daggers, the villains lunged at Fiona without hesitation. Eto chanted the incantation for the Physical Barrier spell in response. In the meantime, Nils couldn't move because of the princess he held in his arms, which essentially left Amon alone to fend off the two foes.

If he'd been an ordinary F-rank adventurer, he would have been cut down in a handful of strikes. However, instead of killing them, Amon robbed them of their fighting ability and bought time by using tactics like kicking sand into their eyes to blind them and slashing his sword relentlessly at their arms.

And then, arrows finally fired from Eto the priest's hands, which held the rapid-fire crossbow he'd bought in Abraham Louis's shop on the fourth day of the festival. He never could have imagined it would debut in actual combat a mere three days later.

An arrow pierced through one of the insurgents' necks. For just a moment, his black-clad accomplice seemed shaken by the unexpected attack. Amon took advantage of the opening. He tackled him using his own body, knocked him down, and plunged his sword into his neck.

Everyone paused, then Eto broke the long silence with a mumble: "I'm glad it worked out..."

Amon sheathed his sword and returned to Nils, positioning himself in front of him and the princess. There was still a chance of a follow-up attack.

Then *he* appeared.

"Oy, get away from the woman."

Oscar had been running at full speed since leaving the mansion.

"She'll land on the beach. The sand should cushion her fall enough to mitigate

any injuries.”

A few villains were polite enough to greet him when he turned off the street and onto the coast. Without paying them any attention whatsoever, he blasted them with a hail of Piercing Fire and sent them crashing onto the beach. There were corpses there too but Oscar didn’t notice them at all.

The only thing his eyes focused on was the man holding the princess he loved and respected. The moment he saw the sight, what little reason remained in his mind flew away. If he had held on to it, he would have realized he and his friends wore outfits different from the black-clad enemies. If he had held on to it, he would have understood that the bodies littered around them were the corpses of the insurgents who had been defeated by those other men. If he had held on to it...he most certainly wouldn’t have tried to kill them.

Oscar spoke with every step he took.

“Oy, get away from the woman.”

The men said nothing and showed no inclinations of releasing Fiona. Of course they didn’t. Because they were villains.

“You’re not good enough to touch her.”

Then he unleashed Piercing fire from his palm.

Everyone sensed the danger in the “one” approaching them. Even Eto had never felt anything like it until now.

*What in the world is this... Both the magical energy coiling around him and the magical energy he’s generating are abnormal.*

“You’re not good enough to touch her.”

The moment the “one” said those words, Eto instinctively said, “*Sanctuary.*”

Sanctuary, a defensive magic deployed in emergency situations... A priest’s secret technique for creating a protective circle instantly without chanting an incantation. Only powerful, high-level priests and priestesses could use Sanctuary Square, which was a form of Absolute Defense Magic. Most ordinary

priests could use Sanctuary. Though it only lasted for five seconds, it was capable of rejecting most physical and magical attacks.

Except the kickback on this occasion was dreadful. Had the spell been cast by a high-ranking priest, things might have turned out differently... Unfortunately, Eto was only an E-rank adventurer.

*Shing.* Sanctuary activated normally and repelled the three projectiles of Piercing Fire that had been darting precisely for his, Nils, and Amon's foreheads. Eto nodded in his mind when he realized his judgment had been on the mark.

“Ngh—”

Then the kickback from his spell hit him hard. He coughed up blood and dropped to his knees on the ground.

“Eto!”

“Eto, no!”

Amon rushed to his side and supported his body. Eto's consciousness was already fading.

Oscar wasn't interested in this exchange. “Hurry up and get away from the woman,” he said, launching another round of Piercing Fire.

“10-layer Ice Wall.”

This time, a transparent wall of ice blocked Oscar's attack.

“What the hell?”

It made sense for Sanctuary to repel his Piercing Fire, but a wall made of *ice*? There were cracks in it though... Wait, *only* cracks?

“I went looking for you three when I couldn't find you... So imagine my surprise to see you surrounded by dead bodies *and* in the middle of combat.” Ryo paused, finally noticing that Eto was coughing up blood. Seeing his friend covered in blood...the sight was more than enough for him to lose his mind. “You bastard... What did you do to Eto...”

“Shut your mouth and get away from that woman.” Oscar fired another four Piercing Fires.

#### *Icicle Lance 4.*

Ryo countered the four flame needles with four ice spears.

“What in the *hell* is that...”

Even if he didn’t yet know why, Oscar understood that the water magician in front of him wasn’t normal. The fact that he could intercept his Piercing Fire with a corresponding number of ice spears made it crystal clear that the other man could generate magic at the same speed as himself. It was his first time meeting such a person. As long as Fiona lay in his opponents’ hands, he couldn’t use any large-scale destructive magics. He risked losing everything if he did. Naturally, this limited his options.

Oscar glared at Ryo with his crazed eyes. “I’ll kill you first.”

“*Flame Spear Barrage.*”

On a completely different level than Piercing Fire, ten flame spears with enhanced penetrative power burst from his hand and flew toward Ryo.

*Laminated 10-layer Ice Wall.*

Ice Walls appeared in front of Ryo one after another, overlapping with each other as they stretched the distance from him to Oscar. He had used the same spell against Leonore the akuma’s Hellfire. Ryo wasn’t surprised to discover that the Flame Spears specializing in penetration were much stronger than Piercing Fire. They were capable of tearing through his patented 10-layer Ice Wall in a single strike, so Ryo had used the Laminated version in anticipation of this to negate the spell’s high penetrative power. So unless his opponent’s magic was as destructive as Leonore’s Hellfire, it wouldn’t be able to break through Ryo’s current defenses.

Oscar fired another four rounds of Flame Spear Barrage in an attempt to destroy the ice wall. His spears advanced through the Ice Wall...*but* their speed weakened with each layer they pierced. Though it was hard to confirm visually, this truth was undeniable. Finally, they vanished when they hit a layer of the ice wall they couldn’t pierce.

They repeated this pattern several times... And Ryo’s Laminated Ice Walls blocked all of Oscar’s Flame Spear Barrages.

“Impossible...”

Oscar couldn’t believe what he was seeing. One strike of his unique Flame Spears was powerful enough to break through the imperial castle’s ramparts. He had fired ten of them in rapid succession, five times...for a total of fifty Flame Spears. Yet the water magician warded them all off? It felt like a nightmare. On top of that, his opponent showed no signs of exhausting his magical reserves.

“What, done already? Then I suppose it’s my turn now, huh?” Ryo said coldly.

Then another voice cut in, drowning him out.

“Stop, stop! Put your swords away, all of you!”

The owner of this new voice sounded extremely well-acquainted with Ryo. However...

“Abel, I didn’t ask for your help. Get in my way and I’ll freeze too.”

Ryo’s voice was terribly, awfully low. It made even Abel shiver. He’d never heard it before, and out of everyone here, he’d spent the most time with the water magician. He understood then how enraged Ryo was.

“R-Ryo, please, just wait a second.”

Breaking out in a cold sweat, Abel begged Ryo to control himself before gesturing toward Oscar.

“Look, this white-haired man is Oscar. Oscar Luska, Vice Commander of the Imperial Magic Division of the Debuhi Empire.”

Upon hearing his name, Oscar finally deigned to look at the intruder.

“Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Abel. I’m here as the proxy for the guild master of Lune’s adventurers’ guild. These four guys you’re fighting aren’t the bad guys. They’re adventurers belonging to Lune’s guild. I know them all really well, so I can vouch that they’re not the kind to participate in what went down at the garden party.”

Oscar twitched a little, reacting to the mention of the garden party.

“And of course, I know you’re only acting because you’re worried about the princess. So just listen to me right now. Please.”

A voice cut in then.

“Abel, I think this discussion is over. Now, if you’ll kindly move out of the way so I can kill him.”

“God damn it, Ryo, why won’t you listen to me?!” Abel shouted.

“Did you really think I’d stand here twiddling my thumbs after what he did to Eto? Am I supposed to just let him get away with it? No, I believe the best payback is to freeze this woman in ice. She’ll make a lovely objet d’art, wouldn’t you say?”

The moment he heard those words, the reason that had been returning to Oscar’s mind abruptly snapped. Fury on his face, he unleashed his magic.

*“The Fall of Heaven and Earth.”*

This spell rained innumerable flame bullets down from the sky, destroying the land in a wide area...at least it would normally. But this time, all of the bullets targeted Ryo, falling directly on him.

*Water Jet 256.*

He mowed them down by firing two hundred and fifty-six streams of water in a fan shape. It was a sight to behold as he intercepted and annihilated the flame bullets.

“Hmph. Pretty good for a human, but not nearly good enough. I can kill him now, right, Abel?”

“No, you moron, of course, you can’t!”

Abel’s entire body was now drenched in sweat, the trickles having turned into rivers. Even so, he couldn’t back down at his point. The Kingdom and the Empire were on the brink of war. He now realized he needed to convince Ryo much more than Oscar because his friend wouldn’t stop fanning the flames.

“Ryo, I completely understand where you’re coming from, but I’m *begging* you to stand down right now.”

“Question for you, Abel. If the same thing happened to Rihya, would anyone be able to persuade *you* to stand down?”

“Yes, they would and I’d do it. Because I know Rihya wouldn’t want a war between the Kingdom and the Empire,” Abel answered firmly and unequivocally. He said the words to talk Ryo down but also genuinely meant them from the bottom of his heart. His friend remained silent for several long minutes, which felt like an eternity to him. His stomach hurt from the seemingly endless wait.

“Is that right... Okay, I understand. I’ll defer to you on this, Abel.”

His relief was immediate and apparent at that moment. Even a bystander wouldn’t have mistaken it.

“Abel, would you be so kind as to hand over the princess to that white-haired, tanned individual?”

“Yeah, I will. Nils, you can let go now. I’ll take it from here.”

So saying, Abel took Fiona from Nils and carried her to Oscar. When the other man accepted her into his arms, calm finally returned to him.

*That must be the Inferno Magician, Ryo thought to himself as he watched the scene play out. White-haired and tanned? What the heck kind of Main Character Syndrome nonsense is he? He’s no match for Leonore when it comes to magic, but...the speed with which he can generate it is definitely abnormal. He might even be faster than me... Which is saying something since my speed was faster than hers... So this just means I have to train harder, doesn’t it?*



The next day was the day after the port opening festival ended. Last night, Eto had been admitted to the local hospital operated by the Temple and was now almost fully recovered. This was thanks to Abel...well, more accurately Rihya of the Crimson Sword, who pulled strings at the Whitnash branch of the Temple.

Incidentally, Rihya herself had administered his treatment since she was exceptionally skilled in the healing arts. Of course, Eto didn’t know this on account of being unconscious during it. When he woke up and asked about it, he trembled with emotion upon hearing the answer.

“Rihya loves Abel, you know...” Ryo murmured while thinking of Eto’s unrequited feelings.

“Love and admiration are two different sentiments,” whispered Amon, the youngest among them.

His words surprised Ryo. He wondered what sort of experiences the boy must have had in his short sixteen years of life to utter such things...

In any case, Eto had recovered. He hadn’t suffered external injuries at all and the blood he coughed up was due to the recoil from Sanctuary, which the Temple knew how to treat based on its accumulated expertise.

*The magic in this world is insane... Well, maybe less the world and more this specific kingdom? Perhaps this is how magic works in the Central Provinces in general? There are so many magics different from mine... Leonore the akuma's and Sera the elf's... Not to mention yesterday's “Inferno”... I'd love to carve out time someday to research the topic properly...*

A lonely atmosphere inevitably enveloped a place after a festival ended. This was a universal truth and Whitnash was no exception. Nevertheless, a few stalls still hawked their wares on the main boulevard. Merchants from all over would travel to the city and set up their stalls during the festival period. And every time the festival took place, some of these merchants would settle here because they came to feel at home in Whitnash. Several of the stalls Ryo and his friends liked were still open for business and would remain there for a while yet. Sadly, the crêpier had already departed...

And so the four of them were enjoying their final outing of eating and wandering around... Excluding Eto, who had been told not to overdo it with anything, including food, since he had only just recovered.

Thus, the three of them partook to their hearts’ content... Then they heard a voice from behind.

“Maaan... I want something to eat from the stalls too...”

It was Abel.

“Abel, did you settle the problem at hand first?”

“I sure as hell don’t wanna hear that from *you*, Ryo!”

Last night, the relationship between the Kingdom and the Empire deteriorated to the brink of war, no doubt in part due to the water magician in front of him. Though of course he sympathized with Ryo for being filled with righteous indignation because of what happened to his friend.

Abel explained to them that both sides agreed to overlook the battle between the vice commander of the Imperial Magic Division and the four members of Room 10. Once he had learned that Princess Fiona was awake and Prince Conrad recovered, he’d gone directly to them and explained the situation as he’d been told by Nils and the others. Oscar, also in attendance, had listened and apologized, thus safely resolving the matter.

However, the same couldn’t be said of the attack on the garden party.

“You see,” Abel said, “most of the visiting dignitaries were affected in one way or another, so I’m pretty sure lots of diplomatic issues will crop up at the national level after this. At the very least, the lord of Whitnash is gonna have one hell of a mess to deal with...”

“I thought the Secret Treasure of the Air Barrier was supposed to protect the area?”

Eto had remembered what Lyn and Rihya discussed a few days ago. Did he memorize every word uttered by the person he so admired...? There was no denying the possibility.

“Yeah, but apparently it was rigged to stop functioning right before the attack. Clearly a failure on the lord’s part,” Abel said with a shake of his head. Then, as if something suddenly came to mind, he jerked his head up and continued. “Oh, right. Nils, Eto, Amon, Princess Fiona wanted me to give you three her thanks. You’re getting a monetary reward too, since you not only saved her from hitting the ground, but also put yourselves at risk by fighting the attackers to protect her. The Empire’s going through the guild, so the money will probably be in the guild’s account by the time you make it back to Lune.”

“Hell yeah!”

“I’m grateful to hear that.”

“Are you sure it’s all right for us to accept?”

Nils, Eto, and Amon were overjoyed. Of course, they hadn’t helped her because they were angling for a reward but it was only natural to feel happy about their actions being acknowledged and commended in a tangible form.

“By the way, you get nothing, Ryo.”

“W-Well...that makes sense, considering the bad guys were already defeated by the time I arrived. Only some weird fire magician was left for me to deal with.”

Abel let out a huge sigh. “I dunno whether to be amazed or appalled at you calling the Inferno Magician ‘some weird fire magician.’”

“Which reminds me, weren’t you at the garden party too, Abel? You weren’t hurt or anything?”

Abel suddenly started behaving strangely. “O-Of course not,” he said. “S-S-S-Something on that level is a p-piece of cake for me.”

“Based on what I’m seeing, I’m not so sure about that...”

“I have to agree...”

Eto and Amon stared skeptically at his suspicious attitude. As for Nils?

“That’s just like you, Abel! You really are amazing.”

He never once doubted his hero.

“Abel...you’ll feel a *lot* better if you just let it all out. Go on, spit it out.”

Ryo’s gentle words could be taken as a detective conducting an investigation or someone encouraging a coworker who’d had too much to drink. At any rate, he had no intention of letting his friend escape.

“All right, so...I *was* there at the garden party in the beginning, but then...halfway through, this city’s guild master caught me. He dragged me off for a private discussion in one of the annex’s rooms... Because of the soundproofing magical device though, I didn’t realize what was happening until it was almost too late...”

“But I thought Hugh took care of all the talks before he left?”

"Yeah, except for one thing... He wants to hold a beginner seminar for adventures here in Whitnash just like they do in Lune. Apparently, he and Hugh discussed course materials and hiring instructors, but...yesterday he wouldn't stop talking my ear off about how he wanted his prospective instructors to participate in the classes Lune has and other stuff..."

Those working in high-ranking positions evidently had it tough in myriad ways. If it was *this* bad for a mere proxy, then how much worse could it be for Hugh McGlass, the official guild master...

After that, Abel asked the four members of Room 10 to deliver a letter to Hugh. In it, he had written everything he and Whitnash's guild master had discussed.

"I actually wanna give it to him myself, but I still have some work to finish up first..."

Even Ryo could tell Abel was lying. He clearly just didn't want to deal with Hugh's needling comments, but once he returned to Lune, the guild master would interrogate him anyway, so he was only postponing the inevitable for a few days... Why do people always insist on kicking the can down the road instead of dealing with their problems head-on...

Ryo shook his head again and again, thinking about mankind's fate since the dawn of time.

# The Way Home

Early the next morning, they reconvened with everyone involved in the escort mission they'd been hired for, including Coffee Maker led by Delong. It had been ten days since they last saw each other.

"Hiya, folks. Nils, you sure are the talk of the town now, huh?"

The first thing Delong mentioned was the infamous boat race incident. Coffee Maker too had been watching the "showdown" and after it ended, they'd had a rousing good time talking about it with Whitnash's adventurers.

"It's never a bad thing to have your name out there as an adventurer." He nodded emphatically as he enthusiastically clapped Nils on the shoulder. "All right, we're heading back in the same formation we came here. Let's stay focused these next two days."

"Sir, yes, Sir!"

Then, two days later, just like their journey to Whitnash, they arrived in Lune without encountering any trouble.



*My name is Alfonso Spinazola. I'm the grandson of Margrave Lune. I turned nineteen this year. As both my parents are already deceased, barring any issues, I'm in line to become the next margrave. Wait, no, none of that matters. The biggest problem lying ahead of me right now is a certain woman who's been in a terrible mood these past few days.*

*Called Sera, the woman is my sword instructor. She's an elf and an incredibly beautiful one to boot. The word "beautiful" sounds too trite for her... But there's no other way to describe her, in my opinion. Of course, beauty has no bearing on her abilities as a sword master.*

*Once upon a time, I made a grave error. I tried to use brute force to make her mine. The result of my faux pas? A shattered shoulder and a sword impaled in*

*said shoulder. You heard correctly. After she broke it, she deliberately plunged her blade into it. I was scared spitless...*

*Naturally, that was the inevitable price I paid for my foolish actions... Ever since then, my teacher has become an object of fear and admiration for me. As long as I've known her, she's hardly ever smiled. She's reticent too. I'd never heard her discuss anything except our training either. She teaches the knights too and they mentioned much the same about her behavior, so I think that's simply her personality.*

*The knights know of my past mistake... I sometimes wonder if they also know about my shattered, impaled shoulder... Nobody said anything afterward though... Normally, I would be scorned for what I did, but...*

*Since that incident, I've been trying hard to change myself. Ashamed by my foolish behavior, I strive every day to become an aristocrat worthy of being the next Margrave of Lune, someone who won't be criticized behind his back. Of course, I still have a long way to go, but I continue to put in my best efforts.*

*Now, enough about me. The biggest problem at the moment is my teacher's ill humor these past few days. However, that doesn't mean she rebukes me unfairly or lashes out at me physically. I just feel a bit uncomfortable is all. And I'm not the only one. Everyone on the estate, knights included, feels the same way.*



*My name is Reilitta and I work as a maid for the lord mayor. My primary responsibility is taking care of Madam Sera, who's a sword instructor on the estate. Unfortunately, my lady has been depressed for a few days now. Of course, she's been fulfilling her professional duties as usual and treats us maids kindly as always. But because I interact with her every day, it's why I know she's been feeling so lackluster.*

*Even when I ask her if something's the matter, all she says is "I'm fine" or "Same as ever." So I don't know the exact reason for her low spirits. However... I think the mock battle at the training center the other day might have something to do with her bad mood.*

*I'm just a simple maid, so I don't know much about the sword or magic.*

*Having said that, even I could tell that the battle between her and— What was her companion's name again? Ooh, yes, Mr. Ryo. Even I could tell that the battle between her and Mr. Ryo was amazing. Due to the location in which I work, I often see the knights training and as Madam Sera's attendant, I often see her battling them. But...the difference between her bouts with the knights and the one she had with him was like the difference between an adult and a baby... No, on second thought, more like a god and an ant.*

*And then, after their mock battle ended, Madam Sera embraced Mr. Ryo. She stepped away immediately, but it was my first time seeing her so lively and clearly enjoying herself. Not to mention she said he was "important" to her...*

*Madam Sera is a strikingly beautiful woman...as if she were the Goddess of Beauty herself. Nevertheless, there are no strange rumors whatsoever about her. Both her outstanding looks and incredible strength mean she has the admiration of not only the knights but also everyone else in the margrave's household. Though the woman herself is indifferent to this all...*

*My apologies for going off on a tangent. At any rate, Madam Sera has been despondent these last few days. And we maids are terribly worried about her.*



That day, Sera visited the adventurers' guild for the first time in a while. Incidentally, before arriving here, she had stopped by the northern library, the Fill-Up Station, and Room 10 in the guild's dormitory.

Yesterday, she had found reference materials on alchemy and golems in the northern library's restricted books section. They weren't books but sheafs of parchment, about a dozen or so pages, and quite old at that. Known as the Mistress of the Northern Library, Sera was much more familiar with the library's collection than any of its librarians. Even so, she had never seen the bundle of parchment until her discovery.

So, wanting to convey the news to Ryo, who was searching for information on golem-related alchemy, she had traversed the above route. Another reason for coming to the guild was she hadn't seen him in the library or the Fill-Up station for the past five days. When she passed through the doors of the building, several pairs of eyes turned automatically toward the newcomer. Then, after

their gazes drifted away, they snapped back to focus on her. Many people did double takes.

“Hey, isn’t that...”

“Sera of the Wind...”

“Lady Sera...”

“This is a rare sighting, huh?”

“Huh? Who *is* that beautiful woman?”

“You idiot! It’s Madam Sera! The sole member of her own B-rank party!”

Pretending not to hear these whispers, Sera headed directly for the receptionist’s counter.

“Hello, Nina,” Sera said to Nina, one of the guild receptionists. “You’re looking well since the last time we met.”

“Welcome, Sera. How may I help you today?”

“I’m looking for Ryo, the D-rank adventurer. I wanted to tell him I’m on the trail of what he’s looking for.”

In general, the guild accepted any messages or goods to pass on to its adventurers, but it didn’t disclose any information to others about its members’ activities because said activities might be, and often were, related to their commissions. Great care must be exercised to keep information related to commissions confidential.

As a B-rank adventurer, Sera was well aware of this, which explained why she phrased her request the way she did. The implication being she was looking for him in order to tell him what he’d asked of her. In fact, she wasn’t lying.

“Ah, I see... Well, Ryo and the others are currently away for work.”

“Oh... Then I’ll come back tomorrow.”

With that, Sera turned around, ready to leave.

“Please wait, Sera.”

Nina rushed to stop her then beckoned her to come closer. When the elf did,

the receptionist dropped her voice and spoke.

“Ryo and a few others undertook a commission that led them to another city, so they won’t return for some time yet.”

Despair suffused Sera’s face the moment she heard the other woman’s words. The dramatic change in her didn’t escape Nina’s notice either.

“S-Sera, are you all right?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, I’m fine... Just fine... How long is ‘some time’...?”

“This particular job falls in the ‘one week or more’ category, so...I don’t know the exact timing of their return, but I imagine another week or longer...”

Nina guessed the job involved an escort to and from Whitnash and that they’d return after the port opening festival there ended, but she couldn’t tell Sera all this. So all she could relay was the fact that it would be over a week before they came back.

“I see... Understood. Thanks.”

Sera walked away from the counter then. She was in shock and anyone could tell as much from a single glance. None of the adventurers spoke to her, instead just seeing her off silently.

A week later and her heart remained clouded.

*I didn’t even know Ryo existed until a month ago, so this is merely me returning to the time before... I know that in my head, but... Ahhh...now I understand too well why the Fairy King took such a liking to him...*

Even though she’d been told he wouldn’t return for another week, Sera nevertheless peeked in on the northern library and the Fill-Up station every day on the off chance he came back earlier. Unfortunately for her, she never found the person she hoped to see and always returned to the margrave’s estate looking crushed.

Eight days later, she met Nina again.

After the morning training with the knights ended, Sera headed to the

northern library. She scoured every nook and cranny of not only the great reading room but the restricted books section as well...but as she expected, the individual she sought wasn't there.

More dispirited than ever before, she trudged next to the Fill-Up Station. There weren't many customers since the lunch hour had already passed a short time earlier. Be that as it may, this was right around the time when she had previously encountered Ryo.

Sera pushed open the door to the eatery and stepped inside. There, she saw...a water magician enjoying curry! She almost burst into tears of joy at the sight. She didn't know why, only that her feelings were genuine.

Ryo gave the curry his undivided attention. Perhaps another way to say it was he practically attacked it... Watching him, she found herself unable to move for a few moments.

He suddenly raised his head and his eyes spotted her. With his right hand holding the spoon, he waved her over using his left. When Sera saw that, a huge smile spread on her face and she walked over to Ryo.



Only adventurers B-rank and higher could access the restricted books section of the northern library, meaning Ryo wasn't alone. Next to him sat the elf woman with the platinum blonde hair flowing down to the middle of her back caught in a loose ponytail. The Goddess of Beauty herself.

Sera.

Normally, those who didn't meet the requirements weren't allowed to step foot in the section even accompanied by a B-rank or higher. Ryo's presence here was thanks solely to Sera, who had gone directly to the mayor and obtained his permission. The purpose of his visit had to do with reading the documents she had found in the restricted books section while he'd been in Whitnash on a job, the parchment which contained information on the specific kind of alchemy that interested him. It was forbidden to take any publications, documents, and other materials in the restricted books section out of the library. Therefore, the only way for him to look at the bundles of parchment had been to request special permission for his entry into the section.

After briefly reading through the pages, Ryo raised his head.

“This is quite fascinating, isn’t it?”

“Right? I thought the same, which is why I knew I *had* to tell you, Ryo...”

“I’m sorry you had to wait so long for me to get back from a job.”

He felt bad that Sera went out of her way to go to the guild and look for him so she could tell him about these materials while he’d been gone for thirteen days on the escort commission to Whitnash. All he could do was thank her profusely.

“Oh, no, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

From the side, her expression looked a bit pleased to him.

“Okay, I’m going to jot down a few notes,” Ryo said as he arranged his sheaf of papers, pen, and ink on top of the table.

“Anything written on parchment is impossible to copy using Transcribe. Not so for regular paper though, which would have made things so much easier for us.”

Sera remarked with disappointment.

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

Ryo made the strange questioning sound and Sera responded in turn. For whatever reason, they weren’t on the same page.

“Did you just say something about transcription?”

“I certainly did just say something about transcription.”

Inflection, word choice, and more can change meaning so dramatically... Words truly are such difficult things...

“So if this were written on paper instead of parchment, I can use this ‘Transcribe’ you mentioned to copy it immediately onto *another* piece of paper?”

“Correct. Based on your question, it’s safe to assume you don’t know about

the Transcribe spell, right, Ryo?” Sera asked, smiling cheerfully now that she finally understood the reason for his confusion.

*I don't mind telling her I have no idea what Transcribe is over and over again if it means seeing this smile...*

Ryo's thoughts were a mess. Through sheer will power, he forced his mind back on task.

“Yes, it is...”

“Goodness, Ryo, you never fail to amuse me. Even though you give off the impression you know quite a bit, not to mention your various strengths, you don't know the most basic things.”

“Does that make 'Transcribe' one of those fundamental concepts...?”

After hearing all this, he managed to solve one puzzle. The various papers often found in the adventurers' guild... The pamphlets Nina had shown him during his registration process... All of it had been Transcribed. *This* explained the huge quantities of paper! On Phi, magic shouldered the burden instead of a printing press!

In hindsight, maybe the answer had been there all along. If magic, the most convenient tool of all, existed, letterpress printing would never have been invented.

“Can I use the Transcribe spell too?”

“Hmmm, that's a good question. Despite being a nonelemental magic, strangely enough, there are some who can use it while others can't. For example, its use is tested in the employment exam for librarians, so all who pass can use it. But—well...if you're going to do business in town, you'll need to hire the services of a transcriptionist.”

It seems printers exist in this world too...

“Aha! I just realized something. If anyone could Transcribe, then there would be no need to buy expensive books...”

“And that is what we call illegal.”

It seems copyright laws also exist in this world...

“You should always buy books properly. For the authors’ sake, you know.”

“You’re right. I’ll do just that.”

Sera beamed when Ryo meekly agreed.

He copied down as much as he could before taking a break. When he did, he asked Sera about something that had been on his mind for some time now.

“I’ve been wondering for a while, but you use the library a lot, don’t you, Sera?”

“Yes, you’ll find me in one, more often than not.”

“Doesn’t it get expensive then, paying the entry fee every time...?”

“Um...” Her gaze suddenly slid away from his.

“Uhhh, Sera?”

“W-Well...you see...since I work at the lord’s estate, entry is free for me...”

“Oh my God, I’m so jealous!” Ryo said from the depths of his heart.

“I-I paid in the beginning, but the mayor was appalled when he learned that my fees accounted for more than nine-tenths of this library’s revenue, so he insisted I use it for free... Though thanks to that, he indulges me whenever I ask for the impossible, which is why he let you access the restricted books section...” She cleared her throat pointedly, as if implying he should be thankful.

“I am, of course, grateful for his generosity,” he replied earnestly.

“Ah, which reminds me,” Sera said, forcefully changing the subject. “Later, I’ll take you to an acquaintance of mine who’s a printer and have them show you how the magic of Transcribe works.”

“Thank you... I’m looking forward to it.” Ryo decided to go along with it. “I really don’t know as much as I should about magic...”

“Frankly, I’m not terribly knowledgeable on human magic, or more specifically, the magic of the Central Provinces... Still, many moons have passed since I left my forest home, so I think I can answer at least a few of your questions, Ryo.”

*How old exactly is she then...*

“Ryo. You were thinking something strange just now, weren’t you?”

“N-No...”

She scowled at him. He looked away.

“I’m around two hundred years old, give or take.”

Ryo’s gaze snapped back to hers in surprise.

“Oh, myyy, did I say something unexpected?”

“A Lovely Woman Who Succeeded in Making Mischief.” That was the title he would give to the image of Sera and her wicked smile.

“No... I’m just surprised at how beautiful you still are despite having lived for two centuries...”

“S-Stop it.” Blushing fiercely, Sera turned her head to the side. “Even I am embarrassed to hear you say so to my face.”



After they ate curry together at the Fill-Up Station, they headed to the printing shop Sera knew. Though it was located in a street off the main boulevard, it boasted a magnificent storefront.

“Transcribing speed changes from person to person,” she explained. “So, fast individuals naturally receive more work, making the industry quite a profitable one apparently. Let’s go inside then, shall we?”

When she opened the door for them, someone came out.

“Oh, hey, Sera.”

“Abel, it’s been a while, hm?”

It was Abel, who held a bundle of printed papers.

“Gosh, Abel, how unusual to see you actually hard at work.”

“Wait...Ryo? Man, you *know* I work...” Abel said, surprised. “Never mind that. Why are you with Sera?”

“Well...you could call her my teacher.”

“And...you could call him my student.”

The two of them grinned at each other.

“Well, aren’t you two thick as thieves...”

Abel seemed taken aback by their attitudes. Just then a woman in her midthirties stepped out from the store.

“Abel, make sure to close the door on your way out... Oh, Sera, welcome.”

“Oops, I lost track of time. I’m off then. I got a *ton* to ask you, Ryo, so you better be ready for an interrogation when I see you again,” Abel said. He left right after that parting remark.

“Hello, Copilas,” Sera said to the woman. “Hope you’ve been well since the last time I came here. Ryo, this is the printer I mentioned, Copilas. She’s the best in all of Lune.”

“Oh, stop it, Sera, you’re exaggerating. Nice to meet you, Ryo. I’m Copilas and I own this printing shop.”

“I’m Ryo, an adventurer.”

Copilas and Ryo introduced themselves to each other.

“Copilas, Ryo said he doesn’t know about Transcription magic, so I brought him here for you to show him. I know we might be inconveniencing you, but would you mind letting him observe?”

“No bother at all. Abel’s was a rush job just now, but I can show him how it works on another contract I have.”

So saying, she led the two of them inside her store.

The Transcription magic Copilas showed them had the same effect as copying and pasting a page. She held her left hand over the original page and her right over the page to be transcribed.

*“I wish through the miracle of pen and paper for twins to be born. Transcribe.”*

This spell duplicates the exact same page. The page can’t be scaled up or down, and is transferred “as is” regardless of the size of the paper on which the

information is transcribed. Of course it was impossible for the printing speed to be as fast as copy machines on modern-day Earth, but since it took only five seconds to transcribe an A4-size page, the speed was perfectly practical.

“This is fantastic,” Ryo said, speaking from his heart. His awe might even be more profound after his experience copying by hand the sheaf of parchments this morning.

“Indeed. It’s one of the magics that completely transformed the humans’ way of life.”

“Sera, you’re getting a bit hyperbolic there,” Copilas said, smiling wryly.

“I’m not so sure about that. It truly is an amazing magic, Copilas, which is why I think you and others who have mastered it are incredible.”

From Ryo’s perspective, more people should view the world the way Sera did because something didn’t have to be flashy for it to be great.

“Copilas, I enjoyed the demonstration. Thank you very much.”

“Oh, no, it was nothing, really. And if you ever need something transcribed, Ryo, please do utilize my shop’s services.”

Ryo and Sera left the printer’s shop. Then she suddenly piped up.

“Ryo, I need to tell you something.”

What an ominous start.

“Ummm, please do?”

“That. That is exactly it.”

“Huh?”

“Up until now, I kept quiet about your politeness because I’m a B-rank adventurer and all. But...you were nothing of the sort with Abel earlier. So you can speak casually to me as well,” Sera said with a pout.

Ryo found her wildly adorable. “Well, if you must absolutely insist...”

“Darn it, you’re still doing it. Try again.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want...”

“Well done!” She smiled happily in response and started walking again.

# Nils's Mysterious Village

Ryo had a punishment imposed on him by the adventurers' guild which entailed completing three commissions in two months. The first was the escort mission to Whitnash alongside the other three of Room 10 and Coffee Maker.

In reality, roundtrip escort jobs were treated as two separate commissions, one for the journey there and one for the journey back. Since this was an internal guild procedure, clients were neither aware of it nor disadvantaged by it. Be that as it may, this type of commission was extremely desirable for those adventurers who needed to meet a quota for whatever reason.

And Ryo was one of them. In short, he just had to do one more job in a month and a half to fulfill his punishment, which was plenty of time. Since he didn't feel any real urgency, he spent much of his time going in and out of the northern library, the Fill-Up Station, or conducting mock battles at the knights' training center. But one day...

"Ryo, I need your help with something."

"Hmmm?"

After several rounds of mock battles with Sera in the afternoon at the knights' training center, he had just returned to Room 10. There, Nils, head bowed in resolve, asked him for a favor.

"What do you mean?"

To summarize Nils's explanation... The village he'd been born and raised in had submitted a hunt request to the adventurers' guild. The job was for C-and D-ranks, meaning he and the other two couldn't take it on since they were an E-rank party. But if Ryo, who was a D-rank, created a temporary party, they would be able to. The commission was to hunt goblins and skeletons that often appeared near the village.

"Did I hear you right?" Ryo got a little excited at the mention of the targets. "Goblins and skeletons?"

*At last, another mainstay of a fantasy world debuts alongside the goblins! Skeletons!*

But something bothered him too.

“But...why goblins and skeletons? Isn’t that a strange combination?”

“Yup. Their habitats are fundamentally different. Although I haven’t the foggiest if the word ‘habitat’ even applies to skeletons,” Eto replied.

For the young priest, undead creatures like skeletons were his mortal enemies... Or so Ryo assumed. So he must be the most knowledgeable among everyone here about skeletons and such.

“Skeletons generally appear in cemeteries, abandoned temples and shrines, abandoned buildings, and abandoned mines in particular. Nils, are there any places like this in or around your village?”

“A graveyard. That might be why they’re showing up. The job flyer didn’t have those details though. The village actually submitted the request to Kailadi first since it’s the closest town. But it was never completed there and that’s how it wound up passed on to Lune...”

“But that doesn’t make any sense. Taking down goblins and skeletons should have been a manageable job for the adventurers there...”

Eto racked his brain over the puzzle. It was common knowledge that goblins were weak—aside from the ones during the Great Tidal Bore. Skeletons weren’t all that strong either, meaning even an F-rank adventurer could easily solo one. If a party had a priest, he or she could use an area purification spell like Turn Undead to defeat dozens of them without too much effort. He just could not wrap his head around the fact that the request remained unfulfilled in Kailadi.

“Yeah, I know, which is why I think we’ll need to head to Kailadi first and ask what happened.”

“How long do you think the job will take?”

“Let’s see. A day to get to Kailadi, another to reach the village, and three to do the job. I’d say seven days in total.”

When he finished speaking, Nils stared expectantly at Ryo. His expression

said, “So what do you think? You’ll say yes, right?”

“I won’t say no.”

“Really?! Thanks, man!”

“But I did promise someone that I’d engage in a mock battle tomorrow, so I’m heading over there now to ask if we can postpone. After I finish, then I’ll go to the guild to submit an application to create a temporary party and accept the commission. Does that work for you?”

There was no hidden meaning in Ryo’s words, but the other three were surprised to learn about what he was canceling the next day.

“Wait, someone is actually going to fight you for *fun*...?”

“Does a person like that even exist in Lune?”

“Are they even human...”

Nils, Eto, and Amon were so shocked they inadvertently muttered comments anyone would find rude if they heard.

“All right, I’ll be back in a jiff.”



Ryo returned to the lord’s estate, which he had left not even an hour ago. The knight on watch at the gate was surprised to see him again so soon.

“Mr. Ryo, is something the matter?”

At some point in time, the knights had started calling him “Mr. Ryo.” He had been conducting mock battles with Sera practically every afternoon for the past few days in the knights’ training center and he too knew the knights gossiped about their fights. This was probably why they began addressing him so politely.

“Oh, no, nothing serious. Sera and I are supposed to train tomorrow as well, but I suddenly received a commission from the guild, so I unfortunately need to cancel. I simply wanted to let her know...”

The guard looked disappointed by the news.

“That really is unfortunate since I planned on watching you two tomorrow.”

“W-Well, I feel bad now...”

“Ah, please don’t. Right, then, you’re looking for Miss Sara, yes? She should be in the training center teaching the knights.”

The guard let Ryo enter and pointed in the direction of the training center.

“Wait, are you sure I can just go in?”

“Of course. The lord has granted you unrestricted access to the training center.”

This was the first he’d heard of it... And when exactly had that even happened?

At the training center...most of the knights were lying on the ground. They were having a good time sleep-learning—as if.

Sera was the only one on her feet, looking no worse for wear. Clearly, she had routed them all. Ryo stood there motionless, taking the sight in.

“Um...”

His voice was barely a whisper. Nevertheless, she reacted immediately and whipped around to face him. Then she moved instantly to stand in front of him.

“Ryo, you’re back already? Did you forget something?”

“No. The truth is, I need to apologize to you, Sera...”

With that, he gave her a quick rundown of the job he’d taken on earlier.

“And there you have it. I came here to inform you that I won’t be able to join you tomorrow for our mock bout and I’ll be out of town for a few days...”

He’d heard she had looked for him during his escort job to Whitnash, so he thought it would be best if he told her this time properly in advance about his situation. Sera looked somewhat dispirited after Ryo finished speaking.

*She always seemed to enjoy our battles, so...it makes sense she’d be feeling down since we can’t fight for a while, hm...*

With that though, he made a suggestion for when he came back.

“Please spar a lot with me when I return. Oh, and let’s eat curry at the Fill-Up

Station too."

Sera brightened visibly at his words. "R-Really? You promise? You *swear* on your life? I won't forgive you if you break it."

"Y-Yes, I promise." Ryo nodded vigorously, overwhelmed by the pressure radiating from her.

"Good. Then do your best, for yourself and your roommate." She sent him off with a huge smile.

As for Ryo...he was just deeply relieved that his news didn't put her in a bad mood.

When he returned to the guild's dormitory again, he found his three roommates still waiting for him in their room. Nils had drawn a simple map of the village and was in the process of explaining various things to them.

"Sorry for the wait."

"Welcome back, Ryo."

"Welcome back."

"So, uh, your sparring partner didn't fly into a rage or anything...?" Nils asked nervously.

"No problems whatsoever. More importantly, let's head to the guild and take care of the formalities. And while we're at it, we can eat dinner there too. I'm famished."

The paperwork went smoothly at the guild. However, the fact that they were summoned to one of the drawing rooms after accepting the job was different from usual. Two minutes later, Guild Master Hugh walked in.

"Thanks for comin', boys. Nah, nah, sit down," he said as they rushed to stand and greet him properly. "No need to be all formal. The reason I called ya lot here was I figured it wouldn't hurt to tell ya why this job came to us from Kailadi. Yer curious, aintcha?"

"Yes, we definitely are." Nils was the first to respond. And of course he was, considering the job had to do with his village.

“Two ‘venturin’ parties set out from Kailadi. The first was an E-rank and the second, D.”

“Are you saying even the D-rank party failed?”

Goblins and skeletons...though they didn’t know how many of the monsters were to be eliminated, it boggled the mind that a D-rank party didn’t succeed.

“Not...quite. Ya see, the D-rank party wrote some interestin’ things in their report. ‘We couldn’t gain the villagers’ cooperation,’ ‘The villagers were hostile,’ and whatnot...”

“Say what?” Nils blurted like an idiot. “But the people of my village aren’t so unwelcoming... Though I guess I can’t exactly call them openhearted either.”

“Hmmm, either way, it’s hard to say somethin’ conclusive based on just a report, ya know? But one o’ the members o’ the E-rank party that went out first suffered serious injuries. A skeleton, ’parently. They stated in their report they encountered over twenty o’ the bastards, so you boys need to be careful. With Eto by yer side though, I’m sure ya boys will be fine. Long as ya don’t drop yer guards, o’ course.”

Eto nodded emphatically then.

“Frankly speakin’, I’m thankful yer the ones who took this job on. Better for a local to do it, in my humble opinion... I m’self was born in a small village, so I understand how ya feel, Nils. Havin’ said that, I gotta confess I was a mite worried when we got the request and saw Kailadi updated the requirement to C-and D-ranks... But shouldn’t be a problem with Ryo, eh? Good, good.” Hugh bobbed his head in satisfaction a few times. “Oh, yeah, here’s a letter o’ introduction addressed to Kailadi’s ‘venturers’ guild. I wrote that yer from the village in question, Nils, and to help ya boys with any information ya need. Though I reckon they won’t treat ya badly regardless.”

“Guild Master, thank you very much for everything. You’ve gone above and beyond.”

“Nah, don’t even worry about it. ’Cuz I got high hopes for ya young’uns. Just come back safe, ya hear?”

Then Hugh exited the parlor with a chuckle.

"I sure worked up an appetite. Let's go eat."

Ryo's unwavering focus on food despite the situation bewildered Nils though he still nodded in agreement while Eto stifled a smile and Amon laughed ruefully.

After all, you can't work on an empty stomach.



The next day, after eating breakfast earlier than usual in the guild's canteen, the four headed to Kailadi. On foot, of course.

A highway existed between Lune and Kailadi to accommodate the frequent back-and-forth transportation of both people and goods. Though the word "road" might be a better descriptor since the ground was only hardened instead of being laid down with stone paving... In any case, it was still leagues easier to traverse than a trackless path.

Poles measuring one meter in diameter and five in height occasionally appeared alongside the highway.

"What are those poles we see sometimes?" Ryo wondered aloud, curious about the structures.

"They're called exorcism pillars and they ward off monsters," said Eto, who was the one usually answering these types of questions. "They should be placed at five-hundred-meter intervals."

"A barrier..." Ryo murmured unconsciously. Because to his mind came the barrier Fake Michael had created around his own house in the Forest of Rondo.

"It isn't nearly as effective as an actual barrier, but...barring the extraordinary, monsters will stay away. So these pillars are installed on most of the Kingdom's major highways."

Apparently, they were on the road between Lune and Whitnash too, but Ryo had no memory of them. Perhaps because extracting information from Coffee Maker had been more important back then. At any rate, it seemed to him that the exorcism pillars and the barrier around his house were two fundamentally different things. Someday, he wanted to solve the mystery of the latter...

Another ambition sprouted in his heart.

Afternoon arrived. The four of them rested while eating the lunches prepared by the guild canteen's staff.

"Goodness..." Ryo said with a sigh, mostly to himself. "This trek sure is uneventful."

"Ryo," Nils said, shooting Ryo an exasperated glance, "what the heck did you even think was gonna happen?"

"I mean, when it comes to journeying between cities, you expect certain events... For example, constantly fending off attacking monsters or capturing a group of bandits and robbing them of their hoard of treasure. You know, the classics."

"Jeez, which world *is* this? All that sounds pretty ominous to me."

If such things happened frequently, economic activity at the national level would surely stagnate. So Nils explained to him. You heard that right, reader. Nils, the swordsman who looked like an overgrown rascal, was the one who explained all this to him.

Ryo was astonished.

"Damn you, Ryo, I know for a fact you're thinking something rude right now."

"Y-You must be imagining things, Nils. Yes, it's definitely your imagination."

Next to them, Eto, unable to contain his giggles, burst out laughing. He finally stopped after a while and commented.

"Nils, you remembered what Abel said to you on the topic some time ago, right?"

"Eto, don't rat me out like that!" Nils said, panicked.

"You know, I *did* have an inkling..." Ryo began.

"Really, Ryo? Seriously? You suck too."

Amon, who'd been listening quietly the whole time, chimed in. "I, for one, think it's amazing that you retain everything you hear, Nils. I'll do my best too!"

Amon was a good guy.

That evening, the four arrived at Kailadi without incident.

“Since the guild’s probably crowded around this time with folks making their job reports, let’s find an inn to stay in first.”

They agreed to Nils’s suggestion and secured lodgings before heading to the adventurers’ guild. Sleeping outdoors wouldn’t cost anything, but who wouldn’t want to sleep in a proper bed when they were in a proper city? Because to adventurers, their bodies were capital too.

After renting a room, they decided to eat dinner. Then the quartet set off for the guild once they finished it. Just like Nils had predicted, they managed to avoid the peak reporting hour and found the lobby fairly empty. Only a young man staffed the reception counter.

“We’re adventurers from Lune who accepted the hunt commission in the village of Abali that Kailadi sent over. We’d like to receive the info for the job. Also, here’s the letter of introduction from our guild master.”

Nils handed over the letter Hugh gave him to the receptionist.

“Understood. Please wait a moment.” He took the letter of introduction from Nils and walked through a door behind the counter.

“Then someone comes out and we wind up in a touch-and-go situation once we find ourselves at the mercy of this town’s adventurers and bigwigs. But we settle things through brute force and all’s well that ends well. Until the next episode!” Ryo said, passionately narrating the kind of scene found in a typical light novel.

“Ryo, *why* the heck are you so obsessed with looking for a fight? *Why*, man?” Nils asked, fed up.

Eto shook his head. “Are you maybe frustrated because you had to cancel your sparring match?”

“Oh, I know what this is!” Amon exclaimed. “It’s that tenet you mentioned a while ago, right, Ryo? ‘Fight no battle unprepared.’”

Unfortunately, or perhaps to no one's surprise, nothing of the sort happened and the four of them were led to a parlor inside.

"The submaster will explain the details of this incident, so please wait here."

And so they waited for the next five minutes.

The submaster was the guild master's aide, making this position the second-highest in a guild hierarchy. The role usually existed in guilds of a certain size or larger. However, for whatever reason, Lune's adventurers' guild had no submaster despite being the largest on the frontier, which explained why Abel was dispatched as Hugh's proxy to Whitnash.

A man in his late thirties stepped into the room, looking like a former magician. As tall as Ryo, slender as Eto, and with a gentle expression like Amon's, he gave off the impression of being easy to talk to.

"So you're the adventurers from Lune, huh? I'm Landenbier, the submaster of Kailadi's adventurers' guild. Looking forward to working with you."

"I'm Nils, the party leader. This is the rest of the party. Eto, Amon, and Ryo."

Unlike his usual casual way of speaking, Nils introduced everyone politely. Because considering time, place, and occasion is fundamental to being a productive member of society.

"Ahhh, so you're Nils from Abali. Master McGlass wrote about you in his letter. He also mentioned he has high hopes for you young folks, which is saying something coming from *the* Hugh McGlass... I have to admit I'm a bit envious he has a party like this under his command, mostly because Kailadi hasn't had many young parties debut recently..."

"He has high hopes...for *us*..."

"Master McGlass'... That sounds so cool. Has a very nice ring to it."

Among the three delighted voices, one fixated on something decidedly strange, but we purposely won't touch on who. Certainly won't say it was a certain water magician...

"Does this mean our guild master is actually someone famous?"

Eto's mutter surprised Submaster Landenbier.

"Don't tell me you've never heard of Champion McGlass...?"

"*Champion?*"

All four said the word in unison, their shock evident.

"Shucks, has the time already come when today's adventurers don't know of such things? Once upon a time, there wasn't a single adventurer in the Kingdom who *didn't* know the name Hugh McGlass. That's the kind of person he is. A war known simply as the Great War broke out ten years ago between the Kingdom and the Federation and Master McGlass is champion of that war. Once you complete this job and return to Lune, ask the older adventurers about the epic tale of Hugh McGlass."

"Yes, Sir, we will."

Although he still hadn't recovered from his shock, Nils nevertheless answered with a firm nod.

"Right then, let me explain to you the details of this job. Although, I have to be honest, there isn't much information *to* give you in the first place."

From Kailadi, one E-rank party and one D-rank party had been dispatched. The E-rank party, composed of five members, had gone first. Two of its members had been grievously wounded in a battle against skeletons. Their attempt ended in retreat.

The D-rank party had gone next. Due to a lack of cooperation from some of the villagers, they had been unable to complete their investigation. They too withdrew.

After that, the leaders of the village visited Kailadi's adventurers' guild to apologize. However, no more adventurers willing to accept the job appeared, so the request had been sent to Lune, the Kingdom's largest frontier city.

"I'm sorry we don't have more information. The guild staff member who listened to these parties' reports already quit, you see. Do you have any questions?"

“I believe the form stated that goblins and skeletons would be the hunt targets, but is the presence of goblins definitely confirmed?” Eto asked because there had been no mention whatsoever of the monsters in any of the reports thus far.

“No, none of the adventurers were able to,” Landenbier said with a shake of his head.

“Did the E-rank party encounter the skeletons in the western graveyard?” Nils, familiar with his village’s layout, asked.

“No, not the graveyard. The report says the eastern woods.”

Nils pondered his reply deeply. “The eastern woods? Really?”

No one had any more questions after his, so Landenbier concluded his explanation.

“Then I wish you all the best of luck.”

And with that, the submaster stood up and showed the four members of Room 10 out.

They departed the town of Kailadi the next morning and reached their destination, the village of Abali, in midafternoon.

“It didn’t take as long as I thought it would.”

“Because we walk really fast,” Nils replied with a wry smile. “Usually, it takes around a day.”

Since all four young men trained with stamina in mind, they were able to greatly shorten the time it took to travel long distances like this. How long can you sustain a high level of performance...? This was an incredibly essential fact of life for both athletes and adventurers. Praise be to stamina.

While the houses were concentrated in the center of the village, the cultivated fields stretched out in a surprisingly vast range outside of it. A few of the villagers working the fields ambled over to the four when they spotted them. Their main reason being the return of one of their own, the swordsman.

“Nils, is that you? Oh ho, it really is! Ain’t you a sight for sore eyes?!”

“Welcome back, Nils!”

Ryo couldn’t conceal his relief when he saw the villagers waving and smiling at Nils.

“Clearly, you weren’t exiled because your people hate you, Nils. Excellent news.”

“Why the heck was that even your first guess?” Nils retorted, his tone less angry and more annoyed.

“You can’t blame me for thinking so. You look like you would have been the neighborhood bully or a hooligan when you were a kid... At the very least, you were mischievous, right?”

“Urk... I can’t... deny that...”

“So conventional wisdom dictates that people like that get kicked out of their villages, after which they end up falling into adventuring.”

“There he goes again jumping to conclusions...”

“Do you think he knows someone who’s experienced something like that?”

Eto and Amon whispered to each other in response to Ryo’s assumption based on his light-novel knowledge.

“A-Anyway,” Nils said, cutting them off, “the first thing we have to do is greet the village mayor and the Grandam.”

He headed to the center of the village with long strides. The other three followed him obediently.

A huge house abutted the village’s central plaza. Made of wood, it was rather spacious inside.

“Boulan, are you in here?”

Nils opened the door and stepped inside without waiting for permission. The other three, however, definitely hesitated. Though the young swordsman might have no sense of restraint because of his familiarity with the house’s owner, this wasn’t the case for his friends. They only thrust their heads through the

door as they peeked inside. The room ended up being a huge space perhaps used as a meeting place.

A few seconds later, a man as big as Nils sporting thick muscles strode out from deeper within the house. He looked to be in his fifties.

“Who’s asking for me... Holy hell, Nils, is that you? Is it really you?”

The man called Boulan stared Nils up and down several times from head to toe, his eyes not believing what they saw.

“Yup, it’s me.”

“Are you sure...? I almost didn’t recognize you, boy.”

Then the two men hugged each other tightly.

“You’re kidding, right? I haven’t even been gone for a year.”

“Yeah, I know, but... Just feels like you grew into a real solid man’s man... Especially since you were such a hooligan when you left the village.”

“Pfft.”

The second they heard those last words, the three behind him burst out laughing.

“Awww, man! Come on, Boulan, why’d you have to go and say that? Oh, yeah, let me make introductions. These three are my party members, Eto, Amon, and Ryo.”

“Nice to meet you.”

As a group, they greeted him and bowed their heads politely.

“Right back atcha. I’m Boulan, the village mayor. I’m not real big on standing around and talking, so go on and have a seat.”

The four of them sat when he urged them to. Just then, a woman around his age walked into the room carrying a tray loaded with cups.

“Nils, welcome back. And a warm welcome to you all.”

“Thanks, Lanlan. Good to be home again.”

The woman named Lanlan smiled cheerfully at them, set down the cups full of

some drink, and then excused herself.

“So, Nils, I seriously doubt the timing of your visit is a coincidence...”

“Got it in one. We accepted the job the village submitted to the guild.”

“That right? Wait, but I thought we sent it to Kailadi’s guild... Not to mention they upgraded the requirement to higher-rank parties, right?”

“No one else was willing to take it on in Kailadi, so the guild there passed it over to Lune. As far as rank, well... Let’s just say I pushed myself and figured out a solution.”

Eto and Amon smile wryly at Nils’s response.

“Huh... Well, better to have you and your friends deal on board than strangers who don’t know anything about our village.” Then Boulan took a sip of water from his cup.

“Boulan,” Nils started, watching him. “I heard the villagers wouldn’t cooperate with the adventurers who showed up the second time. But that can’t be right. What exactly happened?”

“Ahhh... About that... I guess it comes down to the crux of this terrible business, eh... Frankly, I have no idea where to start, so might as well start at the beginning. Strap in cuz this might take a while.”

And with that, Boulan began talking.

“The skeletons were first sighted around half a year ago. In the eastern woods...somewhere thereabouts anyway. Then the goblins were spotted three months ago. Also in the eastern woods...well, deeper in the woods, a little south. I was the one who saw them. But then I never saw any more after that. I looked and looked, but never saw another one. It got to the point where if someone else said they’d seen one, I’d have told them they were seeing things.”

He paused to drink more water.

“The skeletons were always found in slightly open areas of the woods. When I finally managed to scrounge up enough money, I submitted the hunt commission. Figured folks could take care of the goblins while they were at it,

so I wrote that down on the form too. Then the first party showed up and...you know what happened to them?"

"Yeah. Two of them were seriously hurt."

"That's right. They were surrounded by more than twenty skeletons. That party went back to town. The problem is the place where the battle took place." Boulan frowned.

"Don't tell me...they went *inside* the eastern woods?" Nils's precise question indicated he guessed correctly.

"Yeah. The battle contaminated the interior of the woods. So when the second party showed up, a few of the villagers thought we should drive them out. I understand that it was impossible to tell them to pick a better spot for a life-or-death battle, you know? But I also understand the villagers wanting to chase them out of a place we've been told for generations not to enter, especially when that place is stained with blood. It's a complicated situation, to say the least..."

"True..."

After his remark, Nils suddenly glanced at the other three and realized they didn't understand at all.

"Sorry, of course none of this makes sense to you guys since this has to do with the village's secrets... But I can't talk about it without the Grandam's permission. So just wait for now."

Then he bowed his head to them.

After that, the four of them headed to Nils's family home where he'd been born. Currently, his younger brother, to whom Nils had given the family reins, lived there with his wife. They both cried tears of joy upon his return.

The three of them were told to wait in the house while Nils went off to convince the rest of the villagers. During this time, Nils's younger brother, Niloi, and his sister-in-law, Sana, did their parts as good hosts.

"In short, once you reached the age of majority at eighteen, Nils made you

the family heir and also transferred ownership of the farmland, then left the village to become an adventurer?”

“Correct. My older brother never really liked farming even as a child, you see. But he had no choice except to take over after our parents died shortly before his eighteenth birthday... Originally, he planned on leaving the village right after becoming an adult. However, he stayed to raise me.”

Niloi only resembled Nils in face. His personality and the size of his frame were nothing like his older brother’s. He was a very gentle young man.

“I can see that. Despite his looks, Nils is the type who takes care of people, huh?” Eto said.

“I agree. He’s done so much for me and I couldn’t be more grateful,” Amon added.

Naturally, the man in question wasn’t here. If he had been, he definitely would have flushed from embarrassment and protested.

“Speaking of, where exactly is he right now...?”

“A general meeting with the villagers at the mayor’s residence. He’s probably explaining all kinds of things to them...”

It must be in the same spacious room in which Ryo and the others talked to Mayor Boulan.

“Customs and conventions are a big deal in villages, hm...” Amon said earnestly. He could relate deeply, having only recently left his own village.

“They sure are. But I don’t think there will be any villagers against the hunt this time since Nils and the people he trusts accepted the job. Last time, the other party charged into the woods while completely ignoring our traditions, so you can imagine the opposition later...”

“Aha.” Eto nodded. “I had a feeling it was something like that.”

No one willingly discloses information that makes them look bad. Either that, or they’ll cut it down or intentionally avoid mentioning it at all... This happens often. It’s not like they’re lying. They simply aren’t asked, so they don’t answer. Superiors and those who accept the reports must be the ones to probe further.

But...that's an incredibly difficult task.

The result? Clients and allies remain dissatisfied. The world is just full of complications.



"Hey, folks, I'm back," Nils announced upon his return from the meeting, interrupting the five's friendly conversation. Then he took a breath before updating them.

"I'm gonna get straight to the point. We received permission to take out the skeletons. We're heading out tomorrow night. Before we do, I'm thinking we search for goblins during the day tomorrow. Boulan said he'd take us to where he saw one. Just be ready for a fight or nothing when we set out. Now, as far as the skeletons go..."

He paused there to down the cup of water he'd been handed then continued.

"I got permission from the villagers to tell you guys everything, but just wanna make it clear you can't breathe a word of this to anyone else. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Understood."

"Mum's the word."

Eto, Amon, and of course, Ryo all agreed.

"This village is a unique one. It has two distinct characteristics. The first has to do with the village's guardian beast living deep in the eastern woods. I've personally never seen it. Only the mayor and the Grandam have, which is why I have no idea what the guardian beast is like...or honestly whether or not it even still lives there."

"A guardian beast..." Amon muttered, surprised as anyone would be.

Meanwhile, Eto's shock could be attributed to his specialized knowledge. "I know some villages with legends like this exist," he said, "but I never imagined yours would be one of them, Nils..."

*Guardian beast... How very apt for a fantasy setting!*

Ryo was the only one secretly excited by the news.

“The mayor and Grandam will go to explain things to the guardian beast before day’s end, about our plan to search for goblins and exterminate the skeletons. Because of all this, the villagers want us to avoid spilling blood in the eastern woods, so...I told them we’d do our best.”

“Thankfully, skeletons don’t literally blood.”

“As-As long as we don’t get hurt, we should be fine, right?”

Eto and Amon each expressed their thoughts. Meanwhile, Ryo’s mind was overcome with clichéd light-novel-type plot developments.

*I’m absolutely positive that this guardian beast will attack us because it’s been driven mad either by an evil god possessing or cursing it. And there’s a very good chance freeing it will be our new mission!*

“Ryo, you thinking of something weird right now?” Nils asked, snapping Ryo back into reality.

“N-No, no, of course not. Nothing at all in my head.”

Nils stared suspiciously at Ryo.

“M-More importantly,” Ryo began, changing the subject to get the heat off himself, “you said the village has two distinct characteristics, yes? The guardian beast being the first. So what’s the second?”

“Man, you’re such a pain... Anyway. The other is a shrine.”

“Shrine?” Eto asked.

“Yeah. But it’s kinda hard to explain, so the Grandam said she’d tell you herself tomorrow. Good thing too because I have no clue where to even start. So, sorry, but you’ll have to wait until then to find out more.”



The night passed and a new day dawned in the village of Abali. There was no banquet or something of the sort to celebrate Nils’s return in the village square.

*Even though that sort of event is a staple of isekai reincarnation stories... Another day without clichés or peak fiction. Too bad...*

Ryo was the only one down in the dumps about this. It wasn't like he *liked* alcohol or drinking parties or anything. He had simply been expecting it as a guaranteed trope in the story. That was just the kind of man he was.

When the four of them went to the village square, they found Boulan the mayor talking to an elderly woman.

"Morning, gents. Eto, Amon, and Ryo, right? Let me introduce you. This is Mistress Nasu, the village advisor. Otherwise known as the Grandam."

The moment he spoke, Mistress Nasu—er, no, the Grandam—swung her staff at Boulan. He adroitly evaded it by bending his upper body backward.

"Who in tarnation tells guests that? Foolish boy. Apologies, honored guests, but just like Boulan and Nils, this village is full of dolts who don't know their manners."

"Why are you dragging me into this too..." Nils mumbled quietly.

"Anyway, let's get this show on the road and look for goblins," Boulan interjected smoothly, refusing to comment on the old woman's grumbling. The fact that he glossed through this without issue might just make him an outstanding mayor.

The spot was located a fifteen-minute walk away from the village's outermost boundary.

"It's surprisingly close, huh?" Nils said, staring in the direction of the village.

"Yeah. The village kids even come all the way out here to play sometimes. 'Course, I banned them from getting near here after I saw what I did. But," the mayor said, looking meaningfully at Nils, "no matter where you live, a few kids will always wanna break the rules. Am I right?"

"Okay, I mean, I feel like I did stuff like that in the past too...maybe...a high chance...possibly..."

"Ain't no 'maybe' about it and you damn well know that."

Boulan refused to let Nils talk his way out of it, instead finishing him off by rubbing salt in the wound.

“I knew it. I knew you’ve always been like that, Nils...” Ryo muttered to himself, nodding vigorously with his arms folded in front of his chest. Well...his muttering wasn’t exactly quiet either. Almost as if he *wanted* the person he was talking about to hear him.

“I knew it,’ my left foot, man. And what do you mean by ‘always’? It’s like you’re saying I’m *still* like that even now.”

Eto snorted with laughter while Amon smiled wryly. Not a single person there refuted Ryo’s assertion and tried to placate Nils by saying something like, “But you’re totally different now!”

In fact, Nils in the present hardly ever broke the rules, but you could say everyone just had the impression he was a troublemaker.

They walked another fifteen minutes from the location Boulan initially brought them to, the place where he first sighted the goblins. From there, the number of footprints that seemed like they belonged to goblins suddenly increased.

“No... No way.”

Eto imagined the worst. But it wasn’t just him. Nils did too.

“A den of goblins... Maybe even a village of them, huh?”

It was common practice for adventurers to divide groups of goblins into two categories: about twenty of them comprised a den and any more than that was considered a village.

Ryo lifted his head then.

“What’s wrong, Ryo?”

“Nils...there are more than ten goblins heading toward us. They’ll be here in five minutes.” He pointed to the south.

“Dang, your scouting ability is no joke. In that case,” Nils said, “we kill all of them except one.”

“Because we’re going to follow the one we leave alive to the den and destroy it?” Ryo confirmed.

"You got it," Boulan said. "What I'd rather do is conduct a proper investigation first *then* get the right people in place, but...we don't have a choice now since they're already coming at us."

One or two wouldn't have posed a problem, but there was strength in numbers. The fact that twice as many as the five of them were approaching worried Boulan. "Nils, he said ten, at least. You sure about this?"

"Ryo's here, so we'll be fine. Ryo, you're in charge of stopping them. Up to you how you wanna do it."

"Roger that."

*This is my chance to try out some new techniques... Kek kek kek.*

Ryo cackled wickedly in his mind.

"I think Ryo's..."

"Scheming, huh?"

He had planned to smile evilly in his head. Except it came out on his face. Watching him, Amon and Eto murmured quietly to each other. Ryo just could not keep any secrets...

Five minutes later, ten goblins burst out from within the woods in a slightly open clearing. He visualized in his mind and cast a spell.

*Ice Bind 10.*

When he did, ropes of water bound the goblins' hands and feet then froze instantly, restricting their movements.

"Let's go, Amon."

"Yes, Sir!"

Upon seeing the immobilized goblins, Nils and Amon leaped forward, each dealing the finishing blow to a goblin. Once they killed eight of them, Ryo deliberately undid the Ice Bind on one of the monsters. To no one's surprise, the freed goblin ran as fast as it could in the direction it came from. Since goblins lacked intelligence...it was very unlikely the being considered it had

been let loose on purpose.

After the ninth had been killed, Boulan and the four members of Room 10 pursued its escaped comrade. The village mayor was stunned to his core at their superb skill in defeating the monsters without incurring any damage themselves. He was also deeply moved at the fact that it had been Nils, whom he'd seen grow up since he was a wee thing, and his friends who had accomplished the deed.

They ran for ten minutes.

"That must be it, up ahead."

A small hill rose out of the ground a distance away from the five.

"I spy ten out front. There's also something that looks like a cave, which contains more, but I can't tell how many."

"Got it. For now, let's take out the ten first in the same way we did earlier. Even though it's haphazard as hell..." Nils said with a grimace.

*Jeez...without Ryo, it would have never worked. Water magicians really are something else.*

Despite some misunderstandings, the four men switched their focus to continuous combat.

*Ice Bind 10.*

Once more, Nils and Amon conducted a unilateral slaughter. Just when Nils killed the tenth one in front, three more goblins came out of the cave.

*Ice Bind 3.*

Chains made of ice immediately bound the newcomers, making it easy for Nils and Amon to finish them off. Incidentally, one of them was a goblin archer. But that didn't matter at all.

And then, the big boss finally appeared. Ryo wasn't the only one who noticed. The rest of Room 10 did as well.

"Something huge is coming. Amon, be careful."

"Yes, Sir!"

Nils and Amon took up their stances, swords at the ready again.

They were met with...

"A goblin general? Are you freaking kidding me..."

Nils hadn't expected this at all and his horrified whisper conveyed as much. Three of these generals had appeared during Lune's Great Tidal Bore. However, generals and such rarely showed themselves. At best, archers were the greatest threats in dens or villages created near human settlements. For the sake of argument, maybe mages.

Unlike the mages that ranked below them, goblin generals were in a completely different league with their high combat ability. A B-rank adventurer would have to endure a grueling one-on-one match to subjugate one...that was the strength of a general. Meaning a goblin general was an impossible opponent for the E-rank adventurers of Nils and F-rank

Amon...at least under normal circumstances.

"*Ice Bind.*" Ryo's voice echoed as chains of ice tightened around the goblin general just like all the other goblins so far. Naturally, the general tried to tear them off. But...neither its hands nor its feet moved. So it toppled to the ground, facing up. Its positioning essentially invited them to defeat it.

"Wait, what? Huh?" Nils sounded almost hysterical.

"Nils, aren't you going to kill it?"

"R-Right, yeah... Definitely."

So saying, Nils approached the general and cut its head off. With that, they removed one of the dangers terrorizing the village of Abali.

"Isn't it great we defeated them all without any casualties on our side? On top of that, we got the general's magic stone as well. And it's quite a deep color to boot. Makes you wonder how long it lived there, hm?"

Ryo sounded very happy.

“Y-Yeah.”

A very small part of Nils still struggled to wrap his head around what just happened and his confusion showed on his face as they walked the path back to the village. As for Eto and Amon, they were simply pleased to obtain the general’s magic stone...

“Ge-Ge-Ge-General, Goblin General! ♪”

“Leading eever everyone, Goblin General! ♪”

...so for whatever reason, the two of them improvised a song on the trek.

“Nils and his mates sure are amazing...”

None of the four heard Boulan’s astonished murmur.

# The Guardian Beast

Many villagers gathered in the village square.

“Mayor, Nils! How’d it go?”

“Good, good. Destroyed all the goblins.”

“Whoooa!”

Cheers of excitement went up at Mayor Boulan’s announcement.

“Well, ain’t you amazing, Nils!”

“The rest of you too. Thanks for helping us.”

“Here, have some of this bandit’s fried boar.”

For some time after, excited chatter filled the air as the villagers surrounded the four young men, clapping them on the shoulder in thanks, shoving food into their hands and whatnot.

“No, no alcohol. They still gotta deal with the skeletons at night.”

“Oh, right, sorry...”

Keen-eyed, Boulan spotted and stopped a villager who enthusiastically offered liquor to them. Despite this being atypical for them, the villagers nevertheless enjoyed having lunch in the village square.

“Boulan.”

“Hello, Grandam. The goblins are done for.”

“Yes, yes, I heard. Well done. In which case, take those four younguns to see the guardian beast before the sun sets. Our protector wants to have a little chat.”

“That right...? I’ll let the boys know then. We’ll go after lunch.”

Ryo’s ears picked up on their conversation.

*An audience with the guardian beast! A classic story event! Which means*

*there's a decent chance we'll end up battling the guardian beast driven mad by a curse...*

He smiled faintly without realizing it.

"Damn it, Ryo, you're plotting something bad again, aren't you..." Nils said, looking incredibly aggravated.

Amon smiled his usual cheerful smile. "There's definitely a wicked aura around you, Ryo."

Eto stared at the Grandam during this exchange. More precisely, he stared at the decorative cord and carved statuette hanging from her staff and rifled through his memories.

*I'm pretty sure, Eto thought, that's the Earth Mother Goddess's...*

The guardian beast's location was an hour's walk upon entering the eastern woods.

"The villagers are also forbidden from venturing deep into the eastern woods. 'Course, Nils being the disobedient hooligan he was never listened and went in there all the time, so the Grandam and I gave him more angry lectures than I can count."

"I knew it!"

"How?! How could you have possibly known that?!"

To Ryo, Boulan's explanation made complete sense. And to Nils, it didn't make sense how it made sense to Ryo.

Eto had been stewing in indecision the whole time, but he finally decided to ask the Grandam what was on his mind. "Grandam... I mean, Mistress Nasu, may I ask you about that statuette...?"

"You can call me Grandam. The only one who still calls me Nasu is our esteemed guardian beast. Now, then, which statuette are you... Ahhh, this little thing? As a priest of light, you should know the answer, eh?"

She raised her staff a little higher so it was easier for Eto to see the stone carving approximately five centimeters wide.

"Yes. It's the crest of the Earth Mother Goddess, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Got a good head on your shoulders, dontcha? I suppose that means the Temple of Light is still teaching things like this, eh..."

"The Earth Mother Goddess?"

Both Eto and the Grandam heard Ryo's quiet murmur.

"Yup. Ain't many of her devotees left nowadays... But the elders of this village have believed in her for generations."

"The Goddess of Light and the Earth Mother Goddess that we believe in are gods who were each worshiped as one of the Pantheon of Seven. But a lot has happened over a long period of time... Nowadays, whenever anyone mentions the Temple or a priest, the very first thing that comes to everyone's minds is the Temple of the Goddess of Light or priests of the Goddess of Light. The other six gods have, for all intents 'n' purposes, fallen by the wayside."

The Grandam's tone was self-deprecating, though a hint of loneliness lurked in it as well. It wasn't frustration or sadness. If pressed, Ryo would say the feeling came closest to resignation.

"Faith isn't something to force on people. And should beliefs fade and disappear altogether, well, that's just the way of this world, ain't it?"

Enlightened... The word described the Grandam in this moment perfectly.

Ryo suddenly thought of a question. "Grandam," he started. "Can you and the other adherents of the Earth Mother Goddess use light magic then?"

Light magic...a healing-type magic that was the specialty of priests and priestesses. But what Ryo wanted to know was whether only the Goddess of Light's priests could use it or if the priests of other gods could as well.

"Light magic, eh?"

"Yes. It's utilized for healing wounds and such."

"I know what it's used for, laddie, and yup, I can use it. But mine is different from what the priests of light use. Eto, ain't it? You and yours say the incantations, don't you?"

Eto seemed surprised by the Grandam's unexpected question. "Huh? Yes, of course."

"Those who serve the Earth Mother Goddess don't. Well, the more accurate answer would be there were never any incantations to begin with. But at some point in time, they became commonplace."

"I'm...sorry? What did you just...? Huh?"

Eto's shock had deepened even more. In fact, he was now frozen. The priest really only froze when Rihya was involved, so the sight of him now in such a state presented an extremely interesting phenomenon to Ryo.

His expression remained slack even as he continued walking automatically. The group dragged him along on their trek. A short while later, they finally arrived at a cave deep in the forest, one in which the guardian beast lived.



Guardian beasts. Nonhuman creatures inhabiting the land. They often establish various forms of symbiotic relationships with the nearby human populations. This is why they're called guardian beasts. Fundamentally, they don't live in crowded places such as cities, but in areas rich in nature, such as mountains and forests.

Furthermore, their existence is rarely made public. In most cases, only the villagers who are involved with them know about them. Therefore, it isn't well understood how many guardian beasts exist, what types of guardian beasts, and what kinds of relationships they build with people.

Outside the cave, the Grandam, Nasu, called out politely to the being dwelling inside. "O Great Guardian Beast, it is I, Nasu. I've brought with me Boulan and the four who will carry out the hunt."

Her voice reactivated Eto, who had been frozen during the walk over. When he saw his friend functioning again from the corner of his eye, Ryo breathed a sigh of relief.

If his speculation about the guardian beast being cursed turned out to be correct, they would suddenly find themselves engaging in battle. In that case, Eto being unable to react quickly would be fatal. However...

“I thank you for making the effort to come here.”

What ambled slowly out of the cave was a...

“Fenrir...” Eto whispered.

A wolf covered from head to tail in silver fur, the fenrir must have measured around three meters long. The being’s gait was unsteady and everyone could see that it had clearly lost a great deal of strength. Nonetheless, its gaze was sharp and its speech articulate.

*Not devoured by a curse then... Ugh... This is definitely not going to trigger an event then.*

Both Nils and Amon saw the momentary flash of disappointment on Ryo’s face. They nodded in unison, their suspicion of his wicked thoughts had been confirmed.

“Hm, hm, a priest of light? Then his presence means they shan’t be overwhelmed by the enemy’s numbers. Now, allow me to tell you about myself. If I am to be precise, I am not a fenrir...but for convenience’s sake, let us say I am something similar.”

The guardian beast chuckled softly.

“A priest of light, two swordsmen...and...”

The creature stared directly at Ryo, scrutinizing him, before continuing.

“My name is Nkuusin. You there, the water magician. What do you call yourself?”

A little surprised by the question, Ryo nevertheless answered. “I’m Ryo.”

Boulan and the Grandam, standing next to him, were definitely more than just a little surprised.

“The guardian beast actually introduced itself...”

The fact that the guardian beast stated its name was what astonished them. This had never happened before, not even once. And in fact, this was the first time both Boulan and the Grandam learned its name, Nkuusin.

“I understand that my name is hard for humans to pronounce, which is why I

deliberately kept it hidden until now. However, that magician over there... Ryo, was it? I felt the need to tell Ryo. Not doing so would be a dishonor."

"Dishonor? What do you mean?" Ryo asked, head in a puzzled tilt.

"Yes. How shall I explain it... You could say I am a relative of the faeries. And for creatures such as us, your presence is... Yes, your presence is a comfort when near."

He didn't really understand what the fenrir was saying. He knew of the Water Fairy King, his sword master who looked like a dullahan. Said Fairy King had given him his sword and robe. When Sera had seen his robe, she'd said, "The Fairy King has taken a shine to you." Then there was the guardian beast, a relative to the fairies, standing in front of Ryo now and telling him his presence was a comfort.

If he put all this information together, then the conclusion was Ryo was loved by the fairies... Although he still had no idea what fairies actually were.

*I'll ask Sera when we get back to Lune. She said elves are basically half fairy, so I have no doubt she can tell me a lot about them.*

"If my presence really is a comfort to you then...um, thank you, I guess?"

He felt like this wasn't the right response.

The guardian beast howled with laughter. "I am the one who should be grateful, for thanks to you my lifespan has been extended by a thousand years. Truth be told, it would have ended in another decade or so... Nasu, well done on bringing this fascinating individual to me."

"I..." The Grandam was at a complete loss for words. Not only was she shocked by the guardian beast's revelation of its life ending in ten years, but she was also even more astounded that Ryo's presence had prolonged said life for a millennium.

"Holy smokes, Ryo, you're amazing..." Nils said, astonished.

"I'm not so sure about that, since I seriously doubt I myself have been blessed..." Ryo replied, perplexed, as he shook his head in denial. Hearing that his presence alone was responsible for adding a thousand years to the fenrir's

life...seemed to have finally made him understand that the guardian beast was in fact a nonhuman being.

"Let us speak of the heart of the matter then. The hunt you will be undertaking... Those who came previously initiated it without seeking my counsel or anything of the sort, which led to many complications."

Despite its lupine face, the Room 10 quartet somehow sensed the worry the guardian beast carried.

"Before we even realized their intentions, they were already fighting the skeletons...so they defiled the forest by spilling blood. I offer my deepest apologies," Mayor Boulan said.

"Hm, 'twas inevitable to an extent...since life and death are at stake. Having said that..." The guardian beast huffed as if it were sighing. "Considering how much trouble even those weak thirty abominations posed to them, they would not have emerged victorious regardless."

Ryo analyzed the guardian beast's words.

*Thirty is more than the twenty we were told... And by "weak abominations," it must probably be referring to the skeletons...which means there's something else stronger, right?*

"Am I right in assuming we're supposed to be defeating something else too?" Nils asked the very question on Ryo's mind, and boldly at that. As expected of a party leader.

"Yes, there is one powerful creature. 'Tis of the same kind, but large. I do not know what you humans call it. 'Tis trapped inside the shrine, near the entrance... Once you defeat the thirty minions, I shall release it for you to kill."

"O Great Guardian Beast, to think you trapped the monster..." The Grandam sounded both admiring and astonished by the guardian beast's explanation.

"'Twas necessary I do so for the shrine's spiritual power was not enough to restrain it. Thus did I use the remainder of my power to capture and trap the thing. Alas...lately, I have been in need of an abnormal amount of power, reducing my lifespan greatly."

Then the guardian beast burst into laughter again. Was it because he was a legend who can laugh at his own lifespan? Or was it simply because he had lived for so long? Who's to say...

Since the guardian beast couldn't stray far from the cave, the rest of the group had headed to the shrine, in front of which they now stood.

"I'd say that's more on the scale of a 'hidden temple' than a shrine..." Eto said to the Grandam.

"Hm. Don't know about definitions and such, but in the village we've called it a shrine for generations. The skeletons started appearing here and there round about six months ago. The shrine's been closed for a long time because we perform the rites in the village... Ever since, we haven't been able to get anywhere near it. All we could do was watch from a distance... And now we know there's a powerful creature inside to boot. What in tarnation is even happening?"

She exhaled deeply when she finished talking.

"Eto, what exactly is a hidden temple?" Ryo said, voicing the question on his mind.

"The best way I can describe a hidden temple is one set with an altar deep inside beyond the doors. The Temple of Light actually has a few. So long as there's a priest or priestess on hand, they can perform the necessary ritual immediately. In the case of a shrine, something like an altar is set inside though it isn't nearly the same size as one. The doors are small too. We don't know when or why they were built because the knowledge has been lost to time without being passed down. But we *do* know that some of the oldest were made over a thousand years ago..."

He found Eto's explanation deeply fascinating. The priest's use of language had been more formal than usual, likely because the Grandam was part of his audience.

"Far as I know, the doors to this here shrine have never been opened. Leastways no one alive right now has any notion of what it's like inside."

The Grandam gave a small shake of her head. "Wait, I just remembered something the guardian beast said in the past. Seems power flows into its cave from somewhere and that's why it took up residence there, because of its weakened state... Might be that this shrine is the source of that power."

"The likelihood is high," Eto replied before presenting his own theory and its possible implications. "There *is* a theory that the hidden temples were built in the earth's veins, so-called places where the forces that spring from the earth gather. If this is the case here, then the power gathered in this hidden temple might very well be flowing to the cave."



Before commencing battle against the skeletons, the four members of Room 10 conducted a thorough briefing session.

"I think the problem is going to be the big, strong one," Eto said. "If it really is a skeleton-type, then it could be a skeleton general, a skeleton king, or an arch skeleton. Other likely possibilities are monster or animal corpses that have turned into skeletons. A bear, for example. In that case, we'd simply deal with it like regular skeletons, so we don't really need to strategize too much."

"Eto, which one is the most dangerous in that list?" Nils asked.

"An arch skeleton. Magic is completely ineffective against them."

*Hmmm... I feel like I've heard a similar phrase recently...*

Ryo trawled through his memory as he listened to Nils and Eto's exchange, but he couldn't remember the incident with the devils being the source of the words.

*Oh, well, whatever.*

"In general, slashes don't work well on skeleton-type monsters, so sword attacks are a bit..."

"That's too bad especially since Amon and I only have our swords as weapons..."

Amon pondered Eto's explanation.

"Eto, what about striking them with hammers?" Ryo asked, basing the

suggestion on his light-novel damage. It turned out to be right judging by Eto's firm nod.

"Yes," Eto said, "something like that would be the most effective method against them."

"Excellent. Then we'll be just fine. I'll immobilize the skeletons so that Nils and Amon can hit them with massive hammers from the outside."

"From the outside?"

"Massive hammers?"

Nils and Amon cocked their heads in confusion at Ryo's confident declaration.

"All right, the first thing we're going to do is eradicate the skeletons in front of the shrine."

Then Eto began an incantation, his voice low.

*"I hereby return this impure soul to the bosom of the divine and pray for its sins to be forgiven. Turn Undead."*

When he said the final trigger words, the thirty skeletons captured by Eto's gaze vanished without a trace one by one.

*Wow, wow, wow! What a super cool incantation! I bet the person who thought of it definitely had Main Character Syndrome!*

While such rude thoughts tumbled in Ryo's mind, the last of the skeletons disappeared into thin air. Did the Turn Undead spell consume a great deal of magic, even for E-rank adventurers like Eto? Or was it because he had laid to rest thirty of them at once? Whatever the reason, Eto collapsed to one knee, panting heavily.

"Are you all right, Eto?" Ryo asked, offering the priest an ice cup full of delicious water. A glass of water is particularly priceless in times like this. The human body is a strange and mysterious thing.

Eto downed the water in a single gulp. "Thanks, I'm fine."

Meanwhile, Nils and Amon approached the shrine doors and readied

themselves. It was finally time to open them. Although the “large, powerful creature” *probably* wouldn’t suddenly jump out at them because the great guardian beast had trapped it, they nevertheless opened it slowly and cautiously. For doors that had remained closed for so long, they were surprisingly easy to open...never mind that it took two vanguard swordsmen to do it.

The doors created a cloud of dust as they swung open. Once the dust settled, they could see inside. A lone skeleton over two meters in height stood there.

“An arch skeleton...” Eto muttered.

“Ah, shit!” Nils said. “Not the most dangerous one invincible against magic!”

Nils and Amon quickly stepped away from the doors and brandished their swords.

“*Ice Creation: Hammer.*”

Ryo cast the spell and generated ice hammers wrapping around the blades of Nils and Amon’s swords.

“Whoa. These are *huge*. Ryo, we use these to smack it around, right?”

“I feel like each hit will go down like a ton of bricks.”

Nils and Amon raised their hammers high and swung them around, figuring out how to use them.

“Correct. I’ll stop it once it’s out in the clearing, so I want you two to whale on it and chip away at its endurance.”

“You got it.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Nils and Amon stood around the clearing Ryo pointed to.

“*Ice Wall 3.*”

He surrounded the path from the doors to the clearing with walls of ice. This would prevent the monster from suddenly going off track and attacking them.

“All right, I’ll signal to the guardian beast to release it. *Ice Flower.*”

Since fireworks were called fire flowers, he gave this spell the opposite name. A glittering mass of snow flew into the air from Ryo's raised right fist. It exploded dramatically when it reached a considerable height in the sky. The diamond dust spreading from the center of the cluster shone shockingly bright under the light of the westerling sun. He sent up a second cluster, then a third, the snowflakes shimmering as they rained down.

The group, forgetting that they were in the middle of a fight, were transfixed by the sight.

"How lovely."

The Grandam's whisper was barely audible, but Ryo heard her.

"All right, folks, the arch is coming," Ryo said, raising his voice to return everyone's focus to the hunt.

"I'm ready! Let me at it!"

Though Nils's shout wasn't the signal at all...it just so happened to coincide with the moment the guardian beast undid its binding and the arch skeleton moved.

The undead hate the living. No one knew the reason, but they were drawn to the living, they killed the living, and they tempted the living to become the same cursed things they are.

The arch skeleton was no different. It started walking straight toward them upon exiting the doors. It plodded forward slowly, until it arrived at the clearing...where it collided into the Ice Wall right in front of it. It had nowhere to go now.

"*Ice Bahn.*"

Even though magic was ineffective against an arch skeleton, whether Ice Wall or Ice Bahn, it was just a matter of not targeting the monster itself. There was no escaping from physical phenomena—like a slippery layer of ice, for example. The creature slid dramatically on Ryo's Ice Bahn and tumbled. It tried to stand up countless times but failed.

*“Ice Wall, Release.* Okay, Nils, Amon, your turn.”

“Hell, yeah! Amon, let’s go!”

“Yes, Sir!”

Nils and Amon closed the gap between themselves and the fallen arch. And then...they raised their Ryo-made ice hammers high overhead and struck the monster with all their might. *Klang.*

“Damn, it’s rock hard,” Nils said.

“It is,” Amon confirmed. “But I can see we did inflict damage, even if it isn’t much.”

“All right, let’s keep going just like this.”

“Gladly!”

*Bam, bam, bam.* The two of them pummeled the monster relentlessly as it lay on the ground, unable to stand. Ryo’s Ice Bahn had a radius of two meters and each hammer measured three meters long. Since the arch skeleton lacked both projectile attacks as well as ranged magical attacks, they could batter at it without suffering any damage themselves.



However, because Nils was an E-rank and Amon was F, each of their hits didn't inflict much damage. It was unavoidable that it would take quite a lot of time to actually defeat the arch skeleton. As it endured their blows, even if the damage was minimal, the thing clambered up onto all fours, having given up on standing up. It now tried to move in this position.

"Well, I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. But the results will be the same since you're lying on top of specially made, *extra* slippery ice."

Just as Ryo said, the arch couldn't move forward even on all fours. All it could do was keep sliding on top of his Ice Bahn.

Why is it so easy to slide on top of ice in the first place? Because of the water on the surface of the ice—or not. You'll slide whether or not there's melted water on the ice's surface. It isn't about thermodynamics either. Of course, water *does* make it extra slippery.

What keeps H<sub>2</sub>O molecules attached is an intermolecular interaction called hydrogen bonding. This hydrogen, H, bonds with the neighboring oxygen, O, then *this* H bonds with *its* neighboring O, which in turn bonds with *its* neighboring H, and *that* bonds with *its* neighboring H. This set of four hydrogen bond states—which equals five water molecules—is the most common form of ice. The most common also means that it's the most stable state or form.

The lower the temperature, the harder the ice becomes. Conversely, the number of weak hydrogen bonds in the same piece of ice will increase at higher temperatures. On the surface of a sheet of ice, it comes into contact with water and air and creates a layer of water molecules with double or triple hydrogen bonds. *These* molecules are why ice is slippery. These double-or triple-bonded water molecules move across the quadruple-bonded ice surface, acting like balls in a bearing.

Suppose you spill a large number of pachinko balls or marbles on a wooden floor... It would probably be impossible to walk on it with shoes or slippers, right? So if you think of the wooden floor as a sheet of water molecules with four hydrogen bonds and the pachinko ball or marble as a separate layer of water molecules with two or three hydrogen bonds, you may get a clearer

picture of how it works.

And the ice floor Ryo created in his Ice Bahn took advantage of this property. This was possible because he'd spent many years bonding at the molecular level in the Forest of Rondo. The ice was made of three water molecules attached to each other, with a large number of double-hydrogen-bonded water molecules...and yet it was so hard that it was impossible to move by driving your toes or heels into the ice. Perhaps only Ryo, who possessed knowledge of both magic and science, could achieve this combination.

Anyway, on top of this Ice Bahn, the arch skeleton was unable to move forward even when crawling on all fours, and continued to be beaten by Nils and Amon.

At long last, the monster switched from all fours to lying on its belly.

"Going from standing on two feet to crawling on all fours and finally lying on your belly... While your approach is correct in attempting to increase the coefficient of friction by increasing the contact area, the outcome remains the same. You can't move, much less jump either."

Fifteen minutes had passed since Nils and Amon started pounding on it with their ice hammers and they hadn't stopped. Lately, they had been training with particular emphasis on stamina, but even as someone watching from the sidelines, Ryo could tell they were tiring.

*If they really, truly couldn't finish the job, I planned on switching places with them. But...*

But he needn't have worried.

"We're almost there!"

The moment Nils whacked it while speaking... *Krak*. With a loud sound, the arch skeleton's neck bone cracked and the red light glowing in its eye sockets disappeared. They had finally defeated the monster.

"Jeez, that took forever..."

“I’m exhausted...”

Nils and Amon fell on their backsides. Nils dragged the flask at his hip up to his mouth and drank the water inside greedily, spilling some on himself in his haste. Amon collapsed backward on the ground, arms and legs spread-eagled.

Undead-type monsters like skeletons don’t leave behind magic stones. The arch skeleton was no exception, so they didn’t find one after its demise despite all the effort they put in.

When Ryo announced that the monster hadn’t dropped a magic stone, Nils and Amon hung their heads in defeat.

“I-I knew it the whole time, but...actually *hearing* the reality bites so hard,” Nils said.

“I agree...”

“Well done, younguns,” the Grandam said, walking toward them alongside Boulan. They had both been watching over the battle from a fair distance behind them.

“Think it’s all right for me to take a look-see inside the shrine?”

“There’s nothing moving inside, so you should be fine,” Ryo answered.

Upon hearing this, the Grandam went into the shrine with Boulan in tow. Eto and Ryo followed close behind them. Nils and Amon continued resting outside, of course.

The interior of the shrine was as wide as the typical twenty-five-meter-long pools in schools. Deep inside straight ahead of them was something that looked like an altar. Despite its size, there was nothing else in the space.

“An altar,” Ryo muttered, “was it?”

“Yes,” Eto replied softly. “Fundamentally, the only thing inside a hidden temple is the altar.”

On the altar was a sculpture of a woman measuring one meter tall and something that looked like a black crystal orb with cracks and a piece missing.

*That orb...*

Ryo remembered seeing the thing. It resembled the one on the stairs leading from Level 40 to 39 in Lune's Dungeon. But this one was smaller and broken too...

"Damaged, eh..." The Grandam murmured, her eyes on the chipped orb.

"Grandam, what *is* this...?" Boulan questioned.

"I ain't got the foggiest notion either, but...I do recall the previous shrine maiden telling me about it. Once upon a time, there used to exist glowing, glittering orb in the shrine. But one day, it became clouded by darkness and some time later, it broke. This must be it..."

While listening to her explanation, the village mayor's gaze didn't stray from the broken black orb. "It used to glow and glitter..."

"The shrine will remain closed as before. It's beyond my power to restore it, so I'll entrust the task to the next shrine maiden."

Ryo turned to the Grandam. "Who's that?"

"You all met her already," she answered happily. "It's Sana, Nils's sister-in-law. She's my top pick, tell you the truth. There are others too around the same age with the makings of a shrine maiden. If they so wish, their generation of shrine maidens has the potential to be leagues stronger than mine, where I was the only one. And should that happen, they'll be able to conduct the rites not just in the village but in this here shrine too. Then there's the cave the goblins were using as their den," she continued. "Just like the guardian beast's, power from here might be flowing to it too."

"Oh, I see." Eto nodded. "That's entirely possible, isn't it?"

"You see, goblins have been attacking our little village for ages now..." Then she glanced surreptitiously at Nils, who remained outside the shrine.

*Wait. Is that the reason his parents aren't alive...?*

Ryo came to this conclusion from the direction of her stare, but he wisely didn't say it out loud. This wasn't something for a third party to stick their nose into willy-nilly. Besides, he himself lost his parents back on Earth.

The Grandam continued speaking.

“Up until now, we haven’t been able to find their stronghold, but the cave where you younguns defeated them might very well be it. If I create a sealing mound there, they won’t be able to burrow to the surface. Boulan, I think I’ll have you take me there tomorrow.”

At least a few of the worries she’d been carrying within her for so long seemed to have been solved just today... And the Grandam looked happier than she ever had before.



Five days after leaving Lune, the four members of Room 10 returned to the city once more after successfully completing the job. Nothing of note happened on the journey back...

They arrived in Lune in the evening. Naturally, the lobby of the adventurers’ guild was packed at this time...

Nils, Eto, and Amon peeked into the space from the doors and sighed.

“Uhhh...isn’t it more crowded than usual?”

“I...think you’re right.”

“Well, we’re certainly in a pickle...”

“Why don’t we clean up first?” Ryo suggested, thinking it would be a waste of time to just wait there.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

There were quite a few public bathhouses in Lune. One of them, their regular haunt, just so happened to be near the guild. Right now, they were in the large bathing area of the establishment.

“Almost time, huh...” Nils said meaningfully.

Eto nodded. “It sure is.”

“I know what you two are discussing, Nils. You’re finally going to confess your

love to sweet Miranda in the red-light district, aren't you?"

"Hell, no, I'm not. And who even is this 'sweet Miranda'?"

The deduction Ryo had put all his energy into turned out to be wrong.

"I'm talking about how Eto and I are both coming up on the guild's three-hundred-day time limit for housing."

Adventurers could stay in the guild's housing annex for up to three hundred days after registration. Once the period ended though, they needed to leave it.

"Ohhh... So that's it."

Ryo nodded, exhaling quietly because their fun times would soon be over. This realization made him think about a lot of things too.

*I might have to push my plans up then.*

"Hey, Ryo, Amon. Eto and I are thinking about either buying a house or renting one after we leave the dorm. What do you guys think about...living with us there?"

The invitation rendered Amon speechless. Both he and Ryo could continue living in the annex for another six months, but he had partied up with Nils and Eto, so at least for him, there was a huge advantage in living with them. He figured this out right away too.

Amon didn't even hesitate. "I would love to," he answered.

Nils nodded excitedly and whapped Amon on the shoulder. "Really?! Awesome!"

Eto smiled happily.

"Ryo," Nils said, "what about you...?"

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to pass," Ryo said a little sadly. "I plan on buying my own house, but I need a huge plot of land in order to conduct my magical and alchemical experiments."

"Ahhh... Okay..." Nils was disappointed too, but he didn't push Ryo more. Maybe because a part of him had sensed something like this would happen.

Though Eto too seemed blue, he spoke with a smile. "Well, if we ever get

another difficult commission like this one, help us out, would you?"

"Yes, of course."

That night, the four members of Room 10 talked in the guild's canteen until the wee hours. About what happened on this job, about everything they experienced together until now, and about what they would all do moving forward.

# The Blue-Eyed People

Afternoon, the day after Room 10's residents returned to Lune from the village of Abali.

Guild Master Hugh McGlass was visiting the city's lord in his residence. After making his report to the margrave, he headed to the knight commander's office. As usual, two knights stood at attention in front of it.

"I'd like to meet with Ser Neville. Might he be in by any chance?"

"Yes, he is."

The one who spoke knocked on the door.

"Sir, Hugh McGlass, master of the adventurers' guild has arrived to see you."

"Let him in."

A gravelly, masculine voice came from inside. Hugh stepped into the office. It was a spacious room, about twenty tatami mats in size, or roughly 31 meters square. The interior was furnished simply, with a fairly large desk, sofa set for receiving visitors, and an assortment of liquors in a cabinet.

Neville Black, commander of Margrave Lune's order of knights, sat within, his large frame sunk into his chair. He was in the process of writing something.

"Sorry, but take a seat over there and wait for me. I'll be done soon."

That was all he said before he focused on the paper and started scribbling again. Hugh wasn't offended, since this happened all the time, so he simply sat and waited.

Three minutes later, Neville finished. He stood up from his chair, retrieved a bottle of liquor and two glasses from the cabinet, and sat across from Hugh. Then they both proceeded to discuss a number of matters as they sipped their drinks.

"Neville, ya sure ya wanna add another one of those magic stones to yer

order?"

Hugh started with a pending question on his side. It was a given that the magic stones he referred to the wyvern ones Ryo and Abel brought to the guild. The margrave had already purchased one of them and Hugh had originally assumed the lord wouldn't want more...

"Yeah, do it. Not like I'm the one using them anyway, eh? When the folks in the Atelier saw the first one, they begged me to buy more. They even went so far as to tell me I could take it out of *their* salaries, which showed me how hellbent they were." Neville chuckled ruefully before continuing. "Won't get such a good bargain again for a while, right? The perfect size, depth of color, and best of all, wind-attributed. A magic stone that fits everything they're looking for."

"This is about," Hugh said, lowering his voice, "a certain *ship*, ain't it?"

"Sure is. When I see people who've been working on it their whole lives and not just over one generation, but *two*, makes me want to buy it for them even if it means going out of my way. Know what I mean? Of course, His Lordship agreed wholeheartedly, so it isn't like I don't have his permission. So tack on another for us, as close to the same as the previous one. We'll buy it for six hundred million florins."

"Ya got it."

Hugh was about to stand, since they had just finished discussing everything they needed to, when Knight Commander Neville suddenly mentioned an unexpected name.

"Hugh, what do you know about an adventurer named Ryo?"

Neville's mention of Ryo shocked Hugh primarily because he didn't think Ryo had any connection to the order of knights.

"Why do ya know his name?"

"Don't answer a question with a question." Neville laughed then continued. "But to answer yours, he's been coming to our training center often recently. That's how I learned his name."

“Ryo? In the knights’ trainin’ center? The blazes is that boy doin’ over there...”

“What do you think? If someone says training center, the first thing you think of is training exercises, right?”

Hugh quaked in fear at Nevill’s response. Ryo was the kind of man who charged in by himself on a suicide mission into a dungeon and defeated a demon prince. So what were the odds of him destroying equipment in training exercises...?

Then he remembered one more thing. A while back, Ryo had told him something about mock battles inside his carriage...

“Don’t tell me he broke things in the center...”

“No, nothing like that, so don’t worry. You know our training center is protected by a magical barrier that’s always active.”

“Then why...”

“Yes, well...” Neville paused, a bit hesitant to say what was on his mind, which was extremely unusual for him since he was the clear-cut and straightforward type. “The truth is, he’s been practicing against Miss Sera.”

“He what now?”

Hugh knew he sounded like an idiot, but he didn’t know what else to say after being blindsided by Neville’s remark.

*Ryo’s practicin’ with Sera? I mean, I s’pose it makes sense since they’re both ‘venturers ’n’ all, but...that ain’t the problem. How the hell do they even know each other? That’s what I wanna know. And they’re holdin’ their mock battles in the knights’ trainin’ center instead of the guild’s trainin’ grounds? Maybe cuz of the magical barrier, like Neville said, since it makes things easier for ’em...?*

Despite everything turning into a jumbled mess in his head, the words that rushed out of his mouth pretty much had nothing to do with the topic at hand.

“So ya give Sera a proper title o’ ‘Miss’ while Ryo ’n’ I get shafted, eh?”

“Of course. Because she’s a powerful person on the lord’s staff. You could even say she’s the most powerful on the estate, not counting His Lordship. Besides, though I can get away with Miss Sera, the rest of the knights call her

Madam Sera.” Neville chortled cheerfully. “Anyway, Miss Sera and Ryo are pretty evenly matched when they face off. I’ve seen them myself and let me tell you, it blew my mind. I completely understand why the knights can’t take their eyes off them. They’re so fast I can only follow them half the time.”

Neville smiled to himself as he thought back to the sight of their mock battles. “You already know she trains my knights, but she’s never once used her Wind Robe during her sessions with them... Well, nothing to be done about it, considering the difference between her pure swordsmanship and theirs is like night and day. And I have to admit, I did feel sorry for her all this time, not having opponents she could use all her strength against.”

“Why don’t ya just offer yerself as her sparring partner?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m no match for her. But here’s an idea for you. What if the great Champion McGlass takes her on? I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Neville taunted.

“Ya dimwit. Ya know damn well I ain’t up to fightin’ o’ any sort, ’specially not after I had to retire on account o’ the injury to my arm. ’Sides, even in my prime, I doubt I coulda beat her and her Wind Robe...” Then Hugh suddenly realized something. “I heard Sera’s magic is amazin’, but...is it on Ryo’s level?”

“Hm. I’ve never actually seen her magic myself.”

“What?”

They weren’t on the same page.

“Wait, are you sayin’ their mock battles ain’t o’ the magical variety?”

“That’s right. They fight using swords.”

“Huh?” Hugh sounded like an idiot once more. “But...” Then he took a deep breath and squeezed out a few words. “Ryo...is a magician.”

“Huh?”

This time, it was Neville’s turn to sound dumb.

Silence reigned between them for a while. Then Neville finally broke it.

“Well...I guess all I really wanted to tell you was I hope Ryo keeps sparring with Miss Sera because their matches sure do light a fire under the knights...”

“Riiight... Got it.”

They both tacitly gave up on thinking about unnecessary things.

Hugh left the knight commander’s office and ran into Sera on the way back to his carriage. She seemed very happy.

“Io, Sera.”

“It’s been forever and a day, Master McGlass. Did you have a meeting with Ser Neville?”

“Yup. Which reminds me, I heard just now yer sparrin’ with Ryo?”

“Indeed I am,” she replied, tilting her head curiously. “Never fear, for I have the margrave’s permission.”

“Nah, I ain’t complainin’. Neville even said yer fights are good for lightin’ a fire under his men.”

“Oh, really?!” Sera smiled cheerfully. “Wonderful!”

Hugh was a man too. As such, Sera’s smile was an incredibly intense force... But then he remembered the margrave’s grandson, Alfonso Spinazola, who had tried to force himself on her after losing to his carnal desire and wound up with a shattered shoulder for his stupidity. Hugh desperately dragged his gaze away from Sera’s smile.

“Should you ever feel a need to train as well, you’re more than welcome to join us, Master McGlass. We have excellent priests and priestesses on hand in the training center who can heal most injuries too.”

Then she walked away.

“Nah... I definitely don’t wanna step foot in there...”

No one heard Hugh’s whisper...



It was afternoon on the day after the four residents of Room 10 returned to the city of Lune from their job in the village of Abali. For the first time in a while, Ryo ate curry with Sera in The Fill-Up Station. When they finished, she went

back to the margrave's estate and he headed toward The Golden Wave.

*Abel owes me a lot of favors. For example, the week of dinners he promised me in the dungeon... He hasn't even treated me once yet. And—oh, yeah!—when I made him look good in Whitnash, not to mention I was nice enough not to turn that darn fire magician into a block of ice. Yes, yes, which means he has to help me with this, no matter what!*

The time was two p.m. Most of the diners who'd come in for lunch at The Golden Wave had already left. Among the few stragglers was a lone B-rank swordsman reading a book as he sat in a chair in the dining hall.

Ryo had planned on asking the receptionist to call him out, but this was even better.

"Abel, I'm here to collect on the debts owed to me."

"Wha? Oh, Ryo, it's you. Don't surprise me like that, jeez. Hold on. 'Collect on the debts owed to me'... Uhhh, could you maybe jog my memory?"

"Fine. When we were in the dungeon, you promised to treat me to a week's worth of dinners."

Abel gasped. Apparently, he had genuinely forgotten about it.

"Of— O-O-O-O-O-Of course I didn't forget. Nope, not at all. You just seemed super busy, Ryo, so I could never find the right moment to ask you. Really. I'm telling the truth."



“Haaa...” Ryo sighed deliberately when he heard Abel’s excuse. Then he sat down across from him. “In exchange for the week’s worth of dinners, I’d like you to help me with something.”

“Huh...? Wh-What is it? I feel like it’s gonna be worse than the dinners...” Abel asked nervously.

“Well, my roommates Nils and Eto are coming up on their three-hundred-day limit for staying in the guild’s dormitory and will have to leave soon. So, they decided to buy a house and Amon is going to join them too, which is why I thought it would be good timing for me as well to leave the annex when they do and live on my own...”

“You don’t plan on living with them, Ryo?”

“That’s right. I want to conduct all kinds of magical and alchemical experiments, so I’d rather live in a house with a spacious yard.”

“Let me guess. You got paid part of your portion from the sale of those magic stones, didn’t you?” Abel remarked like he’d just remembered what they’d been through.

“When I checked my account this morning, the increased balance suggested that two of them had sold.”

“Makes sense.” Abel nodded vigorously in understanding. “Since the margrave already bought one, someone else must have bought another, huh? Damn... GuilMas sure works fast, doesn’t he? What a go-getter.”

“And that’s why I’m here today, because I want you to help me look for a house, Abel.”

“Got it. In that case, leave it to me.”

After all was said and done, Abel was an influential person in Lune. His overwhelming popularity among adventurers came as no surprise, and as one of a handful of B-rank adventurers here, he was well-known to the city’s residents too. Taking this into account, Ryo had realized that having the support of someone like Abel would reduce the chances of him being deceived, not to mention the fact that he could trust any realtors Abel introduced him to. So,

he'd gone looking for the swordsman...

"Did you know that the adventurers' guild manages land and buildings too?"

Evidently, the guild had a real estate division...

In the end, the two of them headed there.

"I never even imagined they'd be involved in this business too..."

"Yeah, I heard there are even some properties managed exclusively by the guild. Well, the reality is that adventurers often buy or rent vacant houses and other places. Maybe that has something to do with the three-hundred-day time limit for staying in the guild's housing annex."

"That's so sneaky! Adults are so sneaky!" Ryo shook his head countless times because Abel was probably on the mark with his deduction. "But there are also parties like yours, right, Abel? Ones who don't buy or rent, but just stay in inn rooms for a while."

"I guess you're not wrong, but when you put it like that... We pay the regular rates though, so it's not like we're doing anything wrong. Well, I know this is kinda awkward for me to say myself, but the reason I can even live like that is because of how well I get paid as a B-rank."

Similar to how company presidents and CEOs lived in the penthouse suites of luxury hotels on modern-day Earth... Or so Ryo baselessly assumed. The lodge's staff handled all the cleaning and laundry, plus if guests ordered drinks and snacks, they brought them right away to their rooms. Keeping all this in mind then...you could definitely lead a pleasant lifestyle like this.

As long as you had money, of course!

"Ryo, have you thought about staying long-term in an inn... Oh, wait, you did say you need a house with a huge yard for your experiments..."

"Correct. In this type of situation, convention dictates that if you spend a certain amount of money, you can buy something like an old noble's mansion or a cursed aristocrat's estate for a bargain price... I believe such story developments exist."

"Convention? Story developments? What the heck are you even talking

about, man..."

Ryo had said his classic light-novel plot progression expectations aloud, but it was clear Abel didn't understand what he was saying. Because of course he wouldn't.

"Ryo, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I don't think that's gonna happen..."

"Huh?"

"My sincerest apologies, but only those of the peerage are able to purchase properties belonging to nobles. Despite Abel referring you to us, exceptions cannot be made."

"Awww..."

"I told you, didn't I?"

The head of the guild's real estate department, Riplait, had been kind enough to attend to them directly. However...the reality thrust brutally upon Ryo was too tragic for him to bear.

"Then my dreams of a house with a spacious yard..."

"Man, relax. We haven't even gotten that far. Riplait, as you just heard, Ryo is looking for a house with a big yard. Apparently, he wants to do magical and alchemical experiments or something. He's rich, so his budget is pretty large. Within reason, of course."

Did he really have to say all that? Wouldn't the guild try to take advantage of him now? These thoughts ran through Ryo's mind.

"Abel, will you stop it..."

"Don't worry. Riplait is the most hardworking member of the guild's staff. So telling him all the necessary information means he'll be able to find exactly what you're looking for."

It elated Riplait to hear such words of praise coming from someone as popular as Abel. He nodded happily when he spoke.

“I see, thank you for providing this information. Unfortunately, nothing among our current listings matches your conditions, Ryo... Would you mind giving me another day to conduct some research? I’ll gather information on all the properties not under our administration, including any new ones just recently placed on the market and those handled by other real estate agencies in the city. If you could drop by again tomorrow afternoon, I’d really appreciate it.”

The serious, intractable expression on Riplait’s face was that of a man who took great pride in his work. And there was simply no way Ryo could refuse such a man’s heartfelt request.

“Understood. Thank you very much.”



“Three o’clock already... A bit too early for you to treat me to dinner, hm, Abel?”

“So it’s already a given that I’m paying, huh... But wait, didn’t you say we’re even if I help you look for a house? Pretty sure you did...”

“Except I’m talking about how I helped you save face on the beach in Whitnash *and* I didn’t kill that ‘Inferno Magician’ guy. So you still owe me for that...”

“All right, fine, jeez, I get it,” Abel replied, half-resigned. “Thank you sooo much for saving my butt back then! Look, I’ll buy you a snack, so let’s go to whichever shop tickles your fancy.”

“You say that, but...it’s not as if I know which shops sell the delicious goods. Would you happen to know of any, Abel?”

“Yeah. There’s one right over there. They got great cakes and coffee. How ‘bout it?”

“Coffee!”

It was the first time Ryo had heard the word “coffee” since arriving on Phi. Although, he did of course know the party, “Coffee Maker”...

“You know what coffee is then, Ryo?”

“Black as the Devil, hot as hell, pure as an angel, sweet as love. That drink, yes?”

“You kinda lost me halfway through, but yeah, pretty sure we’re talking about the same black drink.”

Ryo was devastated by the fact Abel reduced Talleyrand’s famous ode to the elixir as “black drink.” Reality truly was a harsh mistress.

“Wow. This menu is something all right...”

The name of the shop was “Café de Chocolat, Lune.” Despite the inclusion of the word “chocolat” in its name, it did not in fact serve cake made with chocolate. It didn’t, but...

“Mont Blanc, strawberry shortcake, apple tart...”

“I think I’ll go for the strawberry shortcake. As for the coffee... Blue Mountain.”

“The coffee menu is intense too... Blue Mountain, seriously? And Kona? They have Mandelhing too...”

Ryo mentally shook his head, baffled, while reading the menu.

*What in the world is this sense of déjà vu... This can’t have something to do with another reincarnate... Can it?*

A lovely woman came over. “Have you decided what you’d like or do you need more time?” she asked.

“I’d like the strawberry shortcake and Blue Mountain set.”

“I-I... I’ll have the Mont Blanc and Kona, please.”

She wrote down their orders, then walked away to fill them.

“You know about cakes too, Ryo? Even though there weren’t any in the Forest of Rondo...”

“Y-Yes, we had them in my hometown...”

“Huh. Interesting.”

The cake and coffee were both delectable. So perfect that if the shop owner opened another café in modern-day Japan, they would have no trouble staying in business. However, the Kona coffee...wasn't the same Hawaiian Kona he'd indulged in back on Earth. He assumed the name was just a random one the maker had come up with. But the flavor was...

"Shockingly delicious..."

"Right? Isn't this place great? And it's only a stone's throw from the guild."

"I will bet you good money that Rihya or Lyn brought you here. Am I right or am I right?"

"Geh."

Ryo had hit the bull's-eye with his guess.

"Well, it's fine because everything is delicious."

"Why don't you use this as a date spot too, Ryo? With, say, Sera, for example." Abel's words and expressions both conveyed he was prying.

"I'll have you know that Sera and I aren't like that."

"And yet, you're talking about her so casually, like you're *super* close now..."

"Because she wanted me to be casual with her too after she saw how I am with you... It was an unavoidable compromise." Then Ryo shook his head slightly.

"Well, I remember you saying she's your teacher, but...how the heck did you guys even meet? It's not like you two have anything in common. She hardly ever shows her face in the guild, not to mention she's the knights' instructor..."

"Let's just say she taught me a lot in the northern library and we'll leave it at that."

"Ohhh, the northern library, huh? Now it makes sense."

The look on Abel's face said he'd finally solved a long-held mystery thanks to Ryo's explanation. Never mind he'd only been thinking about it for a week.

"Also, she's been helping me train my sword skills. Usually before she teaches the knights, sort of like a warm-up for her I think."

“Hold on. You’re sparring with *Sera*...?”

“Yes. She’s incredibly powerful, you know. I’m currently in the middle of a losing streak against her,” Ryo said with a carefree smile. It was proof that he hadn’t yet come close enough to the point where he’d feel upset about losing. That’s how much of a difference in strength there was between him and *Sera*. “Her Wind Robe is amazing, and her air magic is perfection itself, don’t you think? It increases the speed of everything. Adding speed and weight to her attacks through Wind Robe makes her already extremely polished swordsmanship terrifyingly dangerous.”

“So *Sera* uses Wind Robe with you?”

“Yes. I literally just said that. Abel, you have *got* to listen properly to others when they talk, all right? It only reflects poorly on you when you don’t.”

With that, Ryo finished the remaining coffee in his cup.

*No, no, no, there’s something very wrong with the fact that you’re able to fight *Sera* when she’s using her Wind Robe... I’m only now barely at the level where she and I are evenly matched and that’s without her using Wind Robe... Wait, am I though? I’m actually not confident I can even fight her... Ryo, you’re supposed to be a magician, so how the hell are your sword skills so good...? How far exactly are you planning to go...? What’s your ultimate goal, man?*

What was his ultimate goal... Ryo himself didn’t know the answer to this question either...

“I had no idea a shop like this even existed so close to the guild.”

“Let me see,” Abel said as he ran through the knowledge in his mind. “If I remember right, they opened this Lune branch last year. It’s a longstanding café in the royal capital. I think they’ve been around for forty years or so...”

*Any way I think of it, a reincarnated person must have come up with this cake-and-coffee set idea... And considering how perfect the taste was, they were involved not just in the idea but the creation itself too... So does this mean they arrived on *Phi* a mere twenty years before I did? No, no, impossible. Because I distinctly remember *Fake Michael* telling me, “You’re actually the first visitor I’ve*

*had in quite a while.” That’s how he greeted me in that white world we were in. An angel-like person like him wouldn’t think of twenty years as “quite a while,” right?*

No matter how hard he analyzed the situation, Ryo couldn’t come up with a coherent answer. And then Abel’s next question completely cut off all his thoughts about reincarnates.

“Ryo, can we talk about what happened in Whitnash...?”

“Sure?”

“You tried to kill the Inferno Magician, didn’t you? Oscar from the Empire. If I hadn’t gotten there in time, I’m pretty sure he’d be dead by now. How serious were you though?”

“Ahhh, right, that... I suppose you could call it a verbal tit for tat? Fighting words? Now I want to know if from your perspective there really was such a huge discrepancy in power between that guy and me?” Ryo responded while eating the last bite of his cake. To him, Oscar was apparently just “that guy.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“I’d have to disagree. I don’t think the gap is actually that large. At the time, he was on the offensive and I was on the defensive, so it may have looked like there was a gap in strength when I intercepted everything. But...if our roles had been reserved, I wonder if my attacks wouldn’t have penetrated his defense easily enough.”

Ryo recalled the incident as he answered. Water magic was excellent for defense. For example, Ice Wall could surely be considered the strongest and toughest defensive magic. Even though it could sometimes be pierced, of course.

“What’s more, our respective attributes of water and fire are also relevant factors. Water negates fire, right? As long as you have a tremendous amount of water, you can put out any kind of fire. I think compatibility is at play here too.”

He continued speaking, still remembering that night.

“Plus, the speed at which magic that guy generated, or rather, constructed

magic was...surprisingly fast, hm? Which is why I think that there's a very good chance he can counter my attacks."

"Then why the heck did you rile him up, despite knowing all this?"

"I was on edge. And I'm sure the festival atmosphere made me even more excitable than usual."

"Okay, so, what I got from this conversation is that you're a dangerous man, Ryo."

"But I'm still a babe in the woods compared to you, Abel..."

"Why? Why is it always me, man?! What did I ever do to you?!"

"Oh, yeah, Ryo. I just remembered something."

"What is it? Gasp! Don't tell me...you're going to ask *me* to pay for our food because you don't have any money on you? I won't let you! Do you hear me?!"

"No, you jerk! That's not what I was gonna say at all!" Abel sighed in exasperation. "In fact, if you say yes, I'll buy you another cake set."

"Yes! The answer is yes! I believe I'd like to try the strawberry shortcake next."

Abel was just about done with him. "Don't just say yes without asking what you're saying yes to, you moron."

"I trust you, Abel, which is why I know you won't come to me with an egregious request."

"Bull. You just wanna eat your second cake as soon as possible."

Ryo didn't hear Abel's mutter.

So they each ordered another cake set. One simply wasn't enough for manly adventurers whose jobs were so labor-intensive... And since this was an undeniable truth, Abel too had no qualms about doing so. Although something felt wrong about the idea of filling up his stomach with only cake and coffee...

"So what do you want me to do? I won't accept, depending on what it is."

“You *really* think I’m gonna let you get away with that after you already scarfed down the second slice of cake? Anyway, I want you to tag along with me for a bit after this.”

“After this’? You said the same thing last time, and when we went out and about in the town, we came to the painful realization of how unpopular you are, Abel. Do you remember that? As your friend, I’d prefer not to reopen your wounds...”

“Wait, are you talking about the incident with the Federation’s adventurers, which by the way, has nothing whatsoever to do with my popularity? Come to think of it, my ask this time might actually be a wee bit related to that. Apparently, suspicious people are gathering at a building and we’re going to search it.”

“Abel, don’t you think it’s better to let the city garrison handle jobs like that? From their perspective, any ‘help’ from us would probably just be a hindrance...”

A common trope in isekai reincarnation stories revolved around the reincarnates sticking their noses where they didn’t belong, resulting in them getting rid of a town or city’s villains. Ryo shook his head a little when he thought about it.

“Naturally, I’m not doing this on my own like some kind of vigilante. I know one of the garrison’s commanding officers, Nimur, and he’s the one who asked me for help.”

“Nimur. Isn’t he the one who was stationed at the city gate when we first arrived? He was overjoyed by your return, if I recall correctly.”

“Good memory...”

He had just seemed like a normal guardsman back then, but evidently, he was a captain in the city garrison. A high-ranking officer who didn’t put on any airs? Superbly admirable. Ryo’s estimation of Nimur went up a notch.

“All he told me was something about evening near the west gate, which is why I’m heading to the garrison station to get the facts straight.”

“O woe be to me, a water magician used and abused...”

“You got a real pair saying crap like that while stuffing your face with cake!”



At the garrison station, fully armed guards were lined up.

Captain Nimur spotted them right away when they arrived there. “Great timing, Abel!” he called. “I was just about to come get you at the Golden Wave.”

“Nimur, I thought the search was supposed to happen in the evening?”

“That was the plan, but our recon unit made contact earlier and told us all the suspects are in the hideout right now. I want to round ‘em all up, so we’re moving out ahead of schedule.”

“Got it. Works out in our favor though, huh? I’ll lend a hand. This guy will too. He’s Ryo, a magician. He should make a pretty powerful combat asset, so you can count on him.”

“Oh, nice. Appreciate it. Hm? Ryo, aren’t you the one who rescued Abel? I remember you now. You came back together with him. Well, I’m grateful for your help now too.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Nimur thrust his hand out and Ryo shook it.

“By the way, Nimur, got any ideas about who these shady people are?”

“Actually, we do. We obtained conclusive proof not too long ago. Federation spies.”

“Federation...” Abel muttered quietly. His expression made it clear to Ryo that something about the situation bothered him, which in turn worried Ryo too.

*The four we caught last time were from the Federation too, but...they weren’t real adventurers. Instead, they were infiltrators... What in the world is going on?*

Including Ryo and Abel, the strike team consisted of twenty people. They moved quickly to surround the site of a former workshop near the west gate. The place was large but old. One of the members of the recon unit, which had

been surveilling the area this whole time, went up to Captain Nimur and made his report.

“All ten are inside.”

Captain Nimur nodded in response.

“We go in from the front. Josh, take four with you and go around the back. Abel, Ryo, you go with them and catch anybody who tries to escape that way. I don’t care if you hurt them, but try your best not to kill them. Thanks in advance.”

Evidently, a rough arrest was just fine... But that didn’t give them license to do bad things.

Abel, Ryo, Josh, and his four men went around to the back of the site. Thirty seconds later, they heard the sound of something breaking from the front entrance. Nimur and his team must have used something to smash through the doors.

The angry shouts inside the room carried all the way outside. Then it happened right after. A few people came flying out the rear entrance. But...

“Gaaah!”

...they slipped and fell on the icy ground beneath them. The four members of the garrison tied them up quickly with cords.

A man jumped out of a second-story window above.

“*Icicle Lance*,” Ryo said, aiming an ice spear at his leg to unbalance him. He landed in front of Ryo and passed out. Since the suspect was right there, Ryo, who held his own length of rope, bound the man’s hands behind his back. He’d learned by watching the others.

However... *Krak*. Another window a short distance from the first shattered as two more people leaped out. Then they ran for their lives toward the west gate.

“I’m going after them!” Josh shouted before he ran off in pursuit.

“Hey, wait... Damn it, guess I’m going too. Ryo, hold down the fort here.”

With those instructions, Abel raced after Josh who chased the two escaping

men.

They left Ryo, who continued tying the man up, behind alongside Josh's four subordinates, who mumbled awkwardly...

"Huh...?"

"Um..."

A sudden and shocking sight burst into Abel's field of vision when he turned a corner after chasing the three men for a while: their bodies, consumed by flames.

"A fourth one? *Coruscate.*"

Abel heard the words very faintly. He drew his sword, which flashed as he swung it, slicing through whatever flew at him. It was a fire magic attack, but the mass of fire shone like nothing he'd ever seen before.

"What the *hell* was that..."

Even Abel, who wasn't well-versed in the intricacies of magic, recognized that the attack was anything but normal. He regretted not bringing Ryo with him, but that feeling only lasted for a moment. There was no time for anything else because by the time Abel became aware of him, a man holding a sword was already in front of him!

*Klang. Klang. Klang.*

Abel parried the man's three consecutive strikes. Then, yielding to instinct, he stepped back to create distance between them. Then:

*"Lapis."*

Four stone spears appeared in front of the man and rushed toward Abel. He dodged the one targeting his right leg, used the hilt of his sword to knock down the one aimed at his abdomen, deflected the one headed for his chest with the blade, and tilted his head to avoid the one racing there.

Abel did all of this while moving forward, knowing the best chance to counter was the moment the opponent attacked. He charged in and closed the gap between them, then swung his blade upward in a diagonal slash as he kept

himself low to the ground.

“Tsk”

Abel clicked his tongue in annoyance without thinking. He could tell from the sensation coming from his blade that it had reached only the man’s skin. It also seemed to have cut through some kind of tool... His opponent had dodged perfectly, considering he’d intended to cleave him in half.

However...

“My probe... You son of a bitch...”

Rage suffused the man’s face. The device in his pocket was broken, sliced through. His blue eyes, visible through the light purple hair covering them, glared at Abel.

“This ends now. Disappear!” he spat furiously. “*Vinea Glacies*.”

“*10-Layer Ice Wall*.”

Innumerable icicles formed in front of the man. They seemed to cover the entire area, only to be blocked by a wall of ice.

“What?!”

The purple-haired man looked around, but saw only the three charred corpses and the swordsman before his eyes. There was no one else. As far as he could see, at least—which meant...

“*Coruscare*.”

He fired three vividly glowing clusters of flame around the corner.

“*Icicle Lance 6*.”

A voice came from the other side of the corner... A voice Abel knew... He also knew how much Ryo loved counterattacks. Timing his attacks to his opponent’s, or forcing his opponent to attack so he could crush it with his own... He’d done the same against the harpy queen in the Malefic Mountains and the demon prince in Layer 40 of the dungeon...

Except this time, he created six ice spears against three flame clusters... Which meant Ryo probably intended to...

The moment the thought flashed through his mind, Abel's body moved. *Klang*. The purple-haired man parried Abel's blade with his own.

“Ngh!”

The remaining three ice spears pierced his back...or they would have, if they hadn't broken on contact. The man couldn't mitigate the force of the projectiles, so his body went flying. He tumbled to the ground.

Ryo used the moment to run out from the corner.

“Abel, are you all right?!”

He had been fighting while using Passive Sonar to search the whole area, so though he'd known Abel was still alive, it was only natural he'd felt uneasy until he actually saw him with his own eyes.

“Yup, all good.”

When he dodged the purple-haired man's stone spears, he had just barely avoided the one aimed at his head, so he had a cut on his left cheek. Of course, it wasn't a life-threatening injury.

“What the hell *is* that guy...”

“*10-Layer Ice Wall Package.*”

The moment Ryo chanted the spell and enclosed them in a barrier made of ice, a rain of fire descended.

“*10-Layer Ice Wall Package.*”

It was powerful enough that he had to reconstruct the ice wall. The fiery deluge continued for over a minute... When it stopped, the purple-haired man was no longer there...

“Damn, he got away...”

“I'm almost positive the fire rain just now was someone else's magic... They must have helped him escape, hm?”

Ryo understood to some extent what had just happened. Instead of using his sight, he'd used Passive Sonar, or water vapor in the air, to get a grasp of the

situation. Still, there was something he *didn't* understand.

"That," he said, "wasn't a person, was it?"

The man didn't possess horns and a tail like an akuma, nor was he a grotesque creature like the devils and demon prince. On the surface, he looked completely human. But a human with purple hair. And those eyes...

"Well, I've sure never heard of a *person* with glowing blue eyes."

Ryo nodded in agreement. "I suppose this means danger is afoot in the city of Lune too, hm..."

"Except we normally don't get people like him here..."



The next day. After doing some research in the northern library with Sera in the morning, he ate lunch at The Fill-Up Station then arrived at the adventurers' guild for his one o'clock with Abel. He was already there, conversing with a familiar child near the reception counter. Said child noticed Ryo's arrival before Abel.

The child was Natalie, the only other water magician he knew besides himself, who happened to be part of the Bureau of Royal Magicians. When Abel realized Ryo was here, he said a few words to Natalie before walking over to him.

"Look at you, Ryo. Right on time."

"You can keep talking to Natalie. Don't let me interrupt."

The girl bowed her head politely at them both then left the guild.

"A letter for me arrived from the royal capital and she was nice enough to bring it to me."

"From the mysterious— What was the name again?" Ryo tried to recall the previous letter from the royal capital that Natalie gave Abel. "Hilarion?"

"Jeez, your memory's only good for the most random stuff, huh?" Abel smiled ruefully before slipping the letter, probably from Hilarion again, inside his clothing.

"Were you all right after what happened yesterday, Abel?"

"Hm? Oh, you mean that purple-haired guy? Yeah. Not like anyone attacked me after."

"No, that's not what I meant. I want to know if Rihya was angry with you for getting hurt."

"Ahhh, okay... Yeah, uh, she was *pissed*, to put it mildly..." Abel grimaced, shaking his head a little. He must have gotten a real earful from her... But the wound on his left cheek had completely vanished.

Ryo nodded mentally, not at all surprised by the power of Rihya's healing magic.

When Abel and Ryo entered the guild's real estate division, its head, Riplait, stood up to greet them. "Abel, Ryo, thank you very much for your patience." Then he indicated for them to sit down on the sofa set in the room.

"I managed to find only one property that meets your conditions," he continued, broaching the subject as soon as one of his subordinates served tea to the three of them. "However..." he said before trailing off.

"Based on your tone, I take it the place doesn't fit my criteria perfectly, correct?"

Ryo knew that in situations like these, where the other party prevaricated, it was usually because of minor problems despite the overall score being a passing one.

"Yes. The location is the issue."

"The location?" Abel and Ryo said in unison.

"Indeed. It's outside the city."

"!"

This news surprised them both.

Ryo had been prepared to compromise on various terms, like the yard's size or the other houses in the neighborhood. Yet...he had never imagined he'd be shown a property *outside* the city walls.

When he first arrived on the outskirts of Lune from the Forest of Rondo, he and Abel had stared at the sweeping view of the area from atop a small hill. The city sat amid the golden sea of the wheat fields growing around it. Within that sea of gold, he remembered seeing quite a few houses. Those who made their livelihoods from farming had moved from the city center to outside of its walls. Because of the constant travel to and fro for these folks, the city gates never closed, even at night.

“This property, is it a farmhouse or something like it?”

“That’s right.” Riplait nodded firmly. “I visited it myself yesterday and aside from its location outside of the city proper, I can recommend it to you with full confidence.”

“Then why don’t we go and take a look at it?”

Upon Ryo’s suggestion, both Riplait and Abel stood.

“I’ve already put in a request to use one of the guild’s carriages, so please wait at the front.”

With that, Riplait headed to the rear of the guild’s main building where the depot was.

“I didn’t know the guild had its own fleet of carriages.”

“Yeah, three, I think. Folks just call them the guild carriages, even though GuilMas uses one of them almost exclusively for his trips to and from the margrave’s estate. Guild staff will grant permission to use one if they deem it necessary, like your business today. They don’t just lend it out willy-nilly to adventurers, just so you know.”

“Too bad.”

Abel put a kibosh on Ryo’s thoughts before he could even voice them out loud.

After the three of them boarded the guild carriage, it turned down the main avenue and headed north. It was the same one Hugh had been in when Ryo ran into him on the way back from the lord of the city’s residence. A short time later, the carriage reached the center of Lune, i.e., the double-walled plaza at

the entrance to the dungeon. It turned right there and went east down the eastern boulevard of the city, in short, heading toward the east gate.

Ryo too actually knew this area very well. Why? Because his regular haunt, The Fill-Up Station, was nearby.

For him, the property being situated near the east gate was a huge point in its favor, even if it was still outside the city proper. He very much preferred it to the south or west gates.

The inspection at the east gate was simple for the carriage's passengers. The guard just had to verify their identification; in Abel and Ryo's case, their guild cards, and for Riplait and the cabman, their guild staff cards. Since it only took a few seconds to check each person's, the process was essentially stress free.

Five minutes after exiting through the east gate, the carriage arrived at their destination. The first thing Ryo looked at upon disembarking in front of the house was the large yard. He could see a wooden fence a considerable distance away marking the edge of the plot. It was four hundred meters long and four hundred meters wide...large enough to fit three soccer fields comfortably.

And then he turned around to look at the house standing there.



It wasn't...*quite* the stereotypical farmhouse he'd imagined.

"Is this the kind of house farmers build?"

The building itself was single story, but fairly wide. Impressive double doors guarded the entrance in the center. Besides this main entryway, he saw two other doors—side entrances, presumably. There appeared to be several windows, though the slatted shutters were closed at the moment. They reminded Ryo of his house in the Forest of Rondo.

"This is indeed a farmhouse, but the family who owned it were evidently very wealthy. The only son and heir was elevated to the peerage after his engineering skills were recognized in the royal capital. Once he moved there, he invited his parents to live with him as well, which is why both the house and land were put up for sale."

"He went from an engineer to a noble? Must be incredibly talented, huh?"

Abel nodded thoughtfully in response to Riplait's explanation.

"Other farmers have purchased the farmland scattered about here and there in these parts, but this particular property has been on the market for close to a year now without any prospective buyers."

"That long?" Ryo had noticed how neatly mowed both the front yard and the area around the barn were. "But the lawn looks so well-tended. Not a weed in sight."

"Ah, there are commissions posted in the guild for maintenance on vacant houses that E-and F-ranks can accept, so that's probably why," Abel replied.

"Normally, yes, but the owners of this property never submitted any requests to the guild. That is also the reason the guild's real estate division never checked it. My sincerest apologies."

As head of the aforementioned department, Riplait bowed his head apologetically to Ryo because this listing hadn't been on the guild's register when Abel and Ryo first visited. If the owners had submitted a request for maintenance, of course, the guild would have sent its staff to inspect it.

"Wait, really?" Abel asked. "But then how... Ohhh, that old man's cleaning

company?"

"Correct," Riplait said. "This is one of the places in the care of Master Schmidthausen's company."

"Is this the cleaning company run by a former adventurer?"

"Yup, got it in one. You know about it too, Ryo? He's got a scary face, but he's a good person. You can definitely rely on him if you have any cleaning jobs. Apparently, he gives discounts to adventurers."

The reason Ryo knew about him was because Nina, the receptionist, had mentioned the man during his first visit to the guild's dormitory. More specifically, a former adventurer's cleaning company managed the cleaning there.

The three of them walked around the inside of the house, inspecting it. The place was so scrupulously clean that he could move in at any time. As he suspected, the doors other than the double doors for the main entrance were side entrances connecting the inside of the house to the outside world. Perhaps they had been built to make it easier to carry things in and out instead of relying just on the main entrance. Like service or back doors.

In the same vein, there were two more of such doors situated in the rear of the house. Again, they seemed to have been installed to make it easier to carry things in and out of the spacious house.

There was a living room, dining room, kitchen, a few bedrooms, and a few large storage rooms as well. And finally, a den-like room too, which was surprising for a farmhouse...

"So this is what it means to be a wealthy farmer, hm?" Ryo murmured quietly to himself.

The most surprising feature of the house's interior was the massive, black kitchen counter. Made of a material that resembled granite, it was an extremely handy space for a cook. It was a furnishing that indicated who actually held the true power in this household.

Their tour of the house continued...

But then Ryo noticed something unfortunate.

“There’s no bath...”

His face could have passed for a sculpture representing the word “despair.”

“W-Well, no, there isn’t... However, if it’s absolutely vital for you, Ryo...”

“It is...”

When he saw Ryo’s despair-stricken expression, Riplait too was filled with the same emotion at his own oversight. Yes, despair is contagious.

Abel was the only one completely unruffled. “Guess you’ll just have to make one yourself, huh?”

His suggestion, tossed out so casually, brought Ryo back to life.

“Oh my goodness! You’re absolutely right! I can just make it myself! Riplait, do I need permits or anything to undertake remodeling?”

“No, not at all. That’s actually one of the reasons I recommend this property. If you lived within the city proper, you would have to request all sorts of approvals from the relevant authorities...even for repairing the walls of your own home, for example. But on land *outside* the city walls, such as here, you can do as you like so long as you don’t encroach on the main roads. Which means of course you can install your own bath. Should you request it, we can also help you hire a reputable carpenter and other artisans,” Riplait answered, the despair covering his face a moment earlier nowhere to be found.

“Wonderful. Then, might we discuss the price...?”

“Certainly. Including the property itself, plus all necessary paperwork and procedures, the total is fifty million florins. What do you think? I rounded the price down to the nearest whole number.”

“I’ll buy it.”

Ryo had decided on the spot. For him, its location outside of the city was no problem. First of all, he wasn’t the kind of exemplary adventurer who went to the guild every day to accept work. Secondly, he knew of many fantastic

restaurants, including The Fill-Up Station, near the east gate. Though the fare at these establishments was geared toward commoners, they were way above standard with the delicious food they served. A third huge point in this property's favor was how much closer it was to the northern library and the margrave's residence, which was even farther north, than the guild's dormitory.

But the biggest perk of all was the massive yard. It was even bigger than the area within the barrier in the Forest of Rondo. He definitely hadn't anticipated something of this size. Though he was disappointed by the lack of a bath, being able to make his own solved the problem.

So as far as Ryo was concerned, he had no reason to turn down a property with such favorable conditions.



The rhythm of the carriage jostled the purple-haired man and purple-haired woman within.

The woman exhaled quietly. "Good grief... Your mission was to search for the outlier, yet you wound up killing three people and then engaging two more in combat. Tell me, *how* did this even come about?"

"It's not my fault. I was operating the probe when suddenly three men came running in my direction. I had no choice except to kill them since they saw me," the man responded matter-of-factly, his demeanor impassive.

"And the probe was ultimately destroyed, wasn't it? You'll have to return to the tower before making any more moves."

"The next time I meet that swordsman and magician... I'll definitely return the favor." For the first time, the purple-haired man finally showed some emotion in response to his companion's remark.

"*Can* you, is the question."

"The *bindings* placed on me made it impossible at the time for me to defeat them... Even so, those two possessed shockingly high combat ability for humans. Next time though..."

The man's muttered words were so low that even the woman sitting next to

him had to strain to hear them.

“If they remove even one level of the bindings, I can take care of them both at the same time. Easily too.”

“Seems to me like you’re simply holding a grudge now... Well, do as you like.” The woman shrugged. “Even though we couldn’t identify the source of the outlier, I’ve had more than enough of this city. Once we receive a new probe, we’ll investigate a different location. We certainly don’t want the castle to fall, hm?”



Far north of the city of Lune.

“General, I come bearing news regarding a *particular* matter.”

“Tell me.”

“Yes, Sir. Gamingam’s platoon, which infiltrated the Kingdom’s city of Lune, has withdrawn.”

The man addressed as the general frowned. “Elaborate.”

“They were captured by the city’s garrison and placed in jail, but they managed to escape and decided they might as well leave the city entirely at that point.”

“Captured, were they? What a colossal failure...” The general pressed his palm to his forehead and shook his head slightly. “Dispatch new agents. Where else do we have our people undercover and in position?”

“Excluding the margravate of Lune, the marquessate of Hope, the dukedoms of Shrewsbury and Flitwick, and the Kingdom’s capital.”

“So our southern base is destroyed...”

“Yes, Sir. Marquess Heinlein... Well, he...” The adjutant’s expression turned bitter as well, reflecting the general’s.

“Never mind. Forget about him. There’s nothing more we can do there and I’d rather not stir up a hornet’s nest at this point. That’s exactly why you need to do something about the margrave of Lune, since his domain is in the south.”

“Understood.”

The adjutant saluted him, then exited the room.

Alone now, the general murmured to himself.

“We *must* make it in time, no matter the cost...”

## Epilogue

In the white realm. As usual, today Fake Michael was in charge of managing several worlds. He held the usual stone tablet in his hands.

“Well, you have finally come up against Oscar Luska, The Inferno Magician, hm... Goodness gracious, the clash of water and fire... This time was a simple skirmish, a warm-up if you will, so no real harm done. Good for you. However...the impending collision between you two will be tremendous... Dominus Ryo Mihara, you certainly are fated to lead an eventful life... Things are already complicated enough as a reincarnate... So it should be interesting to see what happens next.”

After murmuring all this, Fake Michael swiped through the stone tablet to see a prediction of the future.

“Oh, *my*, something else in store for you... You are indeed bound to walk the path of Asura. Normally, a reincarnate wouldn’t find themselves tangled up in such turmoil... You shall find yourself living in a world far removed from the peaceful, uneventful life you sought... Dominus Ryo Mihara, I do so hope you’ll survive this ordeal...”

# Afterword

Hello, nice to see you again. I'm Tadashi Kubou. Thank you very much for picking up volume 2 of *The Water Magician*'s first arc.

In this volume, Ryo and his friends leave their base of Lune and head to the port city of Whitnash. I think you'll find his world expanding little by little. In the web version, the port opening festival only lasted three days, but I was able to add a fourth and then a fifth day with this printed edition... What can I say except new characters just kept showing up one after another?

There are also lots of new episodes in here that aren't in the web version. The "general" and the "blue-eyed people" you met toward the end have their roles to play in volume three too. In short...volume two is where I started deviating from the web version. I had a feeling things would turn out like this.

Because the truth is, even as the person writing this story, I have no idea how it will change. Solidifying the characters' details, creating a framework for the world itself... Once the setup is there, the characters start to act and speak on their own. All I do is describe their tales. I usually come up with a general story flow in the beginning, but sometimes they jump ahead of me—easily, at that... Is this what it means to make the author cry?

The end result of these characters moving on their own is a more interesting story than what I had originally thought. And a few hundred thousand more words from now, I'm sure they'll show us even more entertaining developments... A round of applause for these amazing characters!

This volume also contains a continuation of the extra story, "The Fire Magician," from volume one. You can only read it here in the printed edition—nowhere else. Of the total of forty chapters, volume one contains one through eight, volume two contains nine through sixteen, and volume three will pick up from seventeen...

Following on the heels of the first, this second volume comes in just a shade

under 230,000 Japanese characters. That's a lot, huh?! This amount adds up to two pocket paperbacks, so you're getting lots of bang for your buck! ...Probably.

Nokito-sensei did the illustrations for volume one and this one too. Everyone I know thinks so highly of their illustrations, saying they match beautifully with the story's atmosphere. Sensei never ceases to amaze me! Ryo's suuuper laid-back vibe and Abel's suuuper exasperated vibe are absolutely perfect!

Three months have passed since the first volume was released on March 10th. This never would have made it into the hands of the readers without the efforts of many people, including the publisher, and I couldn't be happier about it.

I hope you'll stay with me on this journey!

## Bonus Story

### The Magic Copper Ore in the Village of Rusay

West of the city of Lune, three adventurers were on their way to the village of Rusay: Nils the swordsman, Eto the priest, and the (apprentice) swordsman Amon.

“By hook or crook, we gotta make this job a success!”

“Yes, especially since Ryo’s the one who asked us.”

“I can’t believe we each still get four gold coins even if we fail!”

Nils, Eto, and Amon were all extremely excited. And who could blame them? After all, just like Amon said, they’d still get paid for their troubles even if they didn’t succeed. What’s more, if they *did* successfully mine the magic copper ore, they would receive twenty-five gold coins for each piece extracted!

The reward was an unprecedented amount for F-rank adventurers, so there was no way they *wouldn’t* be fired up about the job.

After departing from Lune this morning, they arrived in Rusay in the early afternoon. The village prospered in the past as a mining town. Situated half a day’s walk from Lune, its location was perfect and it wouldn’t be an overstatement to say the iron ore mined here supported Lune’s development. Incidentally, back then as well as now, its veins of magic copper ore amounted to very little...

However, twenty years ago, Rusay’s iron ore deposits had been all depleted. That, coupled with the discovery of new ones near Kailadi, led to a dramatic decline in the village’s importance. It’s said that something like a post town once existed here, but twenty years was by no means a short time...

“Doesn’t look like there’s an inn or lodge we can stay at, huh?” Nils asked.

“Nope,” Eto replied with a wry chuckle.

Meanwhile, Amon looked a bit worried. “I suppose this means we’ll be excavating forever then.”

Since their primary objective was to enter the abandoned mine and dig for magic copper ore, if they kept digging and digging without finding anything, they would end up spending the night inside... So perhaps there was no point in staying in town.

“Well, if we don’t have any other choice, a night in the shaft shouldn’t be too bad...” Nils said.

“Supposedly, Rusay’s abandoned mine has a natural wind current, so no one gets sick even if they stay inside for a long time,” Eto said, offering the health perspective as any priest would.

The three of them headed directly to the abandoned mine without passing through the village center because they had already learned at the guild that pickaxes and other equipment were placed in front of the mine. Every once in a while, people came to mine magic copper ore here. Of course, they weren’t from Lune, where the magic copper ore was extracted from the dungeon. No, these people were adventurers from Acray, the largest city in the south. So, even though it was an abandoned mine, it wasn’t necessarily deserted...

But today, around fifty people were gathered at what appeared to be the entrance of the mine.

“This is...” Amon began.

Eto nodded. “Something has definitely happened.”

Nils, his arms folded, called out to an elderly person staring in the direction of the mine. “Excuse me. We’re adventurers from Lune, here to mine for magic copper ore. Would you mind telling us what’s going on?”

Though Nils looked like an overgrown punk, he knew his manners and that included conversing politely. He wasn’t an idiot, after all.

“Ah, you boys sure came at a bad time. Not ten minutes ago there was a cave-in near the mine’s entrance. No one can get in and everyone showed up to check whether or not anyone was inside before it happened.”

“Cave-in...”

That was the only thing Nils could say in response to the elder’s explanation. He hadn’t expected something like this to occur.

“If we can’t get inside the abandoned mine...”

“Then we can’t dig for anything...”

Eto and Amon heard the other two’s conversation. And naturally, felt dispirited by the news.

A cheerful voice came from behind the disappointed trio.

“I was wondering why the tavern was deserted and now I find everyone here, including you, old man. That explains it.”

“Hm? That you, Kreis?” the elderly man said. “Ah, come to think of it, today’s the day you were s’posed to arrive from Acray, huh?”

You could tell in a single glance that Kreis was an adventurer. Behind him were two women. One seemed to be a scout and the other a magician.

“Yup. I delivered the requested magic stones to your house. So? What’s with all the people here?”

“Right, about that. There was a cave-in at the mine’s entrance.”

After Kreis and the elder discussed various things for a few more minutes, they suddenly focused their attention on Nils and his party.

“You gents adventurers too? Fairly unusual to see any in this village. I’m guessing you’re here to mine magic copper ore?”

“That’s right. I’m Nils, an F-rank from Lune. This is Eto and Amon,” Nils answered politely. Because any way he looked at the other man, Kreis was a veteran adventurer.

“Lune, huh? Us too. So you’re newbies, eh... We actually haven’t been back there in a while, you see. The C-rank party, Lord Kreis and Comrades, at your service. I’m Kreis, the leader. This is Sesa, our scout, and Lute, our magician. Nice to meet you all.”

"Kreis... I *really* think we should change our party name..." Sesa, the scout, said with a sigh.

Though she remained silent, the woman next to her, Lute the magician, nodded vigorously several times in agreement.

Kreis's mouth turned down in a sulk. "No! I won the coin toss fair and square! We're keeping the name and that's that!" Clearly, the trio had their own issues to deal with.

"Just look at Abel's party. Their name, The Crimson Sword, is obviously symbolic of him, right? And every swordsman worth his salt wants to be like him!" Kreis said.

"Abel!" Nils blurted, excited by Kreis's impassioned plea.

"Oh? Nils, was it? I heard Abel finally came back. You know him too?"

"Yes! I admire him tremendously!"

"Right?! He's the ideal swordsman!"

The two men who looked up to Abel hit it off right away.

Eto and Amon smiled in amusement. Sesa and Lute covered their faces with their hands and hung their heads despondently. Yes indeed, every party has its own issues to deal with...

"Nils, you and your pals came here to extract magic copper ore, right?"

"That's right, but..." Nils trailed off. His uncertainty made sense considering the cave-in at the abandoned mine's entrance. If they couldn't get in, they couldn't mine anything...

"You know, not being able to complete a request through no fault of your own, like this situation for example, won't lower the guild's reputation," Kreis said. As a more experienced guild member, he wanted to attempt to cheer him up. However...

"Actually, we didn't go through the guild for this commission," Nils clarified. "One of our friends contracted us directly. He asked us to mine magic copper ore for his alchemical studies..."

"Ah, okay." Kreis nodded in understanding of Nils's answer. Then he turned around to look meaningfully at Lute the magician.

She nodded. "You can't move the rocks that just fell in the cave-in," she said in a soft whisper, "but you *can* drill a hole in one that's been there for a long time."

Though she spoke in a low tone, Nils, Eto, and Amon heard her anyway. All three were surprised, as she'd basically told them to enter the mining shaft by creating a new hole in the wall.

"We-We'd definitely like to try that, if possible!"

Nils bowed his head respectfully. Eto and Amon rushed to do the same. Lute smiled and nodded in return without saying anything else.

"All right, it's settled! I'll go have a quick chat with the mayor then."

So saying, Kreis headed back to the elderly man from earlier. Since the five others weren't standing so far away, they could hear their conversation.

"Sir, we're going into the mine to help the boys we just met."

"What? Ahhh, the adventurers who came to dig for magic copper ore? Kreis, if you're heading inside, then..."

"Yeah, I know. I'll check to see if anyone's trapped inside. See you soon."

In exchange for searching for survivors, he obtained the village mayor's permission to enter the mine...which itself meant that no one would complain, at least out in the open. Perhaps Kreis was a shrewd man.

*"Change shape at my will, for thou art my captive. Stone Change."*

The earth magician, Lute, created a hole in the wall.

"Whooooa..."

Nils, Eto, and Amon all exclaimed in surprise. It was the first time any of them had witnessed a sight like this.

"Setting aside the earth itself, only high-ranking earth magicians can do things like bore holes in rocks and change their form. On top of all that, spells like this

consume a ridiculous amount of magical energy. But my party member is brilliant, which is exactly why she can pull it off,” Kreis explained, boasting as if her achievements were his own. Hearing him, Lute, the one who actually opened the hole, blushed and looked away.

“Damn it, Kreis! Can’t you see you’re embarrassing her?!” Sera the scout scolded.

“But I’m just telling the truth! I’m complimenting her, aren’t I?!” Kreis argued back.

It seemed the three of them got along really well.

“Fine, fine. Anyway, let’s head in. Nils, you and your guys have magic lanterns, right?”

“Yes. We bought them in the guild’s co-op,” Nils replied, lightly patting the fist-sized tool hanging from his belt. The same item hung from Eto and Amon’s belts too.

A magic lantern was an alchemical device that emitted light. It was a miniature version of the most common alchemical device, the streetlamp. If Ryo had been here, he might have shouted, “That’s a flashlight!” One unit cost one thousand florins, a reasonable price.

Its energy source was magical power, but it had an artificial rechargeable magic stone built in. Anyone with a vocation capable of releasing magic externally, such as magicians or priests, could charge it with their own magical energy. It was capable of staying on with a single charge without any problems, and could be reused any number of times, making it an extremely superior alchemical device.

In the past, small magic stones were used as a disposable source of power...just like batteries in battery-powered flashlights. However, the development of the artificial rechargeable magic stone led to a decline in the use of small magic stones extracted from monsters like lesser boars, so adventurers’ guilds stopped buying them.

The group walked through the hole Lute had made and turned on their magic

lanterns.

“Wow, it’s pitch black in here, isn’t it?” Amon murmured.

“Yeah. Different from the dungeon,” Nils agreed.

“The walls and floor of the dungeon glow faintly, which is why we don’t need lights in there. Though it *is* curious that rock walls can even glow... Well, I guess the dungeon’s just special like that, and anyway, places where the sunlight doesn’t reach will naturally be dark,” Kreis said with a firm nod.

Though he stated the obvious, it was easy to forget when you spent a good chunk of your time in the dungeon.

The group walked for a while before emerging into a cavernous area like a hall. It was quite large—roughly the same size as the plaza in Lune near the northern library, in fact. The ceiling stretched close to four meters high.

“This is the mining site. You can mine from the walls or dig holes in the ground, whatever tickles your fancy. But there’s hardly any magic copper ore in here, so just be prepared to settle in for the long haul,” Kreis said to Nils and his friends. Then he looked at Lute, who sat down nearby.

“Thanks, Lute. You take it easy now, okay?” Sesa the scout handed her friend a mana potion. Evidently, it wasn’t easy to create a hole in rock walls even for a C-rank magician. Perhaps then it should come as no surprise that magicians were rarely recruited for mining operations...

“Thank you very much, Miss Lute.”

Nils bowed his head in gratitude and Eto and Amon followed suit.

Lute nodded in response, smiling at them.

“All right, guys, time to dig!”

Amon nodded, adjusting his grip properly on the pickaxe in his hands.

Now the trio’s real battle began...

Taking breaks as necessary, the three of them continued to dig. Eto, who lacked the physical strength to swing a pickaxe, helped them by moving aside

the crushed rocks.

As for Lord Kreis and Comrades, they fulfilled their promise to the village mayor and explored the abandoned mine to check for anyone trapped inside. They took down a monster during their patrol.

“Lots of bats and lesser bats here just like on Layer 1 of Lune’s dungeon, but they hardly ever attack, so it’s fine.”

With that comment, Kreis left them some bread, meat, and water.

“You boys plan on digging through the night, right? You’ll get hungry, so make sure you eat. Think of it as a treat from your seniors.”

Then Lord Kreis and Comrades left. They would be staying tonight at the village mayor’s house.

Nils, Eto, and Amon continued taking breaks as necessary and eating as they dug. At one point...

“I heard it again,” Eto whispered.

“Yeah. The rumbling sound, right? Maybe there’s a cave-in somewhere deep inside?” Nils replied while wiping the sweat off his brow.

“Sesa said this specific cavern is reinforced all throughout, making it the least likely to collapse in the mine,” Amon said, swinging his pickaxe.

The trio kept digging. And then, at long last, they acquired what they wanted.

“I see it!”

“We did it!”

“Wow! Two?!”

Two fist-sized pieces of magic copper ore rolled out and landed on the ground. Nils, Amon, and Eto cheered in excitement.

“Well done, guys!”

The three members of Lord Kreis and Comrades had been waiting in the cavern near the dig site. They must have heard the three young men’s joyful voices.

“We did it, Kreis!”

Nils showed him the two pieces of the ore he held in both hands.

“Whoooa. Look at these beauties.”

Then, at that moment. They all heard it. A thundering, rumbling sound. Nils, Eto, and Amon realized it came from even closer than before.

“That sound...”

“It’s a bit different from the noise a cave-in makes...” Nils asked Kreis, who couldn’t give him a clear answer. But...

Lute the magician, who spoke rarely and in whispers when she did, suddenly shouted. “Something is digging in the rock!”

She was an earth magician, so in a way, her vocation made her an expert in rocks and soil.

“What do you mean?”

However, both Kreis and Sesa the scout were slow to react. No wonder, since their comrade Lute had a tough time creating a hole in rock despite being a C-rank adventurer. So it was basically impossible to think a *human* could be boring through it now...

“Shit! A monster?!”

The second Kreis spoke, the cavern’s opposite wall collapsed and some sort of creature appeared.

“An underground mole!”

“Kreis, you *really* need to do something about the way you name things...”

Sesa the scout couldn’t resist making the quip in response to his shout.

“A mole...and a greater mole, at that. It nullifies almost all earth magic attacks.”

The one who sounded the most calm now was Lute, who had screamed just moments ago.

“Yeah, they’re bad news. Nils, take your boys and get out of here! We’ll

handle this!"

"But wait..." Nils unthinkingly objected.

"You know part of a junior's job is to let their seniors show off and have the glory, right?" Kreis said, grinning.

Of course, he said this to make it easier for Nils and his friends to evacuate without worrying about them. They understood that too. They also understood they would only be a hindrance if they stayed to help Lord Kreis and Comrades. "Understood! We'll head out first! We'll be waiting for you, so don't disappoint us!"

"Definitely! We'll be done before you know it!"

Nils shoved the two pieces of magic copper ore into his bag, which he held tight with his hands, and ran toward the hole Lute had first created. Amon and Eto raced behind him, carrying the pickaxes.

After making sure the three of them exited the hole, Kreis unsheathed his sword and faced off against the underground mole, otherwise known as a greater mole.

"All right, time to settle this in a flash."

Confidence overflowed on his grinning face.

Three minutes after Nils, Eto, and Amon made it outside the abandoned mine, Kreis, Sesa, and Lute exited the hole in front of the worried trio.

"Thanks for waiting, boys!" Kreis called cheerfully.

"Kreis! Are you okay?!" Nils replied.

Eto, however, was the first to rush over to Lord Kries and Comrades.

"Any injuries?" he asked, worried they'd gotten hurt.

"We're all fine. Thanks though," Sesa the scout answered with a smile.

"Dang, if only our healer Shosa was as devoted as you."

"Just so you know, Kreis... I'm going to tell Shosa you said that when we get back to Acray."

Kreis panicked at Sesa's remark. "No, you dummy, don't!"

"Shosa?" Eto cocked his head curiously.

"That's right. Our healer, like you. We're actually a party of six. The other three are in Acray on another job," Sesa answered.

"Wait, did you guys stay here a night because of us?" Nils figured out the other party had extended their stay in the village to support them.

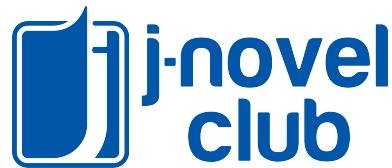
"Don't worry about it. We're all adventurers of Lune, right? Only natural for us vets to help out you newbies. Abel and his party did the same for us when we first started out, so we're just paying it forward. And besides, now we have a souvenir for Shosa and the others."

So saying, Kreis showed them the yellow magic stone in his right hand. It was half the size of a fist, fairly large, and a deep shade of yellow. Most likely the greater mole's.

"It's so pretty..." Amon whispered before he could stop himself.

"Right? It should sell for a lot, so the others will let us off the hook. And none of it would have been possible if we hadn't stuck around to back you guys up. Thanks, boys." Kreis grinned broadly then.

And that was how Nils, Eto, and Amon succeeded in mining magic copper ore from the abandoned mine in the village of Rusay.



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by Tadashi Kubou

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