



THE CENTRAL
PROVINCES ARC

III

THE WATER MAGICIAN

AUTHOR: TADASHI KUBOU
ILLUSTRATOR: MEBARU



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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.

★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."

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. Took a liking to Ryo, so 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.

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."

WIND



[SERA]

An elven B-rank adventurer, the sole member of the party "Wind," an air magician, and a highly accomplished swordswoman. Her age is a secret.

Character References

Rough Draft

NAME: Sera

AGE: Roughly 200 years old

HEIGHT: 170 cm

PROFILE: An elf of the Western Forest, a B-rank adventurer of Lune, and the sole member of the party Wind. Can use both the sword and air magic, but her skill with the former is so outstanding she was appointed the instructor of the city's order of knights. A bookworm who's also well learned and somewhat experienced in alchemy. Because of her long lifespan, she seems to be entangled in many different webs...?

TRAITS: An aptitude for air magic

ATTIRE: Since he's the eighth prince of a small nation, his clothes aren't extravagant, but they're stylish and well-made.

POSSESSIONS:

✦ Her sword - A former member of Wind forged it for her. It's slim like a rapier but with a double-edged blade that glows faintly green. / Her earrings - Made of air magic stones.



Sera's sword looks really sharp.

It's apparently the last sword forged by a former member of her party, a dwarven blacksmith.



Everyone's got a past, huh?

The story goes that the woman was on her deathbed, her life almost over, when she got up and forged an unbreakable sword to replace Sera's old one that had broken.



...So swords have pasts too, huh?

Character References

5cm I-----

Rough Draft



NAME: Willie

AGE: 15 years old

HEIGHT: 170 cm

PROFILE: The eighth prince of the Monarchy of Joux. Honest and earnest, he's kind to others but tough on himself. A sincere boy with a lot of grit. In order to deepen the relationship between his country and the Kingdom of Knightley, he was sent to the latter as a hostage and is studying in its capital as an international student. Since Willie has an aptitude for water magic, Ryo doted on him as his disciple on their journey.

TRAITS: An aptitude for water magic

ATTIRE: Since he's the eighth prince of a small nation, his clothes aren't extravagant, but they're stylish and well-made.

POSSESSIONS:

✦ A plate made via alchemy that attests to his status as a member of a royal family. Always hanging around his neck, the thumb-sized plate is usually hidden under his clothes.



Here's a fun fact I learned—the royals and nobles of each country always carry an ID plate.

Yup, they're made using alchemy. I heard they got popular during King Richard's reign.



Abel, even if you steal one from someone, you know you can't use it, right?

And...why are you telling me that?



Well, I figured it was my job to stop you before you did something dastardly.

Sure—except I'd never do that!



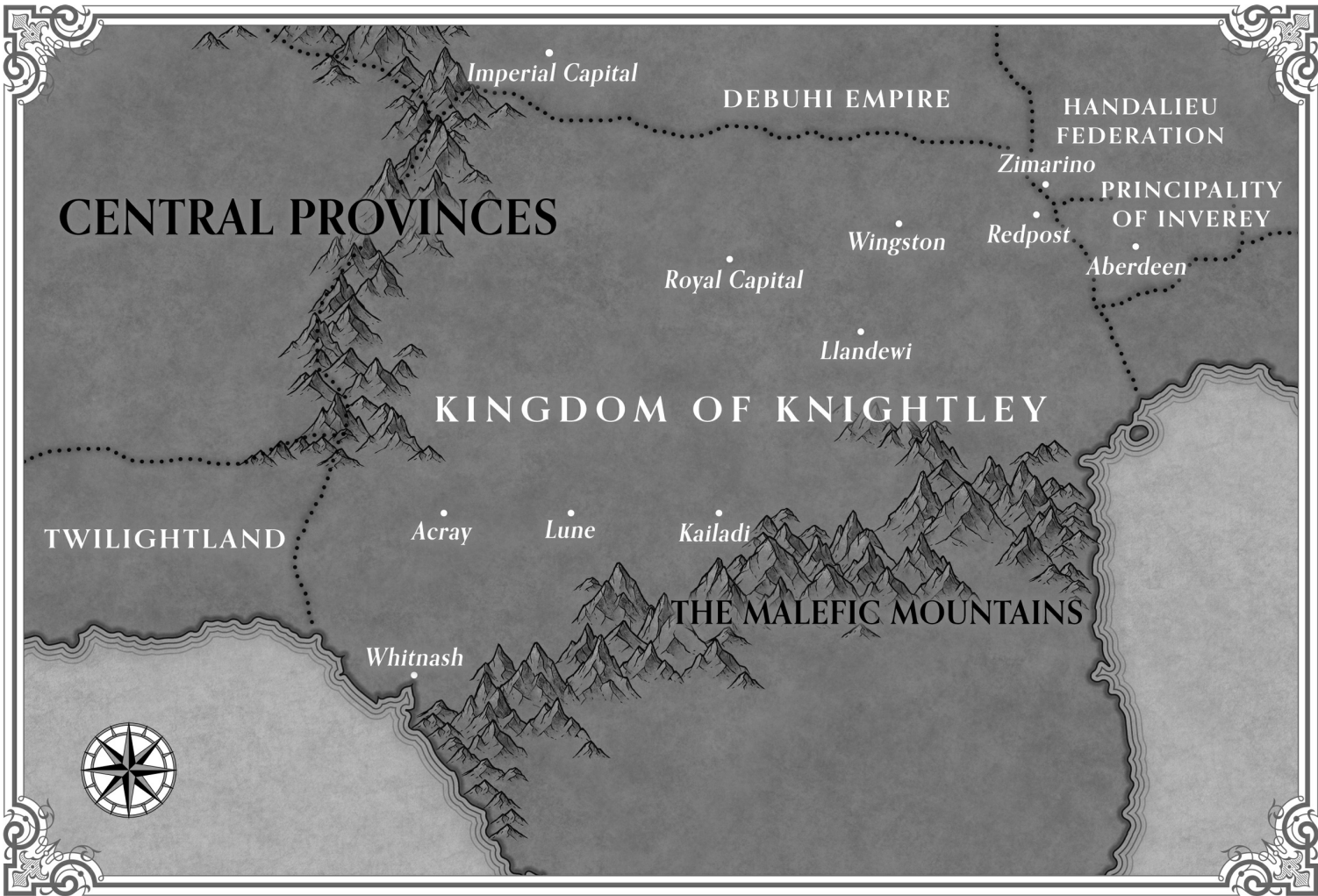


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Prologue

“Ugggh, I really don’t want to give up on this dining set... And I adore this sofa too. This stand is an interesting piece as well... What to do, what to do... You know what? The sofa it is. I’d like this sofa, please,” Ryo said.

“Yes, of course.” The young man with the mellow demeanor smiled and bowed his head politely. “Thank you for your patronage.”

In a store selling high-quality goods, the staff’s customer service must also be high quality.

Behind Ryo, Abel looked over the price tags. His cheek twitched in dismay every time he read one, but no one noticed...

The lord mayor’s residence and large mansions lined an entire block in the northernmost part of the city of Lune. In the same area, you could find many luxury stores, making it a place frequented by the so-called upper class. Someone like Ryo, of course, would never have set foot here—hah, just kidding. Ryo was actually quite familiar with the neighborhood because of his sparring sessions with Sera in the lord’s estate.

Technically speaking, Ryo actually only passed through the district... Regardless, these trips were exactly the reason he knew about the fine furniture shop.

“Abel, are you absolutely sure about buying me furniture as a housewarming gift? You really don’t have to, you know.”

“Y-Yeah, of course. It’s the least I can do. You always have my back, Ryo, so one or two pieces of furniture is nothing in comparison...” Abel said. He couldn’t help his stiff expression. After all, *he* was the one who’d told Ryo to pick his favorite shop. He hadn’t expected his friend to know of an upscale store like this and then to *choose* such a high-end sofa as his gift...

The final price was an entire zero longer than he’d imagined spending...

“Well, thanks to you, I was able to buy something very nice. I personally would *never* spend five hundred thousand florins on a sofa of all things.”

You heard right. A five-hundred-thousand-florin sofa... Converting it to Japanese yen, that was millions... The sofa was unmistakably *extremely* high-end.

“R-Right... Good for you then, huh?”

Though Abel had paid an astronomical cost he could have never predicted, he found himself feeling surprisingly magnanimous and unbothered in light of Ryo’s happiness. The most important thing about a gift was that the recipient liked it.

The pair left the luxury furniture shop and meandered south. They didn’t have a particular destination in mind, but they also had no further business in this northern part of the city. On account of all the high-class stores here, the location was by no means gentle on a person’s wallet...

“Hm, how about this? Since you were generous enough to buy me such a splendid gift, I’ll treat you to a cake set at Café de Chocolat,” Ryo suggested.

“The shop’s gonna deliver your sofa, right?”

“That’s right. Sometime tomorrow afternoon, he said. That means I need to make sure the house is sparkling clean in the morning.”

“No way. It can’t be *that* bad,” Abel said dismissively. “I mean, it’s barely been a month since you moved in...”

“That’s easy for you to say, Abel, because you live in an inn.” Ryo tutted, wagging his finger at Abel. “You can leave your room a mess and the inn staff will tidy up for you, but it doesn’t work like that when you live alone.”

“Well...I guess it’s never a bad thing to clean up.”

“Exactly. E-xact-ly!”

“Oh, yeah, there’s something I wanna tell you, Ryo.”

“What is it? Gasp! No, don’t you dare tell me I have to pay for the sofa myself

because you don't actually have enough money..."

"As if, man! I may not look like it, but you know I *am* a B-rank adventurer. I have a decent amount saved up, you jerk!"

"Hmmm. Okay, fine. Then what is it you want to tell me? I can't imagine you discussing anything besides money with such a serious expression, Abel..."

"Times like these really make me wonder what kinda image you have of me in your mind."

"That's easy to answer! A miserly swordsman, of course!"

"Hey, whaddya know? Just thought of a great idea. Why don't I return that sofa?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. You're a wonderful person, Abel. A virtuous swordsman!"

Abel deadpanned.



Their conversation was going nowhere fast...

Abel sighed heavily. “Ugh, whatever. Anyway, back to what I wanna say. It’s about *that*. You remember the incident with the spies from abroad we were involved in?”

“Spies from abroad...? Ohhh... We got caught up with spies twice, didn’t we? The first were the four we took down in the dark, the ones who didn’t attend the party celebrating your return. The second was the group who also didn’t attend your welcome-back party, whose house we raided with the city’s garrison.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong, but...your phrasing is liable to create a lot of misunderstandings...”

“The truth is more persuasive than anything else, you know. Abel, the powerful man from the city of Lune... No, wait, Abel, the powerful man hidden in the shadows... From the murk, he buries those who defy him into the same darkness. A terrifying man to be sure.”

“No, I don’t, and no, I’m not!”

Yup, their conversation really was truly going *nowhere* fast...

Abel once again expelled a heavy sigh. “It’s about the first four. They wound up escaping from prison.”

“You don’t say! They were fairly skilled in their own right though, hm?”

“If I remember right, they rushed us all together, smacked straight into your ice wall while taking a direct hit from your ice spears... Sunk without even getting a move in on us. So I’m not really sure I’d call them skilled.”

Ryo folded his arms across his chest. “Compared to the people who fled from the building we raided,” he said a little pompously, “don’t you think those four seemed at least competent in close-quarter combat?”

“Really? You can make a judgment like that with such little information?”

“Well, the way I remember it, they were perfectly in sync when they charged us. That made me think they were accustomed to fighting in tricky situations like that. You know, smack-dab in the middle of a city or in the dark or sneak

attacks and whatnot... In any case, they *felt* like people who had that kind of training.”

“Huh... It’s possible, actually. Apparently, a special investigator who interrogated them before their jailbreak pointed out that they may have received formal assassination training in the military or elsewhere.”

“Formal assassination training...” Ryo shook his head. “What does that even *mean*...?”

“Exactly what it sounds like and there are definitely people who go through it,” Abel replied, shaking his own head a little. “They aren’t well-known, but they exist in the Empire.”

“The Empire? And not the Federation?”

“Yup, the Empire. Though the four we caught had Federation guild cards, they were probably forgeries.”

“Wow. They go that far in their covert operations...?”

“They sure do. Chances are good they’re part of the 20th Imperial Regiment. The 20th is the imperial army’s trump card, specializing in combat in urban regions, mountains, forests, and similar environments. If the Empire’s official trump card is the Imperial Magic Division that has the Inferno Magician, then its unofficial trump card is the 20th Regiment. It’s also known as the Shadow Regiment.”

Ryo’s eyes widened in surprise. “Well, if that isn’t some serious Main Character Syndrome-naming convention.” He couldn’t believe anyone would call a military unit something like that... But after thinking about it for a few moments, he realized there really was no need to be so shocked. After all, these were the same people who included the word “Debuhi” in the name of their country. “Just when I thought the Debuhi Empire couldn’t disappoint me any further...”

Abel simply shook his head in reply...



It was probably just a coincidence that they passed the garrison station on

their way south from Café de Chocolat. At the very least, it wasn't a scheme by Ryo, who ended up regretting his offer to treat Abel to a cake set. It was probably also a coincidence that the garrison members exited the station entrance at that exact time—and oh, look, their commanding officer, Captain Nimur, was among them! This was the same man who was part of the sting operation on the old workshop. Another coincidence, no doubt.

Three coincidences in a row—how...coincidental.

“Abel, great timing!”

“Oh, Nimur. What's all this? Don't tell me you're going out on another manhunt or raid...”

“You always were sharp, huh? I actually sent a messenger to The Golden Wave earlier,” Captain Nimur said with a smile. He looked at the water magician beside Abel. “Hello! Ryo, was it? Apologies for what went down last time. It was just our collective bad luck to run into a crazy guy like that...” His face contorted as he apologized. It was a sad memory, as Nimur had lost one of his men in the battle against the blue-eyed man.

Of course, Ryo had gotten tangled up in another incident immediately after, so he wasn't at all bothered. Especially since he'd received a *very* generous reward from the garrison.

“Don't worry about it...” he replied.

“So what do you two say? Care to join us for another search-and-seize operation? It goes without saying we'll pay you handsomely.”

And that was how Ryo and Abel found themselves participating in another arrest...



Their group of twenty, including Ryo and Abel, currently surrounded the remains of an eatery near the east gate.

“All ten are inside.”

Captain Nimur nodded, acknowledging the recon unit member's report.

“We'll attack from the front. Jitta, take four people with you and go around

back. Abel, Ryo, you two go with them. Catch anyone who tries to escape. I don't care if you hurt them, but do your best not to kill them."

Abel nodded in understanding.

Meanwhile, Ryo muttered, "I feel like this has happened before... Such déjà vu..."

A minute after they had gone to the back of the building, an explosion came from the front. The raid had commenced. Angry shouts and the sounds of swords clashing erupted within. If Ryo's déjà vu was accurate, the next thing to happen was...

Three individuals flew out of the back entrance. None of them were part of the garrison. Which meant...

"Wah!"

They slipped and fell on ice suddenly below them. Then the city's soldiers bound the unconscious trio.

The next moment, a second-floor window shattered and a man jumped out of it.

"Icicle Lance."

Ryo shot his ice spears at the man's legs to unbalance him. He hit the ground headfirst and passed out in front of Ryo.

Ryo hesitated. He had been given rope to tie the villains up, however...

Krak. A different window shattered and another person leaped out of it before running toward the east gate.

"I'm giving chase!" Jitta, a garrison soldier, yelled before darting off in pursuit.

"Hey, wait! Shit, I'm going after them too," Abel said.

"Abel!" Ryo shouted.

It was rare for Ryo to raise his voice like that, so Abel, of course, heard him. Then he remembered what had happened the last time he pursued someone in a similar situation—or, more specifically, *who*.

“Ryo, you come too!”

Ryo nodded, leaving the unconscious man lying in front of him. One of the remaining garrison members would surely bind him.

More importantly... Ryo and Abel ran. Unlike last time, they reached a bend in the road quickly. When they turned the corner, they saw Jitta holding the escaped man against the ground.

Good. A very good sight—if only that had been the end of it.

Ahead of them stood a figure. A purple-headed, blue-eyed woman.

“What do we have here?”

Ryo and Abel thought they heard the woman murmur something along those lines. It was as though she had recognized them the moment they rounded the corner. Although it should have been their first encounter with the woman—neither could remember meeting her before now—they both thought she was familiar... To put it more accurately, they both had a feeling about whose *accomplice* she was.

Though Abel’s hand wasn’t yet on the hilt of his sword, he stared cautiously at the woman. Ryo had already activated Passive Sonar to investigate their surroundings.

“I don’t sense anyone else,” Ryo whispered. “In short, the man from back then isn’t near...”

Abel nodded.

Purple hair and glittering, blue eyes... The last time they encountered such similar features, they belonged to a man whom they confronted. And fought. A man who had been an incredibly powerful enemy.

“Abel, I caught him,” Jitta called. “Please help me carry him back!”

Both Abel and Ryo unthinkingly looked at Jitta, focusing their attention on the soldier...

As soon as Ryo realized what he’d done, he jerked his gaze back to the front.

Too late. The blue-eyed woman was already gone.

Ryo sighed quietly. When Abel heard him, he too looked ahead and realized the woman had vanished.

“But she...” Abel said, “she was *just* here, right?”

“Yes, she was.”

“My eyes weren’t playing tricks on me, right?”

“No, they weren’t,” Ryo answered confidently.

While there may have been a possibility they had seen an illusion, Passive Sonar had confirmed the woman’s presence so it stood to reason she hadn’t been an illusion.

“You know what I find more unbelievable about all this...? The fact that such a terrifying person was right there, so close to my neighborhood. It really begs the question—what in the world are you doing slacking off?” Ryo asked, suddenly turning to Abel.

“What? How the heck do you always find a way to blame *me*?”

“Because, as a B-rank adventurer, it’s *your* responsibility to eliminate such frightening individuals. Otherwise, the rest of us will face problems galore. Isn’t that why you get paid the big bucks?”

“Except *you* aren’t the one paying me, Ryo!”

Even though everyone *should* want peace, the world sometimes makes that difficult. At that moment, Ryo keenly felt the challenge of achieving world peace.



“Good grief...” the purple-haired, blue-eyed woman muttered within the carriage. “I went to Lune again because I was told to, but the outlier really came as no surprise. That simply means this place is now out of bounds for us. Still... Those two were the same swordsman and magician from before, weren’t they? They most likely live in the city, but to think I’d see them again during such a short visit... However, they *should* think I was only an illusion since I utilized a magic formula for cognitive inhibition... Yes, yes, the formula should have worked! Julius said he had no choice but to kill the man back then because he’d

been seen. I really don't understand him. Though I *am* glad he wasn't with me this time. We definitely would have ended up in a battle if he had been... I heard he went to the eastern part of the Kingdom. I wonder if he'll be fine on his own... He has a bad habit of trying to settle things with brute force... This is exactly why men are such troublesome creatures."

She exhaled deeply. "Since we're done with Lune, perhaps I should go after him... Decisions, decisions."

The Hero's Visit

A thin layer of snow falling from the gray morning sky blanketed Markdorf, the capital of the Debuhi Empire, in white. The city was the center of a massive economic bloc said to be the greatest in the Central Provinces, yet few people walked its streets at present. This emptiness was emblematic of the economic downturn of the Empire as a whole.

The main avenue running north-south through the center of Markdorf ended at the imperial castle, the center of the entire Empire. Emperor Rupert VI, master of the castle, listened to Premier Hans Kirchhoff's report. The man also happened to be a member of the peerage. A count, to be exact.

"You say the Hero has arrived?" Rupert VI asked, visibly displeased.

Understanding the source of his aggravation, Premier Hans bowed his head in commiseration. "Yes, and as previously agreed, he's requested an audience with you, Your Majesty."

"Didn't we receive a report that he had crossed the border? When was that? A week ago, I think? That means he headed straight here to the capital without stopping anywhere else."

"Indeed. Clearly, he has some sort of objective... However, it is unclear to us at the moment since all he's done is request an audience with you."

Rupert's obvious displeasure deepened. For him, the Hero was a being who brought only trouble and nothing else.

"What is this agreement you're referring to? It's the first I'm hearing of it, and with the Hero no less..."

"I myself had no knowledge of it, so I asked the head librarian Tulan at the imperial library to look into the matter. About three hundred years ago, when the Empire was still a monarchy, King Karl XII bestowed upon the Hero then a seal of approval. Tulan found a written record of this."

"Three hundred years... That's practically ancient history. What are the

contents of the seal?”

“No matter the era, we are bound to help the Hero.”

Rupert VI sighed heavily. “Bloody hell, what a pain in my arse. Fine, I’ll grant him an audience at least. After that, our cooperation depends entirely on what the Hero seeks.”



As the audience with the emperor was an informal one, there weren’t many courtiers in attendance. With the Hero Roman at the forefront, he and the six remaining members of his party knelt, each on one knee, before the stairs leading to the dais on which the ruler’s throne sat. They waited for Emperor Rupert VI to speak to them.

“Master Roman the Hero and friends, raise your heads.”

At Premier Hans Kirchhoff’s urging, the Hero’s party obeyed deferentially.

“Hero Roman as well as his comrades, I welcome you,” Rupert VI intoned.

“We are unworthy of your welcome, but nevertheless honored by it,” replied Graham, the party’s clergyman and oldest member. Though Roman, the Hero, was the party leader, he was only nineteen and inexperienced. As the eldest, Graham often acted as their representative during formal meetings.

“There’s no need for formalities in light of the informal nature of this audience. While I am of course honored by your visit to our nation, perhaps you’d care to tell me the reason for it?”

Rupert VI’s attitude displayed no trace of his disgust. In fact, his tone was the epitome of politeness.

“I came to the Empire to request personal instruction from the renowned Inferno Magician, Oscar Luska,” Roman answered with a determined gaze. Depending on the country or the person in power, this could be considered an incredibly disrespectful act, which explained why his party members glanced at him anxiously.

Rupert hummed, caught off guard by the unexpected request. Why would the Hero want to fight Oscar?

“So,” Rupert said, “you wish to train with Oscar?”

“Lord Oscar Luska is extremely well-known from his adventuring days too, so we first visited the adventurers’ guild. However, we were told he no longer went there because he had long since been put on the military register. That was when we decided to impose on Your Majesty’s magnanimity and seek an audience with you here in the imperial castle,” Graham the clergyman explained.

Rupert VI stared at Hans. “Hans, where’s Oscar now?”

“Lord Oscar is stationed at the Imperial Magic Division’s training ground.”

After receiving the answer he expected, Rupert fell into a thoughtful silence.

He’s always at the training ground, so that’s nothing new. Having said that...I’m well aware he leaves the training of the division to Fiona and the others while he holes himself up in Magical Training Center Number 4. Looks like the Whitnash incident had a profound effect on him... He did his job well protecting Fiona, but the man himself isn’t convinced of that, eh? No matter. This just means he’ll grow even stronger. Bravo, bravo... If I take that into account, would the Hero and his friends prove useful as a test for Oscar’s newfound strength?

“Very well, Hero Roman, I shall grant your wish. You have my leave to visit the training grounds. However, that area is a fair distance from the imperial capital, so I bid you to rest here in the castle tonight and depart tomorrow. I’ll have my people arrange transportation for yours.”

“I am eternally grateful for your kindness, Your Imperial Majesty.”

Roman the Hero bowed his head deeply.



“The Hero’s coming?”

Commander of the Imperial Magic Division, Fiona Rubine Bornemisza, repeated back to her adjutant, Marie.

“Yes, we received a missive from the castle. Here it is.”

She handed over the official letter to Fiona, who read it thrice for good

measure.

“What in the world is Father thinking? Not only did he allow a foreigner to enter the training grounds, but also permitted them to train with Master... Jurgen, is he up to the usual?”

“Indeed. As always, the vice commander has secluded himself, alone, in Magical Training Center Number 4,” Jurgen, Oscar’s adjutant, replied.

His behavior wasn’t new. It had started when they returned from Whitnash and had persisted every day since. Over a month had already passed. Though Oscar ate breakfast with Fiona in the mornings while making his reports to her, he would shut himself away in the fourth training ground right after.

Of course, it wasn’t a problem since Fiona, as the commander, had given him her permission. Fiona led the division’s training and military exercises with the help of the adjutants, Marie and Jurgen, as well as each squadron’s captain. There were no issues even without Oscar. That was the sort of system in place.

“Well, nothing we can do about Master. He just gets like that sometimes.”

Their relationship went way back, so Fiona knew this was simply how Oscar reacted after losing or making a huge mistake. Anytime he keenly felt the lack of his own magical power, he tended to shut himself away from everyone else.

I remember Master telling me once how remembering the humiliation of defeat makes him tremble with anger. How he recalls the scene over and over again, sears it into his mind, and imagines the flames consuming him. Because that’s what makes him stronger. And the reality is that he does become stronger after he goes through this process. So strong even I notice... In particular, how abnormally powerful his spells become and the speed at which he can generate them. He told me to try the method too, but I saw no change whatsoever... Honestly, I thought it was completely impossible to understand... Except, is it really something only Master is capable of? I don’t think so... I just can’t help feeling like there’s some inner secret to magic involved, something I’m missing... If he ever surfaces from his self-imposed exile, I’ll have to ask him about it in great detail.

Lately, Oscar hadn’t been troubled by anything magic-related, so even Fiona hadn’t witnessed one of his brooding spells in quite some time. She wasn’t the

only one concerned about him. Not only were the division members, who'd been called up six months ago, confused by his behavior, but so were Marie, who'd been her adjutant for a year and a half now, and Jurgen, who'd been Oscar's adjutant for over two years. For them, it was the first time seeing him like this.

"So this is usual...?" Jurgen murmured quietly, almost to himself. He couldn't do anything about his commanding officer, so he chose not to dwell too deeply on this new information.

"The Hero and his group will arrive early in the afternoon tomorrow. I have no idea if Master will agree to take him on, but it should be fine if we have the division members engage in mock battles with them. I'd like you to handle that and arrange a place for them to stay as well."

"Understood, Commander."

With a bow from Adjutant Marie, the meeting to welcome the Hero ended.



The Hero Roman and his party members, seven of them altogether, sat comfortably inside the coach traveling from the imperial capital to the training area.

"I've never seen a carriage this enormous before."

"You'd need at least ten horses or several thoroughly trained ones to pull it. Otherwise, it must be very difficult."

Each of them complimented the carriage. However, one of them—a man—looked annoyed.

"Roman, are you serious about this? You know how low the level of magic is in the Central Provinces, right? It doesn't hold a candle to me or Alicia. It's a waste of time, if you ask me," Gordon, a fire magician, complained.

Gordon spoke arrogantly at only twenty-three years old, but that confidence was only proof of his exemplary track record as an adventurer in the Western Provinces. For over half a century now, it had been the norm for magicians of the Western as well as Eastern Provinces to hold the magicians of the Central in

low regard.

“I know, but I still wish for him to teach me.”

The memory of how easily the creature named Leonore dealt with him weighed heavily on Roman’s mind.

“What was her name again? Leonore? We don’t even know if she was telling the truth. Someone ten thousand times stronger than you... Like hell that person even exists. We basically know everyone who’s powerful in the Western Provinces. Besides the ones who you’re evenly matched with, there isn’t anyone who can actually overpower you. That’s just a fact. So, while I guess I can understand why you’d want to go to the Central Provinces...I just don’t think this person, if they even exist, is a magician.”

“Be that as it may, Gordon, when it comes to the most famous or powerful adventurers in the Central Provinces today, the first name on everyone’s lips is The Inferno Magician. He might not be who I’m searching for, but, at the very least, I believe I’ll gain some idea about how to become stronger. This is selfish of me. I know this, but please, stay with me just a little while longer.”

Then Roman bowed his head deeply.

No one could resist when confronted head-on. All six of his party members knew this from painful experience.

“Ugggh...” Gordon sighed, a sound seemingly ripped from the depths of his soul.

“Fine, okay? Just...do whatever you want.” He roughly ruffled Roman’s hair and gave into the Hero’s desire.

“I will. Thank you very much.” Roman beamed at him. He had yet to realize that it was this smile holding the party together.



In the morning, the Hero and his party departed from the imperial capital. They stopped for lunch on their trek and then arrived at Magical Training Center Number 4 a little past two in the afternoon. The group of imperial guard knights that had escorted their carriage from the capital wordlessly turned around to

make the journey back as soon as the vehicle entered the training center's grounds. What the Hero and his party didn't know was that only those with special permission could enter the magical training centers. There were even rumors that anyone who tried to enter without permission would be bombarded by magical attacks without question.

Of course, that was just a rumor. However, it just might be entirely possible considering the magical training centers radiated such a threatening aura to outsiders...

When Roman the Hero opened the carriage door and stepped outside, he found three men and women standing there.

"Master Roman, welcome to our magical training center. My name is Fiona Rubine Bornemisza and I'm the commander of the Imperial Magic Division. I humbly extend my welcome to the rest of your group as well."

Fiona placed a hand on her chest and saluted them in the imperial fashion.

"W-We are grateful for your hospitality," Roman managed to say.

Morris, the party's scout, noticed the Hero stared at Fiona in a complete daze. He elbowed Graham, their clergyman and negotiator, in the side.

"Graham, Roman."

Graham understood right away. "My name is Graham," he said, moving to stand next to Roman, "and I'm the designated negotiator for our team. Your Imperial Highness, please accept our deepest gratitude for receiving us personally."

"Oh, my... She's an imperial princess?" said Alicia, the group's air magician, from behind Graham.

Even as Graham sighed mentally, his calm expression never wavered.

"I appreciate your greetings. However, this isn't a palace but a military training center," Fiona said. "Moving forward, there's no need to be formal with your speech or tone. Behind me are adjutants Marie and Jurgen. They'll be looking after you all. Having said that, as this *is* a training ground, I expect you'll

encounter your fair share of inconveniences, for which I apologize in advance.”

“We understand, of course. After all, we’re the ones who requested instruction from the Inferno Magician himself. So, please, don’t worry about inconveniencing us. Since we’re on the topic,” Graham said, “may I ask where Lord Oscar is?”

“Right, about that. Vice Commander Oscar is currently in the process of fine-tuning a different regimen. He’s scheduled to make a report to me tomorrow morning and I’ll inform him about your visit then. Would you be willing to wait to spar against him until he’s ready, Master Hero?”

Roman grew flustered when he realized she was talking to him. “Y-Yes, of course. Please don’t mind me.”

“Then I’ll take you at your word, Master Roman. You have my thanks for your kindness.”

Thus did Fiona succeed in having him accept Oscar’s delay.

Graham, the only one who realized what just transpired, sighed inwardly. *Ah, Roman... You are still so young and naive.*

“You all must be tired from traveling for half a day in the carriage. There are rooms ready for you in the annex, so feel free to rest at your leisure. Marie will guide you.”

“Your Highness,” Roman interjected, “please wait.”

“What is it, Master Roman?”

“If possible, might I be allowed to observe a military exercise?”

Fiona narrowed her eyes slightly. “Hm. I was told His Majesty gave you permission to conduct mock battles with Oscar... Did the emperor also give you permission to watch the Division’s maneuvers?”

“Ah... No...” Roman unconsciously hung his head. She was right, Emperor Rupert VI had only approved his sparring with Oscar.

“With all due respect, Your Highness,” Graham said, taking the conversational reins from Roman, “His Majesty gave us permission to enter the training grounds. In other words, we interpreted that to mean we could observe training

regimens, which is part of the reason for our visit.”

Naturally, the party members hadn’t actually discussed the minutiae of how they’d spend their time, but being barred from observing training drills presented a practical problem. Moreover, they had no idea when Oscar, their primary motivation for being there, would actually appear, and trying to kill time wasn’t going to be easy at the training center.

“Mmm... How about this,” Fiona said. “We’ll stage a magic battle between your representative and ours, and if you win or we judge your efforts good enough, we’ll let you observe our training. What do you say, Master Hero? Will you prove to the members of my division that you and yours have earned the right to watch us?”

Even though Graham had explicitly told her *he* was the negotiator of their group, the unmistakable truth was that this was Roman the Hero’s party. Because he lacked experience, he was currently completely head over heels for Fiona...

This princess knows exactly how to use Roman’s youth against him. What a dangerous young lady.

For the umpteenth time that day, Graham sighed inwardly. But before Roman could answer her or Graham could interject, someone else replied for them.

“Challenge accepted. I nominate myself.”

It was Gordon, the fire magician of the Hero’s party.

Like hell I’ll let the magicians of the inferior Central Provinces make us look like idiots. Once she sees how much more powerful I am, this silly little princess will be speechless.

Gordon brimmed with confidence. When he got like this, no one could stop him.

“So you’ll be the Hero’s representative. Heard.” Fiona smiled cheerfully and gestured at them to follow. “Then let’s head inside to the training center.”

The Hero’s party had no choice but to follow, completely at her mercy.

Graham, somehow, was the only one of their party who realized she had

them dancing in the palm of her hand. Even some of the Imperial Division's members looked amused.

That was when Graham lost his patience.

Not only did she sink her claws into Roman, but she managed to rile Gordon up as well! Why in the realm do we even have to engage in this farce of a battle? Prove our worth to her people? That doesn't even make any sense! Damn it to hell... Whatever I say now, it's too late... I have a terrible feeling our party will end up revealing too many of its secrets.

So Graham steeled himself, accepting the fact that all of this was necessary for Roman to grow stronger.



"As for our fighter... Hm..." Fiona spied a young man, twenty years old, who belonged to the 2nd Company. "Klimt, you'll be representing us. A mock magic battle."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"Master Gordon, you're a fire magician, and so is our Klimt. I believe you can both learn from each other. Oh, one more thing. Master Graham, you are your group's healer, yes? We too have an outstanding healer, so...short of an instant kill, both of you should survive well enough."

Everyone except Gordon, Klimt, and the judge watched from the spectator stands.

The two combatants put twenty meters between them, then faced each other.

"I, Jurgen Barthel, will be the judge of this encounter. Lethal attacks aren't permitted. If a fighter surrenders, loses consciousness, or is deemed incapable of continuing the fight, the match will end. Master Gordon, are you ready?"

"Yeah," Gordon answered.

"Klimt, are you ready?"

"Yes, Sir, I am," Klimt answered with a nod.

“Then let the match begin!”

Gordon made the first move.

“Fire Ball.”

He didn’t take the match seriously because he didn’t take magicians from the Central Provinces seriously, so he wanted to end it quickly and decisively with the first strike.

Except...

“Fire Ball.”

Klimt negated Gordon’s Fire Ball with one of his own.

“Huh. You can do it without chanting the incantation. Then how about this?
Fire Ball. Fire Ball. Fire Ball.”

Gordon unleashed three Fire Balls back-to-back-to-back.

Unfortunately for him...

“Fire Ball. Fire Ball. Fire Ball.”

Klimt intercepted the trio with his own set of three.

“Dam you...! *Fire Javelin. Fire Javelin.*”

Gordon launched two strikes of Fire Javelin with its high piercing power.

In response...

“Fire Javelin. Fire Javelin.”

Klimt did the same.

Finally, Gordon snapped.

“To hell with this! I don’t care what happens anymore! *Blade Lange—*”

“Fire Ball.”

Klimt aimed a Fire Ball at Gordon before he could say the final trigger word of his spell.

“Magical Barrier,” Gordon said, countering his opponent’s Fire Ball with

defensive magic now that his powerful technique had been interrupted.

Although spells could be activated without their corresponding incantations as long as the trigger words were spoken, trigger words for explosive moves required a fair amount of time to activate. Something like Fire Ball could be generated and launched within a second, but you needed at least three seconds to execute more powerful techniques.

Still, compared to spells with super long incantations, three seconds was nothing in the span of time. Yet, it had been more than enough of a delay for Klimt to shoot his Fire Ball and stop Gordon's special move.

Gordon found himself in a situation he hadn't anticipated: his finishing blow had been interrupted and each of his rapidly generated minor spells countered by Klimt's.

How the hell is he able to match my magic? He should barely be able to keep up since I started... Don't tell me he's faster than me at generating magic...? Piss right off with that! Everyone knows that magicians of the Central Provinces use ridiculously long incantations for magic that's ultimately weak as hell! So I'm supposed to just believe he can activate his magic without incantations and he's faster than me at generating it? Not a chance!

Sadly for Gordon, the reality was that all his spells were either countered or outright blocked.

At the same time Gordon was internally panicking, so was Klimt. Actually, Klimt's mental state went beyond mere panic. Why? Because of his inexperience.

He had entered the Division half a year ago, and only after becoming part of it did he learn how to use his magic properly. His magical control had become second nature to him, like breathing, thanks to the Division's training, which was so intense it almost made people vomit blood. However, he most certainly didn't have a lot of experience in combat against others. Of course, one-versus-one bouts were the primary method the Division used in its training exercises, but ultimately, they were just that—practice drills.

Gordon attacked with such force Klimt feared he had no choice but to kill him.

There was no one in the Division who fought like him...except for the vice commander. Although the Division had only been in existence for six months, it had actual battlefield experience and countless successful monster hunts under its belt. Klimt too had taken part in a few of the latter.

As for battles... He'd injured himself seriously in a training exercise before the campaign and lost a lot of blood in the process. Though the wound itself had been mended quickly with an Extra Heal, it took much longer to recover the blood he lost, making him unable to join the expedition.

In short, compared to the other Division members, he didn't have much experience with actual, real life danger. Klimt had been well aware of this fact and wanted to do something to make up for it, but the Division unfortunately didn't get many opportunities to head into a real battlefield. In fact, ever since the campaign he'd missed out on, the unit he belonged to, the 2nd Company, hadn't been dispatched to a major battle once.

His lack of experience basically meant Klimt didn't know how to break through the deadlock between him and Gordon. He couldn't increase the number of his moves any further and they were evenly matched in terms of magic generation speed.

If he let Gordon succeed in using his special move, he'd probably lose. Maybe even die... In that case, Klimt had to make sure Gordon never had the chance to execute it.

He made up his mind and took a step forward. While firing his magic, he took one step, then another, toward his opponent.

Wh-What the hell is this guy thinking? Why is he coming closer? Does he think he can win because he's faster than me at producing magic? Don't screw with me, you bastard!

That was Gordon's inner voice speaking. Unfortunately, he completely misunderstood the reason behind Klimt's approach. The young man was only moving closer to avoid giving him the chance to activate his most powerful technique...

"Fire Ball. Fire Ball. Fire Ball. Fire Ball. Fire Ball..."

Klimt focused entirely on using the Fire Ball spell. Every time he launched one at Gordon, he closed the distance between them with another step. Fewer than ten meters separated them now.

Then suddenly, at that moment, the ground between them exploded and a cloud of dust rose.

“Huh?” Klimt gasped. Even as the sound escaped him, he was already dropping facedown onto the ground.

A split second later, a flame spear flew through the spot he’d been standing. He rushed to stand, but he was too late. A demonic-looking Gordon stood in front of him holding a flame spear, about to swing it down on Klimt.

“Stop right there!” Jurgen called out sharply.

“Victory to Master Gordon.”

He had saved Klimt’s life.

Even as he rasped heavily in exertion, Gordon managed to make his way to the Hero’s party sitting in the spectator stands.

In contrast, Commander Fiona stepped down from her seat and into the arena.

“Well done, Klimt,” she said softly as he lay there unmoving after his defeat.

He rushed to stand up and apologize for losing. “Your Highness, forgive me for failing to meet your expectations.”

Even though Fiona had done him the honor of choosing him as the Division representative, his sad defeat frustrated him to no end.

“There’s nothing to forgive. Look at Master Gordon.”

“Beg your pardon?”

Doing as she bid, Klimt looked to Gordon, who had returned to the spectator stands. Nothing in particular stood out to him, so he didn’t understand Fiona’s intent.

“Master Gordon is exhausted. But, Klimt, you can still keep fighting, can’t

you?”

“Yes. I can go for another round!”

“Survival is the most important thing on the battlefield. And in order to survive, you need to have the power to fight until your very last breath. For magicians out in the field, that power is the most vital tool in their arsenal. That is a magician’s ability to keep fighting. Today, you proved you can last much longer than the Hero’s magician. Excellent work,” Fiona said.

“Th-Thank you very much!”

“Now all you need is experience, which I expect you to accumulate deliberately moving forward.”

With that, Fiona returned to her seat in the stands. Following her lead, he too headed to his unit in the spectator seating.

Praise and encouragement. That was how she led. As for the reason she’d chosen Klimt... Fiona didn’t actually care whether they won or lost. Neither result would ultimately change what they had to do moving forward. In this case, she felt it was best to give her subordinates in the Division as much combat experience as possible. Klimt didn’t have enough experience in real battles, so it had been a good opportunity for him to gain some.

That was why she’d chosen him. And Klimt now had real combat experience. She smiled in satisfaction.

After the mock battle between Gordon and Klimt, the other members of the Hero’s party engaged in their own one-versus-one training sessions. The air magician, Alicia. The earth magician, Berlocke. And finally, the Hero himself, Roman.

Roman’s opponent was Emil Fischer, captain of the First Company. The man came from a family of knights and had loved swords since childhood... But, as expected, he was no match for Roman...



The next morning, the Hero’s party ate breakfast in the annex.

Meanwhile, Fiona and the two adjutants ate in the canteen inside the training center then held a debriefing session in her office. Yes, only the three of them. Normally, Vice Commander Oscar, who sequestered himself in Magical Training Center Number 4, would have also attended breakfast and the session right alongside them. However, he was absent this morning.

“Your Highness, what should we do about the vice commander?” Adjutant Jurgen said, concerned.

“Hm. Nothing,” Fiona replied. “Leave him alone.”

“A-Are you certain?”

“I have a premonition he’ll probably show himself at some point today,” Fiona answered with a smile, knowing that Oscar finally had a handle on his emotions. “If Master is finally going to present himself, we should consider setting up a team bout tomorrow morning. We can delay it if it seems like he won’t be arriving until later in the week, but best do it early.”

“Because once the vice commander appears, Master Roman will only have eyes for him?”

“Exactly,” Fiona confirmed with a grin. “Then we won’t be able to have him face off against us and that would be a waste for our Division, don’t you think?”

With the vice commander’s return imminent, Her Highness is smiling again.

Marie was secretly delighted.



“We are to have a group bout today, yes?” Graham, the clergyman-cum-negotiator of the Hero’s party, asked on the day’s schedule with Fiona.

To avoid being lured into making promises he shouldn’t, Roman stood a few paces back with the rest of the party.

Master Graham has his own mountain of trials and tribulations to tend to, eh? Fiona thought, chuckling.

“Indeed. How does seven against seven sound to you?” she asked, intentionally adding to Graham’s distress. “I realize we may not have the necessary strength to muster against you and yours, but we’ll never again have

the chance to engage the Hero's party in combat. I very much hope you'll agree."

"I sincerely doubt you will have any trouble considering yesterday's mock battles. We now understand keenly the caliber of your division's talent."

The day before, Gordon, Alicia, and Berlocke had emerged triumphant from their magical bouts, though the division's respective fire, air, and earth magicians had put up a good fight. Gordon, the fire magician in the Hero's party, underwent a complete change in his mindset when he witnessed how equally matched they had been with their respective opponents.

Except, of course, for the Hero's match.

"We accept the challenge," Graham replied. "Seven versus seven."

Graham bowed to Fiona and summoned the rest of his party members forward.

"Excellent. Now, the problem is how to proceed with *our* lineup. I think I'll have Jurgen participate today, considering his dissatisfaction with only observing yesterday. This means someone else will judge today, but I hope this poses no problem to you, Master Graham?"

So she makes her move!

The thought flashed through his mind upon hearing Fiona's suggestion. She was obviously serious about winning.

Adjutants are either those lacking combat prowess who excel in management or those who overwhelmingly overpower their subordinates in a division. If he's the latter...that makes him a serious threat to us... But we have Roman on our side, so we could still be victorious...

"Of course, no problem at all," Graham agreed.

"Jurgen. Marie. Nin, captain of the 2nd Company. Shtock, captain of the 3rd Company. Elsa, captain of 4th Company. And the assistant healer, Marma. Emil, captain of the 1st Company and Roman's opponent from yesterday, will be today's referee. Yes, this will do just fine."

“Your Highness,” Marie interjected nervously, “I apologize for questioning you, but that only makes six representatives for the Division side...”

“Why, I’m the seventh, of course.”

“Oh, dear.” Marie’s head drooped. “I feared as much...” As Fiona’s adjutant, she sorely wished for the princess to remain safely on the sidelines. Clearly, it wasn’t meant to be...

“In exchange for having Marma fight, the principal healer Finn and the rest of the aid platoon will be on standby. We have all our bases covered, Marie, so don’t fret.” Fiona smiled cheerfully at the other woman.

“The rules are essentially the same as yesterday’s,” Emil said. “No fatal attacks. If all seven members of one team surrender, faint, or are deemed unable to continue to fight, the match ends.”

The Hero’s party and Fiona’s team faced each other across a distance of forty meters.

“Bombard them with everything you have the minute the match starts,” Fiona whispered to her party. “Make them take us seriously.”

Then Emil’s voice rang out across the arena: “Let the bout commence!”

“Light Javelin.”

“Fire Javelin.”

“Sonic Blade.”

“Fire Ray.”

“Static Wind.”

“Stone Spear Killer.”

“The Fall of Heaven and Earth.”

These seven—the cream of the crop even among the elite Imperial Magic Division—suddenly unleashed hell upon their opponents. Their combined power blew a hole through the full-strength Magical Barrier deployed around

the training center. A tremendous boom tore through the vicinity, followed by a flash of light and a cloud of dust...

“Um...” Emil warned, acting as the referee. “I’d like to remind you that fatal attacks are prohibited...”

The rest of the Division’s members murmured among each other in shock.

“The commander just fired off The Fall of Heaven and Earth spell...”

“Captains Marie and Jurgen aren’t holding back either...”

“The others *have* to be dead. There’s no way they survived all that.”

The state of the arena made it impossible to determine what had happened to the Hero’s party. After some time, the cloud of dust finally settled and the spectators could see that—

“They’re not hurt?” uttered someone from the stands.

All the Division’s members sitting in the audience shared one overwhelming sentiment: shock.

Marie’s Static Wind, Jurgen’s Stone Spear Killer, and Fiona’s The Fall of Heaven and Earth were among the Empire’s most potent spells when used against a group of people. To see their opponents completely unscathed was unbelievable, to say the least.

This reaction applied only to the Division members watching from the stands. In the arena, Fiona and her teammates looked unfazed, as if they’d expected as much.

“Though we ripped through the Barrier, it seems we couldn’t penetrate the Hero’s holy sword, eh?” Jurgen muttered.

Holy sword gripped in his hands, Roman stood at the head of his Hero’s party.

“Hm... The Magical Barrier was unable to withstand their assault,” Graham, the clergyman, said.

“My earth barrier didn’t work either,” Berlocke, the earth magician, added.

“And a simple brush from their air magician’s attack was enough to make my

wind wall vanish,” Alicia, the air magician, grumbled.

“That means if it weren’t for Roman swinging his holy sword, we’d have all been wiped out?!” Gordon exclaimed.

“Well, it would have been awfully helpful if you had put up a Magical Barrier too, Gordon,” Morris, the scout, retorted.

“Everyone, please!” Roman the Hero called out. “We won’t hold back. Face them with everything you have.”

All the members of his party nodded in agreement.

“Here I go! *Party Haste. Enchanted Wind.*”

When Ashkhan, who hadn’t said a single word up until this moment, chanted the trigger words to activate the spells, wind enveloped everyone in their party and Roman’s holy sword and Morris’s dagger glowed green.

“Haste” increased the body’s movement speed. Swinging a weapon, dodging attacks, defending yourself, or even shuffling your feet—regardless of how you moved, air magic made it quicker. This type of magic didn’t exist in the Central Provinces.

“Your Highness, she’s an enchanter. She raised their movement speed,” Elsa, the captain of the 4th Company, said.

Everyone flinched, including Fiona, who always remained calm and collected in battle. Though she believed Elsa, she was careful to hide her surprise.

“A magical role that doesn’t exist in the Central Provinces, hm? On your guard! They’re making their move!”

At the same time Fiona’s warning rang out, the Hero’s party unleashed their own magical assault on her and her subordinates, returning the favor for their barrage moments earlier. Simultaneously, Roman the Hero, Morris the scout, and Ashkhan, the air magician who’d cast the enchantment, rushed forward to engage them in close quarters. Marie intercepted Morris while Jurgen faced off against Ashkhan, leaving Fiona to deal with Roman.

“So the imperial princess is Roman’s opponent, huh?” Gordon murmured without thinking. Just as he was about to voice his doubt about Fiona’s ability to win, he found himself unable to continue as Roman and Fiona fiercely clashed swords in the center of the arena.

Roman was a swordsman and *the* Hero. On top of that, Ashkhan’s haste spell enhanced his speed tremendously. Nevertheless, Fiona matched each of his swings without retreating a single step.

Anyone who could cross swords with the Hero was an incredibly rare phenomenon. Astarte, Roman’s holy sword, would shatter any normal weapon in a single blow.

But Fiona’s sword was no ordinary blade. Raven, one of two treasured magic blades in the imperial family’s possession, was a legendary weapon said to hold the power to manipulate both air and fire elements. It was a jet-black sword said to have been made by the gods. Raven had been wielded by emperors for generations. However, Rupert VI, the current emperor, passed it down to Fiona.

In terms of appearance, it resembled a smallsword, something more suited for women instead of men. Based on what Rupert had told those around him some time ago, the treasured sword Raven had taken a liking to Fiona. Being the emperor, there was no need for him to provide further explanation. Since there was nobody able to argue otherwise, Raven had been entrusted to Fiona ever since.

Raven. The treasured sword Fiona’s father gifted her when she was ten. It had lived by her side these last eight years, making it her partner in a way. Now, facing an opponent of a level she’d rarely encountered in her life, Fiona unleashed all of Raven’s potential.

The weapon used its affinity with the element of air to boost its own speed as well as Fiona’s, creating a pseudo-Haste effect. Furthermore, it enhanced Fiona’s own affinity for fire magic through its connection to the same element, enabling Fiona to cast attack magic in between slashes of her sword. This feat was easy to imagine but impossible to execute in the middle of battle.

And she did it all as easily as breathing... No, it felt even easier than that as

Fiona effortlessly fired spells like Fire Javelin and Piercing Fire at Roman.

From Roman's perspective, the fight was becoming overwhelming. Simply put, the number of Fiona's moves were increasing. More specifically, the number of attacks he had to dodge without getting hit was increasing.

Normally, activating a spell during a sword fight inevitably created a small opening. Therefore, if his opponent was a swordsman of similar skill, he could not risk casting a spell. If his opponent was a much weaker swordsman than him, he would not even bother spellcasting... Essentially, spellcasting during a sword fight wasn't common for him.

And yet...Her Highness is doing precisely that.

Even as he fought her off strenuously, Roman stared in wide-eyed astonishment. She shot off her magic smoothly while wielding her sword. Each clash of their blades forced him to acknowledge a truth: her fighting style wasn't the result of a flash of inspiration or spur-of-the-moment ideas, but honed through long years of training. She had clearly been trained to attack with both sword and magic at once.

Fiona started learning swordsmanship at the age of four. None of her ten older sisters had done so, but she'd begged her father, Emperor Rupert VI, and he'd agreed to her training. Why exactly had she been so insistent? Well, her fascination with swordplay started when she laid eyes upon the sword hanging at her father's waist.

"Taken a fancy to Raven, have you, Fiona?" Rupert had said. "Become a master with the sword and I'll lend it to you."

Rupert had been half joking when he said the words back then, but he knew meeting a lifelong partner can sometimes be a matter of fate. Perhaps a part of him had felt his daughter had encountered hers that day. Six years later, on Fiona's tenth birthday, the treasured sword Raven became her companion. That day, incidentally, also happened to be a week before she met the person who would become the most important to her.

So Fiona started learning the way of the sword at four years old and

continued training diligently with Raven at ten. The only one who knew about her strength in the Division was her master, Oscar. Today, however, she demonstrated that power in front of all of her subordinates.

“Amazing...”

Shocked whispers and exclamations dominated the spectator stands. It went without saying that everyone in the Imperial Magic Division was a magician. However, just because they were skilled in magic didn't mean they were incapable of fighting in melee combat.

For normal magicians, exhausting their reserves of magical energy meant the end of the line. The same fate awaited them if their enemy got too close. This weakness was inexcusable for the Division's members. As a matter of course, they were to be expected to be strong in both magical warfare and melee combat. It was the bare minimum for those who stood on the battlefield.

Though her subordinates had known of their commander's skill with the sword, they had never imagined Fiona would be *this* talented with it.



While Roman and Fiona conducted their sword fight in the middle of the arena, Marie and Morris engaged in close-quarter combat, albeit in a peculiar fashion.

Morris was the scout in the Hero's party. A dagger in each hand, she carried herself nimbly in battle, which explained why her strategy involved circling her opponents and attacking from the sides or rear instead of from the front. However...she couldn't employ this tactic against Marie, Fiona's adjutant.

To put it more accurately, Morris *tried* to use this technique, but Marie countered it easily. While Marie was faster than the average swordsman, she was slow compared to Morris, the scout of the Hero's party.

So, why couldn't Morris maneuver around Marie? Well, a constant, powerful downdraft whirled around Marie. As an air magician, her one-on-one fighting style was unusual. She created continuous downbursts around her, almost unconsciously, that hindered her opponent's movements while allowing her to fight.

In typhoon winds blowing at fifty meters per second, anyone would find it difficult to walk normally. Well, such powerful winds swirled constantly around Marie, blowing from above to the ground. It didn't matter how light-footed someone was—the force of the winds made moving difficult, period. In other words, Marie represented the worst possible opponent for someone like Morris, a scout who relied on her agility.

This is definitely not good, huh? I have the best luck to get tangled up with an opponent like her, sheesh. No. Don't tell me the princess told her to target me specifically because she knew how I fight...? What a nasty personality lurking beneath such a pretty face.

Morris remained mobile, never stopping in one spot to make sure Marie didn't have an easy target to focus on. As she moved, she thought of a counterstrategy.

Fwoosh. Klang. She fired a throwing knife at Marie, but just as he expected, the infuriating wind flung it astray.

How...in the world...am I supposed to defeat her... I can't get close to her and my throwing knives won't reach her either... I suppose I'll have to hang on for now and wait for reinforcements?

Morris was a scout, so no one in their party expected much of her in the combat department. Her and Graham's main responsibility in such a fight was to simply stay alive. Naturally, as part of the Hero's party, she possessed combat skills far superior to the average scout, but she knew she wasn't as strong as her peers.

I'm quite literally in a bind...

Morris sighed quietly.

Melee combat was taking place in three locations: in the center of the arena between Roman and Fiona, to the left of the Hero's party between Morris and Marie, and to the right where Ashkhan the enchanter and Jurgen faced off.

The occupation of enchanter didn't exist in the Central Provinces, so you might be wondering what exactly an enchanter is or does. Well, enchanters

used magic to temporarily grant their comrades and weapons elemental attributes or special powers. In short, an enchanter was a magician who specialized in this process.

Why weren't there any in the Central Provinces? The answer is simple: there were no incantations for enchantments.

While Ryo, Sera, and the members of the Imperial Magic Division casted magic without incantations, they were the exception and not the norm for the Central Provinces. In fact, outside of the Division, those magicians belonging to all eight of the imperial magical army's regiments utilized incantations to activate their spells. Fiona and Oscar were solely responsible for the Division's lack of reliance on incantations.

Incantations made it easy for even beginners to use magic. A spell's power remained almost consistent regardless of who chanted its incantation. However, it took time to activate the magic because incantations required time to change—time that could be fatal in battle.

In the end, the crux of magical combat was overcoming your opponent with power or speed, which was exactly why the two of them trained their subordinates to unleash magic powerfully and quickly without the use of incantations.

So, because incantations for enchantments did not exist, the profession itself did not exist in the Central Provinces.

This was also Jurgen's first encounter with the magic.

Her Highness and Elsa said there was a possibility of Master Graham participating in combat since he's proficient with his staff as a weapon, but I didn't anticipate the air magician Ashkhan taking the field instead. Moreover, she's an enchanter... At the very least, this will prove to be an unusual but educational experience for me.

Ashkhan's hand-to-hand fighting style involved increasing her speed through Haste even as she maximized the potential of the gauntlets and leg guards she wore. It was certainly an unusual fighting style for a magician, but Jurgen knew if he said that out loud, she might say, "Well, that's the pot calling the kettle black, isn't it?" After all, Jurgen was countering her using his own orthodox style

of swordsmanship.

Jurgen Barthel was the second son of Count Barthel. Although his brother, eight years his senior, was the heir, the Barthel family had been producing military men for generations, so he'd been trained in all the military arts since childhood. This might have been why, as a child, he'd had a vague intention of becoming a knight for the Empire when he turned eighteen.

In reality, he'd shown a talent for the sword in particular from a young age. At fifteen, he'd defeated his sword instructor who'd been in his father's employ, and by the time he was sixteen, the count himself could no longer best Jurgen. By the time he turned eighteen and officially became an adult, the only one who surpassed him in swordsmanship was his older brother. At the time, the Barthel heir was one of the Twelve Knights of the Emperor, an order consisting of only the Empire's finest knights. And Jurgen had been a good match for him, despite having only recently reached the age of majority.

So of course Emperor Rupert VI took note of such an outstanding individual. After a detailed investigation into Jurgen's background and an interview, Rupert decided Jurgen would be of great help to both Fiona, with whom he was close in age, and Oscar. He trained under Oscar for six months before being appointed as the man's adjutant as well as a member of Fiona's protection detail. All this happened over two years before she was made commander of the Imperial Magic Division...

The sword Jurgen used was an ordinary iron one with a dulled blade provided by the training center. There were no rules against combatants using their normal equipment during this mock battle, which was why Fiona brandished Raven, her treasured sword, and Roman the Hero swung his holy sword, Astarte. However, Jurgen knew he wasn't good at holding back, so he'd decided to use this dull blade instead. Even if he hit his opponent, he wouldn't kill them.

If his superior, Oscar, heard him say this, he knew the man would sarcastically quip something like, "Well, someone's confident, eh?" However, Jurgen knew his own weaknesses and the best he could do was account for them. Otherwise, how awkward would it be if he accidentally killed someone. Jurgen had no

other choice.

The battle between him and Ashkhan proceeded with her on the offensive and him on the defensive. Despite her clear skill in the martial arts, from his perspective, he saw openings to exploit. All he needed to do now was find the right timing. If he acted at the wrong moment, he was done for. This nugget of wisdom applied to anything and everything.

So Jurgen waited patiently for the perfect moment as he dealt with Ashkhan's attacks.

Graham, the clergyman, felt like he'd swallowed the bitterest of pills.

I can't believe this. I can't believe how strong a magic corps is at hand-to-hand combat. There weren't any...well, hardly any of the sort in the Western Provinces. I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised about Morris being unable to land a decisive strike, but the fact that even Ashkhan can't break through her opponent's defenses boggles my mind. No, what's even more baffling is the princess holding her own against Roman... What in the world is she? Could she actually be a swordsman and not a magician...? I can't rule out this possibility entirely considering she's the Division commander. But wait, she was using magic during her duel with Roman, so she's most certainly a magician... While it's hard to imagine Roman losing, I can't deny the stalemates happening all around me...

He too had never experienced a situation like this until now.

Perhaps I should have joined them in combat... But think of the myriad problems that could occur if a healer suddenly jumps into the fray and finds himself defeated... I can't use such an excuse anymore though, not with the circumstances being what they are. I should assist them. But where? How? I'm liable to lose my own head before I even lift a finger if I insert myself into Roman and the princess's clash since they're using real weapons. However, I hesitate to provide support to Morris. With that powerful wind, it's difficult to tell if a battle is taking place at all... Not to mention, I can't think of how to slip past that wind either. Then through the process of elimination, that leaves Ashkhan and Master Jurgen...

Things moved along while Graham remained deeply indecisive.

Ashkhan realized the Party Haste enchantment she'd cast right after the bout commenced was wearing off. The more time passed, the less effective it became. The magic granted the effect of Haste to any allies within a five-meter radius of her. Once applied, it lasted for a certain period of time, even if they went outside the five-meter radius.

There were currently no allies within range of her by this point. It likely wasn't even necessary anymore on their party members who specialized in attack magic. Though she wanted to cast it on Roman, who fought the imperial princess, approaching him now would be too reckless. As for Morris, who struggled against the gale produced by her opponent, Haste likely wouldn't be of much use.

In which case, the only one who needed it was herself. However, the swordsman in front of her... Well, he *was* a swordsman so good with his weapon he didn't even seem like a magician. As adjutant to the renowned Inferno Magician, her opponent wasn't one to let his guard down or leave any openings she could exploit.

Moreover, the swordsman had some kind of goal. She didn't know what he was aiming for, but the way his eyes flickered told her he was up to something.

I need a chance to reapply Haste to myself, but...he might take it as an opportunity to attack me with magic... Or he might use some type of projectile... I don't know what his plan is, but I'm ready for anything.

A few moments later, the stars aligned. The moment Jurgen took a step back, his foot slipped just the tiniest bit.

Now!

Ashkhan took a huge leap backward to put distance between them and cast Haste on herself before she landed on the ground.

"Haste."

"Mire."

At the same time, Jurgen fired off his own magic.

Ashkhan had anticipated this, which is why she had leaped and applied Haste to herself midair. The moment she landed, she could handle him... Or so she'd thought. Unfortunately for her, Jurgen hadn't used attack magic...

Squelch.

The ground turned to mud the instant she landed, swallowing her legs up to the knees.

"Wha...?!"

She couldn't escape easily like this. Naturally, Jurgen, who'd created this situation, rushed forward and rested his blade against her neck.

"...I lose," Ashkhan muttered, yielding.

The moment Graham finally opted to help was the same moment in which Ashkhan found herself trapped in mud, securing her loss.

"Preposterous..." he murmured.

He had watched it all happen. She had leaped backward a good distance. Before she landed on the ground, a line raced toward her location at high speed, then made a small explosion when it reached her, creating a tiny bog.

Jurgen, adjutant to the Fire Magician...and an outstanding magician in his own right... He's tipped the scales. Then...I have no choice but to take the risk.

"Everyone, focus on taking down Marie, Morris's opponent. We'll start with her," Graham said.

"No objections here," Gordon replied, "but how? And what about the long-range attacks we're being bombarded with?"

"I'll deal with that. As for Marie, aim at her from above. Though she's obstructing Morris's movements with the powerful downward draft, the gale's effects should be much less pronounced from above. Ready? Three, two, one, now!"

"Fire Javelin."

“Air Buster.”

“Slingshot.”

Gordon the fire magician, Alicia the air magician, and Berlocke the earth magician unleashed a simultaneous hail of attacks on Marie from above. In response, the long-range bombardment from Fiona’s back line intensified, focusing on Graham this time.

“Absolute Sanctuary.”

Graham cast an Absolute Defense Magic spell only high-ranking members of the clergy could utilize. You could call it the Western Province’s equivalent of Sanctuary Square, which powerful clerics in the Central Provinces used. Just like Sanctuary Square, Absolute Sanctuary blocked all magical attacks, both those coming from within and from without, which is why he had waited until after his comrades had fired their own spells.

Marie soon collapsed under their onslaught of magic. The referee deemed her unable to continue fighting.

Jurgen had taken a second too long to react and found himself regretting it. Defeating the enchanter meant one less opponent on the field for them to battle. Once he succeeded, he decided to go fully on the offensive, but the moment he did, Marie had lost her own bout...which unfortunately evened the playing field again.

When the referee decided Marie was unfit to continue combat, members of the aid platoon carried her out of the arena. Based on what he could see of Finn, the principal healer, she wasn’t in danger of losing her life.

You lowered your guard far too much, Marie... This situation certainly poses trouble for us, hm? Her air magic is convenient even in mock battles, but as for my earth magic...if I’m not careful with it, I risk stabbing my opponent... As difficult as it is to control, I don’t have any other options.

It seemed the Hero’s party still hadn’t determined their course of action. If he was going to go on the offensive, the sooner the better. Resolved, Jurgen fired three blue sand flares. Unlike Fiona and Oscar, who were fire magicians capable

of sending off flares of light whenever they wanted to communicate their orders, he was an earth magician. As a result, he shot explosive sand that reflected light on the blue spectrum. Three signals denoted an order to advance at maximum speed while attacking.

At Jurgen's signal, Fiona's rear line sprung into action. As they ran toward the Hero's back line, they fired magical attacks at them. It was clear that Fiona's party, led by Jurgen, intended to settle the fight at close quarters.

In response, the rear guard of the Hero's party adopted a delaying tactic by using earth magic to create mud. In short, they stalled for time, attempting to slow down the advance by Fiona's party.

Why are they trying to buy themselves time?

Jurgen couldn't figure it out. Fiona's back line bypassed Roman and Fiona, still dueling in the center, and approached the opposing back line from the right—moving clockwise, if viewed from above. He planned on joining them along the way. So with the situation being what it was, why were they stalling for time?

Don't tell me they're waiting for the fight between Her Highness and the Hero to end...? They're both evenly matched though, with neither of them having the upper hand. Then why...

Watching the two of them battle, he was fairly confident their fight would continue for some time yet. Then his gaze suddenly strayed beyond them to where Marie and the scout had been engaged in combat... The area was empty.

"No one's there?!"

Marie had been carted out of the arena for healing, but where had the scout gone?

"Hell and damn!"

He spat those words out at the same time chaos erupted behind Fiona's back line. Morris, the Hero's scout, had circled around them and attacked from the rear.



Fiona's rearguard was in a state of extreme confusion. Nin, captain of the 2nd

Company at the rearmost position, was rendered unconscious by a knifehand strike to the neck and declared unfit for combat. Before the rest of her party could understand what was happening, Marma, the second-in-command of the Division's healers, was defeated next.

You could say that Morris the scout was living up to her name through all this. Despite being the least suited for head-to-head combat, she excelled in situations calling for subterfuge, whether creating disorder like this, assassinating targets, or immobilizing the enemy from a blind spot. Moreover, while all this was happening, Berlocke, the earth magician in Roman's party, continued delaying the enemy by generating bogs. As a scout, Morris had no issues fighting even on the most unstable ground. However, the same couldn't be said of Fiona's teammates, who saw their combat advantage whittled away at an alarming rate.

Jurgen, having joined up with the rest of their group, managed to defend against Berlocke's other magical attacks with his earth barrier, but the tide continued turning against Fiona's side. Below their feet, mud was everywhere. To drive them further into a corner, Morris threw up a smoke screen. Now, they were forced to fight a scout and contend with the hazardous terrain amid a cloud of smoke... Truly a nightmare of epic proportions.

"How are we supposed to get through this..." Jurgen muttered.

"I'm calling it!" called Emil, the captain of the 1st Company and the acting referee of this mock battle. "The bout is over. The Hero's party are the winners."

When he looked in the direction his comrade's voice came from, Jurgen saw Fiona, who had been fighting in the middle of the arena, notifying Emil of their surrender.

"Your Highness, forgive me. If only I had realized our opponents' intentions sooner..."

"No, I lost sight of our surroundings during my battle with Master Roman. This is my failure as the Division's commanding officer." Fiona chuckled. "I put you all through the ringer, hm? Speaking of, I vaguely remember Marie being carted

out of the arena...?”

“Based on Finn’s expression, I think she’ll be fine. Uh, Your Highness, is something the...” Jurgen trailed off as he followed Fiona’s gaze, her eyes fixed on the highest section of the spectator stands.

“Master...”

And there, he saw Oscar Luska, vice commander of the Imperial Magic Division.

The Division members stood and saluted as Oscar made his way down from the top row of the auditorium. Despite not knowing the circumstances at all, Roman the Hero and his party members surmised from the sight that the man descending through the stands was no ordinary one. He moved deliberately, neither too slow nor too fast. After being saluted by the almost two hundred members of the Division, Oscar finally arrived in front of Fiona, where he bent his knee in deference and greeted her, all without the least bit of haste.

“Your Highness. I, Oscar Luska, do humbly present myself to you.”

“Welcome back.”

Although the conversation was brief, the two of them exchanged deep, unsaid feelings unfathomable by others. However, they were in public right now, so any personal discussions would have to wait until later.

“Vice Commander, let me be the first to inform you that this is Master Roman the Hero and his party. They have been lodging here since yesterday because His Imperial Majesty gave him permission to spar with you.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Roman said. “I am Roman.”

“I’m Oscar Luska, vice commander of the Imperial Magic Division of the Debuhi Empire. But... I heard the current Hero is from the Western Provinces, so why have you come here to the Central Provinces?”

Determined, Roman stared unflinchingly at Oscar. “To learn under your tutelage, Lord Oscar.”

“Hm... Yet I have no reason to fight you, Hero. Additionally, I have left my

duties unattended for far too long, so I have a mountain of things to do. Thus, I suggest we spar at a future juncture,” Oscar replied, staring right back.

His words stunned Roman speechless.

“Please, wait,” Graham—the clergyman—interjected on behalf of the dumbstruck Hero. “Lord Oscar, my name is Graham and I’m the party’s spokesman. Begging your pardon, but Emperor Rupert VI himself granted his approval for a mock battle between you and Roman. Therefore, I think it is unheard of for you to refuse at this juncture.”

“His Majesty merely gave his approval. He did *not* order me to fight. Having said that, if there’s a clear reason your opponent has to be *me* specifically, I’m not opposed to the idea. Well, Master Roman?”

Damn it! He’s trying to wrangle a pledge from Roman too!

On the heels of Fiona’s manipulation of the boy yesterday, her vice commander now intended to do the same today and the realization left yet another bitter taste in Graham’s mouth. But the clergyman would later learn that such acts weren’t all bad.

“Though it humiliates me to admit this,” Roman the Hero began falteringly. “I suffered a complete defeat not too long ago. And...it wasn’t a surprise attack or a defeat against another’s strength of numbers either... A lone opponent did me in, even after—even after my comrades strengthened me with various magics. My opponent was a magician, but...I’m a swordsman and...I failed to land a single scratch. That loss made me want to train myself further and so I decided to journey to the Central Provinces to meet its most powerful warrior, the renowned Inferno Magician.”

At the Hero’s mention of his opponent being a magician, Oscar twitched slightly in reaction as the image of a certain water magician surfaced in the back of his mind.

“I’m curious about this magician you faced. Won’t you tell me more?”

“Of course. I’ll tell you everything you wish to know after you teach me,” Roman the Hero answered with a smile.

His reply startled Graham, the clergyman.

I didn't think the boy had it in him to turn the tables like this...

A corner of Oscar's mouth curled up slightly in amusement at Roman's conditions. "Very well," he replied. "However, since you just engaged in battle, we'll reconvene after lunch. One o'clock."

"Thank you very much!"



One o'clock rolled back around at the training center right after lunch and a break. The seven members of the Hero's party stood in the arena alongside Fiona, Oscar, and his adjutant, Jurgen. Aside from the aid platoon on standby off to the side of the arena, everyone else observed from the stands.

"I, Jurgen Barthel, will act as arbiter. Lethal attacks aren't permitted. If a fighter surrenders, loses consciousness, or is deemed incapable of continuing the fight, the match will end."

"I'll head up into the auditorium and watch from there then," Fiona said before heading toward the stadium.

"I suppose we should do the same..." Graham said.

With the exception of Roman, Graham and the rest of the Hero's party started following Fiona up to the stands...

"I don't think so," Oscar announced. "All of you must fight."

"What?" asked Gordon, the fire magician, his voice cracking in surprise.

"The Hero's party comprises all seven of you, no? Then all of you must fight or there's no point to this exercise."

"Hello? Are you listening to yourself?" Gordon snapped back. "Do you even understand what you're saying?"

"Gordon," Graham chided. "Please watch what you say. While his phrasing could have been better, I have to agree with Gordon, Lord Oscar. Though you are the vaunted Inferno Magician, seven against one will not make for a fair fight."

“I caught the second half of your bout against Her Highness and her team. That was seven against seven and, based on what I saw of your—” Oscar paused impassively, lips in a straight line, “—*talents*, we shall say, then the fight won’t be fair regardless.”

“Well, Lord Vice Commander is really throwing the gauntlet down, isn’t he?” Morris, the scout, whispered to avoid being overheard by the men.

“Just like with their bombardment at the start of our match, the members of this Division excel at provoking others, hm?” Alicia, the air magician, murmured in reply.

Ashkhan, listening to their conversation, nodded silently in agreement several times.

“All right, sounds like fun!” Gordon shouted. “Roman, I’m going first. Don’t you dare interfere!”

“I just informed you that the seven of you together would have a difficult time against me,” Oscar said coolly. “But if you insist on taking me on alone, then have it your way.”

“Shut your trap! We decide whether or not you’re a challenge. Oy, ref, let’s get this show on the road already.”

Jurgen sighed deeply. “Is there truly a need to incite the vice commander like this...? Well, no skin off my nose. Right then, both of you, please take your positions.”

After they did as he instructed, he spoke again: “Each of you are ready, yes?”

Oscar held one of the training center’s dulled practice swords in his right hand while Gordon clutched his staff, prepared to do battle with his magic.

“Then let the match begin.”

“Die! *Blade Lange Trident.*”

Upon Gordon’s chant, three swirling tongues of flame rushed from the tip of his staff toward Oscar. This spell, which Gordon deployed instantly after Jurgen’s signal, was his most powerful attack to use one-on-one. His intention was clear—to defeat Oscar without giving the other man a chance to make a

single move, regardless of whether the eddies of flame were strong enough to kill any ordinary magician instantly considering their ability to blow a hole in ramparts.

Unfortunately for him...Oscar was no ordinary magician. He casually batted away the fiery whirls with a swipe of the sword he held in his right hand. The blazing whirlpools vanished just like that.

“That’s impossible!”

Naturally, it was Gordon who shouted those words.

“At this level,” Oscar said, “it is child’s play for me. *Molten Mass.*”

“Ngh!”

Before he knew it, a fist-sized cluster of flames struck Gordon in the solar plexus and he fainted in agony.

“What in the world just *happened...*” Graham, the clergyman, muttered in awe.

The mass of fire had already disappeared. He was certain Oscar had used some sort of magic, but...he had seen neither hide nor hair of the man generating it or the trajectory of the attack itself.

“I don’t care *what* it is. All I know is that I most certainly *don’t* want to be hit with it...”

Alicia, the air magician, mumbled from her hiding spot behind Graham.

“Everyone! Cast enhancement magic on me!”

Roman the Hero’s words snapped the rest of his party back to reality.

“*Party Haste. Enchanted Wind.*”

“*Sacred Armor.*”

“*The Wind’s Protection.*”

Ashkhan, the enchanter, Graham, the light magician, and Alicia, the air magician, each cast their own magics on Roman to enhance his abilities. Through an enchanter, magical attributes can be enhanced...which is also one of the characteristics of Enchantments.

“Interesting. So that’s an Enchantment, eh? Definitely not something we have in the Central Provinces,” Oscar observed, unhurriedly watching Roman and his party.

Whether he liked it or not, Oscar’s blithe attitude reminded Roman of the creature, Leonore. Roman shook his head vigorously several times to dispel thoughts of her.

“Here I go!”

He charged with his holy sword, Astarte, raised overhead. He swung down broadly, aiming at the top of Oscar’s shoulders.



Klang.

His weapon struck, and rebounded off, something metallic.

“Huh?”

The surprised sound escaped unwillingly from Roman’s mouth.

“What’s wrong, Master Hero?” Oscar taunted. “A swordsman can’t win if his sword cannot reach his opponent.”

In response, Roman once more readied his holy sword... Slash. Slash. Slash. *Klang. Klang. Klang.* But all of his strikes were repelled by something covering Oscar.

“Why...” Roman groaned unthinkingly in despair.

“What the hell, what the hell, what the bloody hell *is* that?!”

Morris, the scout, was stunned.

Everyone in the Hero’s party could see clearly that whatever was covering the surface of Oscar’s body deflected all of Roman’s slashes.

His sword wasn’t an ordinary sword. Astarte was a holy sword passed down from generation to generation of Heroes born in the Western Provinces, yet each of its slashes was knocked back even though Oscar wielded neither sword nor shield and wore no armor.

“That’s a Barrier,” Alicia, the air magician, explained to Morris, “which combines the properties of Magical Barrier and Physical Barrier...”

“Let me see if I remember... The Physical Barrier is a spell that defends against physical attacks from swords and arrows and such, right? But isn’t it easily broken? It should only be able to protect against arrows. I thought few people even use it in this day and age.”

“Yes, it can be easily broken, and you’re correct about its rare usage in close quarters due to its lack of practicality. Therefore, it’s possible that the Central Provinces’s version of Physical Barrier is harder...” Alicia said with a nod. “But even Mr. Judge is watching his superior with a gobsmacked expression, so...”

“So that means a harder Physical Barrier isn’t characteristic of the Central Provinces, after all. It just means Lord Oscar’s Barrier is simply abnormal.”

Standing next to the two of them in silence, Ashkhan, the enchanter, watched the battle intently.

“Roman can’t win at this rate though, not with his sword constantly being blocked. How is that fair at all? It doesn’t matter how handsome Mr. Vice Commander is or how much his stern, mysterious aura intrigues me. We can’t have our Hero lose like this.”

“Morris, I know very well he’s your type, but remember that he’s a very important man of a foreign country, so do *not* try to seduce him. Back to the topic at hand. Compared to Magical Barrier, Physical Barrier consumes a terrifying amount of a person’s magic and at a rapid pace too. That’s the reason people of the Western Provinces stopped using it, and is also why I think he shouldn’t be able to maintain the Barrier spell for long, since it combines the properties of both of the other Barriers...”

“In this mock battle between a swordsman and magician, I decided to use a technique only magicians can. What do you think?” Oscar asked with the slightest quirk of his lips.

“What in the world is this...”

“Just a little something that combines the powers of the Magical Barrier and Physical Barrier spells. Since this magic is non-elemental, any magician can generate it.”

“Be that as it may, it’s awfully hard. *Too* hard,” Roman said, half-dazed. He knew of the Barriers the man mentioned, but had never heard of a Barrier this tough.

“Seeing as you can’t break through my Barrier, how do you expect to pierce a demon king’s? What good is a Hero incapable of that?”

Even at a time like this, Oscar continued to provoke him.

“Guh—”

Roman scowled in frustration. However, his expression underwent a sea change a few seconds later. Resolve shone fiercely in his face now.

“I apologize in advance if I skewer you.”

And with that, he began pouring all the energy and magic in his being into the holy sword Astarte.

“You can think about that *after* you succeed,” Oscar replied as he waited, his expression unchanging.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

Roman closed the gap between them in an instant and unleashed a thrust bearing every iota of his efforts.

Klang.

A crack appeared in Oscar’s Barrier. Unfortunately, Roman was unable to break it. To add insult to injury, the crack repaired almost instantly and the Barrier was back to its original pristine state.

“Absurd...” Roman uttered unconsciously. Having expended all his energy on the charging attack, he could no longer support his body and fell to his knees on the ground.

Oscar leisurely pressed the blade of his sword against the Hero’s neck.

“I declare the match over! Winner, Vice Commander Oscar,” Jurgen’s voice rang throughout the training center.

Shortly after, the Division members erupted in thunderous cheers. The series of successive defeats since yesterday...had obviously taken a toll on them, regardless of their opponents being the Hero and his party. Their eyes burned with fervent faith in their vice commander, Oscar, who had at last brought the Division its first victory.

“Master Roman, you’re still young. I’m confident you can grow stronger. Best of luck to you.”

“Lord Oscar, I learned a great deal from our bout, including my powerlessness when faced with a true master of magic. Thank you very much.”

Roman the Hero extended his gratitude from the bottom of his heart.

“Oh, that reminds me. Won’t you tell me more about the magician who defeated you?”

“Of course. She was...a woman? Definitely not a human, but someone of a race I’d never seen until then who called herself Leonore,” Roman said, relating his encounter with Leonore. “Today, you blocked my sword with your Barrier, but she evaded it entirely during our fight. Easily too.”

“Leonore... I don’t know this person. I’ll commit the name to memory.”

Nodding, Oscar made a humming noise in his throat before attempting to end their conversation on that note.

“One more thing, if you don’t mind answering, Lord Oscar. Who exactly were you thinking of when you first asked me?”

A pause, then he answered Roman.

“A water magician in the Kingdom of Knightley. Let’s just say there’s a lot between the two of us. Apologies, but I have nothing more to say on the topic.”

And then Oscar strode toward Fiona, who had made her way down into the arena from the stands.

The Crimson Sword in Wingston

In the Kingdom of Knightley, B-rank adventurers were top-notch adventurers. They were recognized not only for their pure fighting skills, of course, but also for their trustworthiness by the nobles of the country and, by extension, the royal family. For this reason, they were often asked by their lords to perform various requests all over the Kingdom.

And Lune's B-rank party, The Crimson Sword, was no exception as they set off for the easternmost city of Wingston on Margrave Lune's behest.

Abel, the swordsman and the leader of the party.

Rihya, the priestess capable of using Absolute Defense.

Warren the Unyielding, the best and well-known shield user in the Kingdom.

And Lyn, the air magician who, despite being only eighteen years old, was rumored to be on the same level as the royal magicians.

These four made up The Crimson Sword, a party which undoubtedly stood atop the hierarchy of the nation's many adventurer parties. However, this didn't mean they were the best in every respect. For example, magicians had inferior endurance compared to frontline roles such as swordsmen and shield bearers...

"Ugggh. Wingston is too far from Lune!"

Lyn, the air magician, was exhausted. Perhaps it had something to do with her petite stature because every step she took was tiny. Obviously, this was merely *conjecture*. Woe be unto them who would say such a thing directly to her.

"Hold on just a bit longer, Lyn," Rihya, the priestess, replied. "At this pace, I'm sure we'll arrive by dusk. And when we do, I'd love nothing more than to indulge in a bath. Abel, we are most certainly going to lodge at an inn with en suite. Promise me."

Compared to the two men in their vanguard, Rihya was also quite tired, but not nearly as tired as Lyn. So it was in fact possible that the girl's daintiness resulted in her tremendous fatigue, considering how many more steps she needed to take with her small feet...

Not just possible but probable.

Abel wisely didn't voice his thought. Almost immediately it crossed his mind, he found himself feeling horrified, realizing it was terrifyingly similar to what a certain water magician might think. Maybe his own mindset had been poisoned at some point in time... He shook his head a bit to dispel the horrifying possibility.

So the words that came out of his mouth next had nothing to do with those errant thoughts.

"I promise, I promise, Rihya. A Drop of Heaven should work, right? You can bathe to your heart's content there."

"Wonderful! You surely do know the way to my heart, hm?" Rihya said happily.

Warren, the shield user, also nodded happily, ever silent.

"The food there is so yummy too..." Lyn hummed. Despite nearing the limits of her endurance, just imagining the delicious food waiting for them at A Drop of Heaven was enough to galvanize Lyn's footsteps. "I'll do my best to hang on until then..."

Hope gives people strength. Just before six o'clock in the evening, these four arrived in Wingston and secured lodgings in A Drop of Heaven.

The next morning.

"Gosh, breakfast was fantastic, wasn't it?!"

Lyn's voice was so energetic that the exhaustion afflicting her on their journey the day before seemed like a fever dream. Warren nodded silently in response to her happy words.

Lyn, a dainty little thing who was a big eater, and Warren, a giant of a man

who ate relatively little. No doubt their appetites should have been the other way around... Then there were Abel and Rihya, who ate just a bit more than the average person...

Although compared to regular folks, adventurers in general ate a good deal of food. In that respect, neither gender nor profession was relevant. Because their bodies were their capital, eating well and resting well was of the utmost importance.

After eating and resting well, the four of them were on their way to Wingston's government office. Wingston was both the largest city and capital of the Duchy of Shrewsbury. The Second Highway, which ran from the royal capital to the city of Redpost on the eastern border, was one of the busiest thoroughfares in the Kingdom, and the largest city along that road was Wingston. It was also the biggest in the eastern part of the country.

The Crimson Sword had been commissioned by Margrave Lune to deliver a letter he'd written to Duke Shrewsbury. Since they were under strict orders to hand it directly to the duke, they would eventually have to make their way to the ducal residence, but it was unlikely the man would meet with them if they showed up unexpectedly.

This was despite the fact that they were a rare B-rank party in the Kingdom and had identification documents certified by the margrave himself. When it came to the Shrewsburys, a bloodline linked to the royal family, it took a great deal of finesse to secure an in-person meeting with the head of the family... The world was by no means simple...

One way of negotiating such a meeting involved visiting the city's government office. As the term indicated, a government office was literally the center and front line of political administration. It was packed with civil servants, bureaucrats, and even ordinary residents of a municipality who needed a government service.

Normally, the office's employees treated regular folks condescendingly. However, when faced with individuals possessing credentials provided directly by Margrave Lune himself as well as a letter written by the man...

“I-I’ll send a message to the duke’s manor immediately. Please wait here!”

The government official escorted the four into a reception room, then rushed off to contact the necessary parties. They could hear his panicked voice all the way from his office next door...

As they waited, they drank the tea they’d been served, their expressions calm. Because from this point on, they didn’t need to be proactive anymore. Once the arrangements were made, all they had to do was follow a guide to the ducal residence and deliver the letter directly to the Duke of Shrewsbury, and that would be the end of their job.

Not a difficult task at all... Usually.

They waited for thirty minutes.

“Thank you for your patience,” the same government official from earlier said apologetically. “Your visit has been approved and we’ll be taking you to the estate shortly. However, the duke is out on his usual morning ride, so I’m afraid you’ll have to wait there for some time as well...”

If the official made any blunders when dealing with individuals whom Margrave Lune himself had vouched for, even if they were adventurers, his head would wind up on the chopping block. No one in his right mind made light of papers provided directly by a member of the peerage.

“Not a problem,” Abel said with an easygoing nod. “Thanks.”

The current Duke of Shrewsbury, Lord Conrad, went horseback riding—a pastime of his—every morning accompanied by a small handful of his personal guards. It wasn’t like the margrave had given them a strict deadline for handing the letter to him anyway. If the situation had been truly urgent or important, the lord of Lune would have deployed his knights to deliver it... That’s the kind of man he was. Put another way then, though this particular message was important in its own way, it wasn’t vital enough to warrant going to the extremes.

So Abel was in no rush at all.

“Thank you very much for your understanding. Allow me to take you to the ducal estate then.”

Prompted by the government official, the four of them headed toward their destination.

The government office and the duke's residence were situated next to each other. The estate grounds covered a shockingly huge plot of land. To protect its inhabitants, soldiers were stationed between the office and the entrance to the lord's estate. No one could enter and exit freely.

Naturally, the office had alerted the duke's staff in advance of the quartet's arrival. After verifying their documents, the soldiers split, with three taking the lead and two the rear, before they began giving them a tour of the estate. The soldiers acted as both guides and monitors. However, no one in The Crimson Sword was the type to be offended by such behavior.

An issue occurred later, just as the group was about to enter the mansion itself after a brief walk.

"What the...?" muttered...someone. Was it the government official or one of the five soldiers?

Regardless of the source, Abel and his comrades realized something was amiss inside the mansion.

"Things seem hectic, don't you think?" Lyn whispered.

Rihya nodded in silent agreement.

Clearly, something unexpected had happened and there was a mad rush to deal with it... Neither the government official nor the soldiers knew what was going on. The six of them exchanged pointed glances...before one of them, who seemed to be the squad captain, nodded decisively.

"I'll take a look inside. Please wait here in the meantime."

So saying, the captain took one of his subordinates inside with him.

Five minutes later, the captain and the other soldier rushed back outside in a panic.

"This is bad! The Duke...!"

An hour later, the body of Conrad, Duke of Shrewsbury, was returned to the ducal residence. The whole time, all four members of The Crimson Sword waited outside the mansion. They knew that there was no other choice. The sudden death of their master threw his staff into an understandable upheaval.

“I wonder who Lord Conrad’s successor will be?” Rihya, the priestess, questioned Abel.

“If I remember right, he has four sons and one daughter. The oldest son is Lord Andrew and the fourth son is Lord Irwin... I’m pretty sure Irwin’s only nine years old, but I doubt there’ll be a fight for succession...”

“You’re too naive, Abel,” Lyn replied, folding her arms. “Not everyone gets along with their siblings, you know. There’s a very good chance blood will spill blood to take over as head of the Shrewsbury line!”

Just then, she reminded Abel strongly of a certain water magician. “Lyn, is it just my imagination or have you been acting more like Ryo lately?” he quipped.

“As if!” Rihya smiled wryly. “What are we supposed to do about the letter to Duke Shrewsbury now...”

Everyone froze.

“Ah...”

Right, Duke Shrewsbury was dead. The royal family needed to approve whoever succeeded him, which would take months. Both Abel and Lyn’s expressions paled as gloom descended over them...

The four members of The Crimson Sword were led to a parlor on the first floor, where Andrew, the late Duke Shrewsbury’s oldest son, waited for them.

“I apologize for the wait,” Andrew apologized, referring to the long wait they had endured during the hours of chaos following his father’s death.

“No, not at all,” Abel replied. “More importantly...I’m sorry for your loss.”

Andrew was younger than Abel. Based on what Abel knew, Andrew had turned twenty-two this year. Regardless of the letter they carried from the

Margrave Lune, the four were still adventurers. Nevertheless, Andrew addressed them politely. There was no hint of discourtesy in his attitude, which left them with a very favorable impression of him.

“Thank you. Then, by your leave, I’ll accept the letter from Margrave Lune on behalf of the Duke of Shrewsbury.”

“Understood and much obliged.”

Now that they’d delivered the letter to the duke’s eldest son, The Crimson Sword’s mission was complete. So of course Lyn sighed quietly in relief. Followed shortly by Rihya, then Warren.

After Andrew signed the receipt, the four of them left the ducal residence. Normal jobs didn’t require such signatures of acknowledgment, but they were necessary on requests like this that involved delivering something directly. Not to mention something irregular occurred on this occasion—the recipient’s sudden death.

Because the issue of succession would require a good deal of time to resolve, it was better to go above and beyond with protocol in a decidedly abnormal situation like this one—which included notifying the local adventurers’ guild...

“Wingston’s adventurers’ guild is pretty far from where we’re staying in A Drop of Heaven, isn’t it?” Abel asked.

“Indeed,” Rihya said. “The inn is near the east gate while the guild is closer to the west gate.”

She excelled at geography and a single glance at a location’s map was all she needed to memorize it perfectly. It was a skill Abel lacked and one that was extremely useful for an adventurer. Once you became a high-ranking adventurer, visiting a variety of towns and cities became part and parcel of the job. In fact, including the royal capital, Rihya had memorized the layouts of most of the main cities in the country.

That makes her a sort of genius, doesn’t it?

Abel had always thought as much.

With Rihya's guidance, they arrived at Wingston's adventurers' guild. After making the necessary report, The Crimson Sword was freed from its official duty on this score and relief showed clearly on all four of their faces. Of course, they still had other work to do.

"Next up is Redpost, huh?" Abel remarked.

Rihya nodded, Lyn sighed softly, and Warren gently patted the girl's shoulder. Just like the letter addressed to Duke Shrewsbury, they had another from Margrave Lune for the lord of Redpost, a city on the country's border. Having said that...

"How 'bout we stay a night here in Wingston and head out tomorrow morning?"

They'd lost hours waiting because of the trouble in the ducal estate, so it was already later in the afternoon. Even if they left now without eating lunch, it might not be possible to reach the next city while the sun was still out. Instead of rushing then, they might as well stay the night and leave in the morning. By doing so, they would definitely arrive at their next destination in the afternoon. They would be traveling via the Second Highway. As long as nothing out of the ordinary happened, they wouldn't need to camp outside because of the towns located on the road.

Of course, none of the four minded camping overnight. Still, it wasn't something they particularly *wanted* to do. If there was a town, they would find proper accommodations because that was the best way of recovering from their fatigue.

Searching for somewhere to eat a late lunch, the four of them walked down a street a bit far from the west gate. They turned down the main street into a narrower one and arrived at a square, intending to walk down another main path farther down... Perhaps buildings had stood there before. Maybe the plot of land was now vacant for construction of new buildings.

Just as they were about to pass through, Abel saw a man at the back of the plaza.

"Purple hair..." he muttered.

“Is something the matter, Abel?” Rihya asked.

Next to her, Lyn tilted her head in confusion.

Warren followed Abel’s gaze and he too cocked his head thoughtfully.

Although surprised by their reactions, Abel quickly scanned their surroundings and came to a realization.

“You guys can’t see him?” he whispered, his eyes never leaving the purple-haired man on the other side of the square. Luckily, he didn’t sense anyone else, which meant the purple-haired woman he had seen in Lune was probably not actually there in Wingston.

“I don’t see...anyone.”

“I agree.”

Lyn and Rihya both replied to him in similarly soft whispers and Warren nodded silently.

“Seriously...?”

It seemed only Abel could detect his presence.

“There *is* a special robe that combines the powers of air magic and alchemy to hinder detection,” Lyn offered. She knew as well as the others that Abel certainly had better intuition than most. “Master made one a while ago. If someone uses it, ordinary people can’t sense them, but anyone with extremely sharp senses *can* sense them... So, he might be wearing an item like that.”

And then...

The purple-haired man, focused intently on handling the box in his hands, suddenly lifted his head and noticed the four of them.

But he didn’t just stare...

“You... You’re the one I saw back then...” he said.

Though he spoke quietly, Abel still heard him. The glowing blue eyes definitely belonged to the same man. Purple hair, blue eyes... Despite his low, murmuring tone, Abel heard the anger in it.

“It’s time to return the favor.” The purple-haired man slipped the box inside

his clothing, then chanted without warning. *“Coruscate.”*

He fired three brightly blazing pulses of flames at Abel...

“Sanctuary Square.”

...and they would have hit had it not been for the transparent barrier erected in front of him. It blocked all of the fiery attacks. Sanctuary Square, the ultimate defensive magic, courtesy of Rihya. Its ability to repel all magical and physical attacks made the moniker of “divine miracle” most fitting.

Until just moments ago, Rihya hadn’t been able to sense the purple-haired man’s presence. Now she saw him clearly, thanks to his powerful discharge of magic. Devices that blocked detection were only capable of distracting someone’s attention. Once the user’s presence was recognized by another, it was almost impossible to mask it from sight again. For this reason, Lyn and Warren could now see the purple-haired man clearly too.

“Hmph. A lonely swordsman. I take it your magician friend isn’t with you this time? My bindings are still in place, but I will defeat you easily.”

The purple-haired man practically spat the words out.

“I don’t understand what that means, but I *do* know you’re playing me for a fool.”

Then Abel unsheathed his sword, dropped into a fighting stance, and commanded his party: “Battle formation, Triangle 1.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Lyn and Rihya answered in unison while Warren silently took up his position in front of the two of them. Warren was at the apex of the triangle they created, with Rihya behind him to the right and Lyn to the left. Abel moved alone.

This was the quartet’s Triangle 1 battle formation.

They were a B-rank party. Regardless of what kind of opponents they faced, they had the skills to contend with anyone, a testament to their experience and achievements thus far.

They employed Triangle 1 against a solitary enemy with incredible attack

power, as Abel was essentially the only one of them who could take them on. Warren's primary role was to protect Rihya and Lyn while the women provided ranged support. For example, if Abel had to leap backward to create distance between himself and the enemy, they could attack from far away while he regrouped and so on...

Abel knew how shockingly fast the man in front of them moved, which was why he entrusted their comrades' protection to Warren. The shield user would defend them against anyone, regardless of their abilities.

With the women's safety ensured, Abel only had to worry about battling the enemy with everything he had!

Why even fight? Couldn't they have found a way to avoid it? Those questions didn't enter his mind now. If anything, it was far too late for such thoughts.

Abel was a swordsman and the man before his eyes—his enemy—was a monster.

Before Abel knew it, the man was right there in front of him.

"Tsk."

He barely had time to release the sound before their swords clashed.

Klang, klang, klang.

So, that's how the battle began: with the man's incomprehensibly fast leap and three successive strikes. Abel knew from their previous bout that if he stepped back to create distance, a magic attack would come. Last time, he'd been able to block it and launch a counterattack. So...this time, he simply wouldn't put any distance between them!

While deflecting the man's diagonal overhead slash, Abel shifted into an L-shaped stance, putting his weight on his right foot and pulling his left leg back. This naturally placed him on the man's left side. Abel went straight for his neck with his sword.

But the purple-haired man didn't disappoint as he ducked, dropping his upper body forward. He dodged Abel's side swipe and, still in his unnatural stance,

swung his own sword back at Abel using only his left hand. Abel evaded by backstepping, which unfortunately created space between the two of them!

“Lapis.”

Four stone spears appeared in front of Abel when the man chanted... Despite his backstep, he immediately charged back toward the man. Distance meant a magical attack...just like he'd anticipated! He swung his sword sideways, mowing down all of the stone spears.

“Impossible!” the man shouted angrily.

He shouldn't have had time to yell such things in the middle of a hand-to-hand battle like this...but the word slipped out unconsciously. It was proof Abel was outmaneuvering him. Even then the purple-haired man refused to be beaten. He cleanly deflected each of Abel's sword strikes with his own blade.

“Tsk.”



Abel clicked his tongue in annoyance. He knew just how strong and dangerous an opponent like this was. As his opponent met his sword with his own, he recovered his rhythm. It wasn't easy to break someone like him.

His fierce attacks were a threat too, as even one successful strike could decide the battle in an instant. His tough defense was a problem too, as it made it difficult for Abel to land a decisive blow. Moreover, the man would *never* allow himself to lose.

The closer you are to the top, the better your defense is. This isn't just true for swords, but for anything that involves combat. When push comes to shove, all you have to do is dedicate yourself exclusively to defense and wait to exploit a chink in your opponent's armor. That's one tactic, and realizing that gives you a chance to compose yourself and consider alternative options. Abel knew a solid defense was how you pushed through a crisis, which was why opponents skilled in defense were so dangerous.

The longer a battle stretched, the greater the chances of unexpected factors bringing misfortune to those involved. This applied to one-on-one fights and group fights too.

It was pure 'coincidence' that a bunch of children suddenly drew closer. After all, they'd chosen a plaza right in the middle of the city as their battleground. The perfect place for children to play. If they'd been fighting on the other side of the square, where he'd first seen the purple-haired man, maybe Abel would have had the time to react to their approach. Unfortunately, they were fighting near the plaza's entrance.

Abel was the first to realize the children were approaching behind him. Not only because of the man's movements in front of him, but also because he was paying attention to his surroundings. As soon as he did, he became momentarily distracted. A short span of time, but enough for the purple-haired man to backstep and create a gap between them.

"Shit...!"

Too late.

“Vinea Glacies.”

The man’s chant created a countless number of icicles and they all flew straight at Abel, who couldn’t dodge without putting the children behind him in danger!

“Sanctuary Square.”

Rihya cast the spell a second time and repelled every single one of the icicles. Even Abel was surprised by her perfect timing.

The first to come to his senses was the purple-haired man. He moved so quickly it looked like he had teleported. Before Abel knew it, his opponent was in front of him again, thrusting his sword at him. He jabbed once, then again, then a third time. Abel desperately fought him off and the man continued attacking in succession.

Their offensive and defensive roles had reversed. Why? Because the rhythm of the battle had been disrupted. Abel wasn’t hurt and the man hadn’t grown stronger, nor had Abel’s strength decreased. However, the unexpected appearance of the children had destroyed the rhythm Abel had steadily built up during their fight.

What exactly is the rhythm of battle? Well, the same phenomenon exists in sports:

“You know, I’m really feeling on top of my game today,” an athlete might say. “No matter what I do, I think I got this match in the bag.” Or even something like, “My body feels so light.”

Of course, biorhythm has something to do with this too...

Yet sometimes, even when everything is going right, things begin to inexplicably go wrong. This is probably something everyone has experienced in their lives, don’t you think? A sudden shift in the wrong direction that can’t be explained by biorhythm.

All of these things are rhythm. Of course, it’s not always one-sided, and there are rare occasions when the rhythms of both fighters mesh...and that’s when so-called legendary fights are born.

The purple-haired man had no desire for such a legendary fight. He didn't know or care what Abel wanted.

After being forced on the defensive, Abel found himself on the cusp of danger...but he held his ground. Because when it came to the sword, he was one of the elite. Naturally, this meant his defense was tough too. Even when a situation turned dicey, he had plenty of strength to regroup.

Not to mention the preparations he'd made from the start. From the corner of his eye, he glanced at the trio forming a triangle. One of them nodded imperceptibly in response. When he saw that, Abel met the purple-haired man's swing with his blade then drove him back forcefully. Simultaneously, he jumped back a good distance. It happened then.

"Bullet Rain."

Lyn, the air magician, had been quietly whispering the long incantation since the battle commenced. When she finally said the trigger words, over a hundred invisible air bullets whizzed at the purple-haired man...and struck.

"Ngh..."

Abel swore he heard the man release a muffled grunt. At least twenty of the bullets had hit his opponent, riddling his body with holes. Abel saw it clearly, with his own eyes. The missiles made impact. It hadn't been an illusion. He was almost sure of it.

And then, the very next instant, the purple-haired man disappeared.

"Huh?" Lyn gasped. Even Rihya and Warren were frozen in shock.

"Did he..." Abel whispered, his voice barely audible. "Did he give us the slip?"

The others heard him nevertheless.

"He actually managed to escape?" Rihya asked.

"I don't know... But my gut tells me he did."

The purple-haired man's clothes should have been shredded after Lyn's attack, but not a single scrap of fabric littered the ground. *Maybe Transfer or something similar...* Abel wondered if he'd vanished by using one of those spells. Of course, he didn't know if something like that was even possible. And if

it *was* possible, he also didn't know how powerful the man would have to be in order to execute such magic. He knew only the same thing he'd known since the beginning: the purple-haired man, and whoever his accomplices might be, were certainly not ordinary people.

"I *really* don't wanna have to deal with people like that..."

"Too late," Lyn and Rihya murmured in unison...



In a place far north of the city of Lune.

"*Both* of the 'seeds' we planted in Duke Shrewsbury's estate were removed?"

"That's correct, General Rancius..."

Complexion pale, Ambasz, his adjutant, made his report. His nervousness was no wonder, considering he was reporting on the failure of one of their top-priority missions.

"How?"

"One rose to the position of lieutenant of Shrewsbury's knights and the other became his deputy secretary of finance, but both were dismissed from their posts by Andrew Ortiz, the acting Duke of Shrewsbury..."

"This is ridiculous..." General Rancius shook his head repeatedly in disbelief. Then something suddenly occurred to him. "There was a report that the previous duke's cause of death might not have been an accident, right?"

"Yes. We received additional information a short while ago about that very possibility. His Grace's horse went abruptly wild and an investigation revealed a piece of broken pottery had been inserted under the saddle."

The general harrumphed at the news. "People have been using that trick for ages. If you put a thin water bag in between the shard and the saddle, the bag tears after a while of the horse galloping, making the whole thing less likely to be discovered..."

"It is exactly as you described."

"So the previous duke was murdered. I wonder who... No, that's a stupid

question to ask. Because if it wasn't us, then it must have been them, eh?"

"Then...you suspect the Federation, after all?"

General Rancius nodded silently in response to Adjutant Ambasz's question.

The Duke of Shrewsbury was a key aristocrat in the eastern part of the Kingdom. Though they didn't know why, the Federation was intent on destroying law and order there.

"Did we manage to plant new agents in Lune?"

"Yes. However, there's been a successive series of arrests of Federation spies, so security in the city has tightened considerably, which includes more frequent patrols."

"Goddamn it... Why can't those Federation bastards just do their job right? It only makes things harder for us."

Ambasz wisely kept his mouth shut in response to his superior's complaints regarding his imagined enemy.

"Which reminds me, the report on the first captured platoon, Gamingam's, should be coming in soon, right?"

"Yes. That too was delivered not too long ago..."

Unusually, Adjutant Ambasz spoke evasively.

"Look, I'm not happy they were caught, so no matter what you tell me, it can't make my mood any worse."

"Understood. Here are the details of the report then. While Gamingam's platoon was hiding in the city, they were spotted by a pair of men who appeared to be on patrol, so they were forced to lure them into the darkness and eliminate them as a potential source of trouble. All four of them attacked at once, but they failed when hindered by a Physical Barrier."

"What? One strong enough to repel their simultaneous strike? That's hard to believe... And then what happened?"

"By the time they were conscious again, they found themselves in the garrison prison."

“What the hell?”

General Rancius scowled. “Are you telling me our people figured out the reason they failed but not the reason they were defeated?”

“That’s correct.”

“This just gets stranger and stranger... Does Lune’s garrison even have such skilled soldiers...? No, maybe it’s someone from the margrave’s knights... Actually, *that* is very possible. An elite, renowned magician...attached to the order of knights most likely...” the general muttered to himself, the wheels turning in his mind. Then he arrived at a conclusion. “Send an additional two platoons to Lune. Have them investigate the identity of any powerful magicians attached to the knights and report back to me as soon as possible. This isn’t sitting well with me.”

“Yes, Sir, right away.”

Adjutant Ambasz saluted in response to General Rancius’s order.

“Based on this,” General Rancius said thoughtfully, “it looks like only our operations in the royal capital and the western part of the Kingdom are successful. Is that right?”

“Yes, Sir. We had to rush to suspend our operations in the duchy of Flitwick in the north...”

“Right, right, because the order came from the imperial palace. They must know something we don’t. Forget the north. We can do without it.” General Rancius nodded placidly.

An order from the imperial palace meant the will of His Imperial Majesty himself. In short, they didn’t need to think about the whys or hows. They just had to obey.

“The western part of the Kingdom is the only one we can’t afford to lose. Is that understood? Under no circumstances do we pull out of there. If we don’t keep it in check, everything will fall apart in the final phase.”

Ambasz frowned stiffly. “The western forest, yes?”

“We can’t let *those* people get involved with the central government. If they leave the western forest, all of our Empire’s plans would be ruined.”

“Yes, Sir...”

“Hm... Maybe I should go there myself and make sure of things personally.”

“General?” Ambasz asked, dubious.

“Yes. What’s the saying? If you need something done, do it yourself. In this case, I should be on the front lines to ensure the success of our mission.”

General Rancius stood. “I’ll head to the western part of the Kingdom myself. Ambasz, you’ll stay in the imperial mainland. I’m leaving you in charge of logistical support and additional forces.”

“Understood.”

“We aren’t going to screw this up. We *can’t*. I swear on the name of the 20th Imperial Regiment, the Shadow Regiment.”

To the Principality of Inverey

Nils, Eto, and Amon, the three members of the party named Room 10, had arrived outside Lune's city walls.

"Man, I sure am glad that job didn't take as long as we thought."

"It's all thanks to the mana potions Ryo made for us. They considerably shortened the amount of time required for mana recovery."

"I hope he likes this crepe..."

Ryo had made the mana potions during his alchemy practice and given them to the trio as free samples. Thanks to them, the job had gone much more smoothly than they'd anticipated. As a token of their gratitude, they'd decided to visit him at his home and, incidentally, purchased a crepe along the way at a newly established food stall.

"Oh, here we are. It really is super close to the east gate, huh?" Nils said upon seeing the sprawling, one-story abode, its exterior uniquely fitted with three separate doors. Ryo's new house. The main entrance had double doors. The doors on two sides of the building seemed to be service doors...

"All right, let's head inside through the right door," Nils said, strangely refusing to use the central double doors.

"I don't understand why you're deliberately avoiding the main entrance..." Eto quipped.

"Because we're friends with him and friends don't stand on formality. It'd be one thing if it was our first time, but we've already been here tons of times already."

With that, Nils opened the door on the right side of the house. Inside was a fairly wide table surrounded by several chairs. In one of those chairs, an almost unbelievable sight greeted them: a woman of unrivaled beauty sitting and reading a book. The sunlight streaming in through the window made her platinum blonde hair sparkle, which, along with the slight cant of her head, gave

her a celestial aura.

By simply existing, she changed the surrounding atmosphere into something altogether otherworldly... The woman, a veritable goddess of beauty, glanced at the trio. Having been frozen until that moment, the three of them snapped back to their senses.

“Apologies for the intrusion!” Nils shouted before hurriedly closing the door.

Twenty very long seconds passed and still no one spoke. In the end, Nils finally broke the awkward silence.

“Uhhh,” he said, pausing. “I think this is the wrong house.” He spun on his heel and started walking away.

“No, you idiot, it isn’t.” Eto seized his shoulder to stop him. “*This* is Ryo’s house.”

“Well, it certainly was a surprise to see such a shockingly beautiful woman.”

Though surprised by her presence, Amon was still more calm than the other two.

“Y-Yeah, it sure was,” Nils said. “She definitely wasn’t an illusion, right?” Even after closing the door, he still wasn’t sure whether what he’d seen was real or not.

“Okay, all right, let’s try this one more time. Calm down,” Nils said to himself.

None of them suggested entering through the main doors, not even Eto. If you fail once, you simply try again... That’s just how the members of Room 10 were.

“Excuse us,” Nils said politely, using the same decorum he would use when entering the guildmaster’s office. Of course, Nils was Nils, and he had forgotten to knock first...

When he opened the door, the same sight from earlier stretched before his eyes: the stunning woman sitting in the chair. This time, though, she stared directly at them. Before any of them could say anything, a voice from farther inside the house called out.

“Ugggh, Sera, I’m sorry but I just can’t make the alchemical combination work no matter how often I try. Can you show me one more time... Oh, Nils, Eto, Amon, welcome.”

It was Ryo, the owner of the house.



“This is Sera, a B-rank adventurer. Sera, these are my roommates from my dormitory days. E-rank... No, wait, they’re D-rank now. Nils, Eto, and Amon of the party, Room 10.”

Sera nodded firmly. “Pleasure to meet you. I’m Sera. So you three were Ryo’s roommates, hm?”

“I-I’m Nils.”

“I’m Eto.”

“I’m Amon.”

The three were too nervous to reply with anything more than their names.

In this city of Lune, the name “Sera” was even more well-known than “Abel” and “Phelps.” In fact, it was practically a legend at this point... Because while everyone knew she was a B-rank, most had never actually seen her in person since she rarely visited the guild.

She suddenly looked at the clock on the wall.

“Ack, it’s already this late? Ryo, I’m heading back to the estate. I’ll be back soon. I hope to see you three around as well, hm?”

With that, Sera made a jaunty exit.

Instantly, the trio moved again, as if abruptly freed from their temporary paralysis.

“R-Ryo, was that *really* the famous ‘Sera of the Wind’? Why is she here of all places?” Nils asked.

“Isn’t she also the knights’ instructor? Her aura is different from what I imagined...” Eto said.

“You truly keep company with the most surprising people, don’t you, Ryo?” Amon wondered.

Though Nils, Eto, and Amon each expressed their own opinions, the one thing they had in common was their surprise.

“Sera’s teaching me all sorts of things, alchemy being the current subject, as you saw...”

At Ryo's reply, Nils and Eto began whispering to each other.

"No 'Miss' or anything. Talking about her all casual-like..."

"I wonder when they even got this close..."

Of course, Ryo still heard them. It was only natural, since they obviously wanted him to hear.

"Oh, come on, don't be like that." Ryo hung his head a bit dispiritedly. "I treat Abel the same way too..."

Just then, Amon offered him what they'd brought. His timing was excellent.

"Here, Ryo, a present for you. There's a new food stall in the city."

"Crepe! How nostalgic. I don't think I've had any since the ones we ate in Whitnash. A rugged older man was selling it there, hm? He'd come from another town on account of the festival there."

Ryo took a bite. A sublime combination of whipped cream and bananas sandwiched gently together inside the crepe. Perfectly harmonious.

"This tastes just as delicious as the one in Whitnash..."

It made Amon happy to see Ryo eat it with such gusto.

"The stall apparently opened only yesterday in Lune. When we went earlier, a young woman was manning it."

Then Amon went on to tell Ryo the stall's exact location. Ryo silently promised himself he'd buy more tomorrow.



While Ryo and his three friends were busy stuffing their faces with crepes, a heated negotiation was taking place in the guild master's office.

"The air-attributed magic stones are indeed superb. Moreover, they're both uniform in size. What do you say to an offer of one billion for them?"

"Master Gekko, I'd 'preciate it if ya left the jokes for 'nother time. Ya can search the whole o' the Central Provinces 'n' ya won't find anythin' like these ever again in yer lifetime. Three billion for two. I can't take anythin' less, ya know."

“Ahhh, Master McGlass, you have certainly placed me in a bind. Hmmm, all right, how about this? Two billion! I’ll pay you two billion for two! I think this is a reasonable compromise.”

“Master Gekko...I invited ya ’specially b’cause yer a tight-lipped ’n’ trustworthy merchant, ’n’ a filthy rich one to boot. This is the kind o’ deal that your own lordship is countin’ on. Hell, it’s one sure to impress even Margrave Lune hisself. Nevertheless, I’ll do my best to give ya the biggest discount I can. 2.8 billion. Final offer. What do ya say?”

The heated negotiation between Guild Master Hugh McGlass and the merchant by the name of Gekko continued a while longer—until they finally agreed to a price of 2.6 billion florins for the two air-attributed magic stones.

“I’m walking away from this deal a very happy man indeed.”

“Glad ya think so. ’N’ let me extend my deepest thanks for yer business.”

“Pleasure’s all mine. I look forward to you rustling up the proper escorts for me when I head back to the Principality in five days.”

“Will do. Five ’venturers, right? Drop by here again the day before ya leave, so I can introduce ya to ’em.”

Then they shook hands and Gekko left Hugh’s office.

The merchant named Gekko was purveyor to the ruling family of the Principality of Inverey, the country to the immediate southeast of the Kingdom of Knightley. It was a tiny nation that had gained its independence as a vassal state of the Handalieu Federation, one of the three major powers in the area, after the Great War a decade ago. Independence had long been a cherished dream for Inverey, and after achieving it ten years ago, the Principality had undergone rapid development.

The Great War had been an all-out war between the Kingdom of Knightley and the Handalieu Federation, the leading powers of the Central Provinces, hence its appellation as the Great War. During the war, there was a man who made a name for himself practically overnight—Hugh McGlass. For his heroics, Champion McGlass was an incredibly popular figure in the Principality of

Inverey. Even now, ten years after the Great War, he still commanded a tremendous amount of respect from its people.

Being able to reach a satisfactory deal with such a great man naturally brought a broad smile to Gekko's face.

I'm certain Prince Loris will be pleased with those magnificent magic stones. I was worried by the challenge his request posed when he asked me a year ago... Hm, to think I'd eventually find them in the hands of Master McGlass. What I find even more unbelievable is that a pair of such incredible stones exist. I must ensure their safe delivery for the preservation of our country's independence.

The distance from the city of Lune to the Principality's capital, Aberdeen, was about eight hundred kilometers in a straight line heading northeast. It was not close by any means. Despite this, it was a round-trip journey Gekko often made. Moreover, he had personally trained each of his personal guards himself. However, on the way to Lune, they'd endured a series of attacks that had left five of his twenty guards dead, never to make the journey home again. Normally, fifteen escorts for ten wagons wouldn't be a problem. On this occasion, he would be transporting high-value items so he wanted to be prepared for anything.

That was why he had told Hugh of his desire to hire five adventurers.



"What? Both Abel and Phelps's parties ain't here?" Hugh asked.

"That's right, Sir," Nina, the receptionist, replied. "The Crimson Sword is on a job for the margrave and is currently traveling from Wingston in the east to Redpost. On a similar note, The White Brigade isn't due to return for another two weeks."

He had wanted to square away Gekko's request immediately. Unfortunately for him, both of the two skilled B-rank parties that had immediately popped into his mind weren't in Lune right now...

"Well, this is a pickle, innit? Even if Sera weren't out of the question..."

"Guild Master, may I remind you that the one-way journey from here to Inverey's capital takes twenty days? Even should a party decide to return the

day a job ends, they're looking at a total of forty days away, which is a difficult proposition for most adventurers to consider..."

"Yeah, I know yer right, but...they'll be paid more 'n enough to make up for any losses while they're on the job since it's a direct commission from the Principality. That's why I don't mind if the guild fronts the funds to secure lodgings and gives 'em an advance."

Nina was surprised by the financial largess Hugh's words implied. It just proved how important the job was to the government of Inverey.

"How many C-rank parties are still in the city that can take on a job of this scope?"

"None that can provide exactly five adventurers. Of the six members who currently make up the party of Lord Kreis and Comrades, four are in Lune at the moment. Then there are the four who are part of Switchback..."

"Got it. We'll pass on Kreis and his people. Switchback means Rah and his party, eh? Let's go with 'em. But that still leaves us one short..."

"Yes, well," Nina began, sighing. "Rah admires Abel, which is why he only has four members just like The Crimson Sword..."

"He don't really need to go that far to copy him... There's gotta be someone powerful who goes solo that can fill the hole... But I can't think of anyone. Is Sera the only one? Sera means the margrave and his estate and that makes me think about magic stones..."

Deep in a well of thoughts, Hugh suddenly smiled like the cat that ate the canary.

"Actually, there *is* a solo 'venturer perfect for the job."

The next day.

As someone who lived alone, Ryo always started his day early. First, he began with magic practice at dawn. At the moment, he was focused on Breakdown Rush—or at least its first step.

An explanation is in order to understand how Ryo arrived at the fanciful name

for the attack where “sonic blades are released from three clones, and a rush attack follows in their wake—”

...that was how it was supposed to work, apparently.

However, as a water magician, Ryo couldn't fire the air-based sonic blade attack, which ruled out the “sonic” part for the name. Then there was the “three clones” part of the description, but naming his strategy something like that wouldn't make sense. So that was out too.

That only left Ryo to use the “rush attack” part of the description, which depicted the instantaneous leap—easily mistaken for teleportation—used by Leonore the akuma and Sera. Ryo wanted to replicate this with water magic. He'd been practicing it alongside his running during his days in the guild's housing annex, but...it was surprisingly difficult. To facilitate his training, every morning he transformed the spacious yard in front of his house into an ice rink by using the Ice Bahn spell to cover the ground in a layer of ice. In his mind, he was going to glide rapidly over the ice by propelling himself with Water Jet.

In reality...

“Argh! Ow!”

“Gaaah!”

“Dwah.”

“Noooo.”

All of these screams came from Ryo.

“Why is this so darn difficult... Isn't it a trope in isekai stories to zip around by shooting jets from the bottoms of your feet? Heck, there are games that let you fly with just a pair of special shoes!”

Unlike those stories, *this* was reality.

To move himself instantaneously from one place to another, he'd have to shoot Water Jets from the entire back of the body. If he only used legs or back, he would destabilize the rest of the body, which would be dangerous.

He knew all this. The difficult part was calculating how much propulsive force to allocate to each part of the back of his body. If he generated x newtons of

force from the back of his head, how much would he have to produce from his back to balance everything out? And so on.

Currently, he was fumbling for answers. In his latest attempt, he emitted 1,024 Water Jets from the back of his body, each producing a uniform magnitude of force. He tried several combinations, such as emitting three hundred from his back, twenty from his right shoulder, and so on. From there, he made minute adjustments to the locations of the jets to find an equilibrium...

And that was the extent of his current predicament.

As of now, Ryo could control up to 256 Water Jets perfectly and instantly. If he doubled the amount to 512, he could control most of them but not instantly. When the number doubled again to 1,024, he *felt* like he could control them, but there was quite a delay.

Well, he wasn't in a hurry at all, as long as he could master at least the 256 instantly in basic combat. Still, he dreamed of going beyond his limits. Such was the nature of dreams, after all...

While he went through his daily morning assignment, he heard the bell tower in the city ring nine o'clock.

"Gah, I need to get ready to head out."

At least he'd had time to perfect his Breakdown Rush...probably...

He passed through the east gate and, after walking for a while, arrived in front of the crepe stand Amon had mentioned yesterday. It was open for business. At the same time, he became curious about the shop next door, which looked like it had opened fairly recently. Bows and crossbows hung on display even from the building's eaves...a familiar sight.

As he was considering it, an elderly man exited the shop and began arranging even more bows. Ryo had definitely seen him somewhere before. He looked just like the shop owner in Whitnash who had sold Eto the rapid-fire crossbow.

Ryo called out to him before he could stop himself.

“Um, excuse me.”

“Hello there and welcome to my... We’ve met before, haven’t we? You were with the lad who bought one of my repeating crossbows in Whitnash.”

Much to Ryo’s surprise, the shopkeeper remembered him. It may have been incredibly important for merchants to remember those they’d met, even onetime clients, it was often difficult in reality to do so...

“That’s right. You’re Abraham Louis, right?”

“Wow. You remember my name...”

Indeed Ryo had. Why? Because it was the same name as a famous watchmaker on Earth. Not to mention that the elderly man in front of him also made watches, unrivaled mechanical ones at that, as a hobby despite specializing in the construction of outstanding bows and similar weapons.

“But what about your shop in Whitnash?”

“Well, the reason I was there in the first place was because of my long-standing connection to the lord of that city. But with everything that happened at the garden party...”

“Oh, yes, of course...”

Ryo too had heard that the mayor of Whitnash had been stripped of his title and lands after the garden party incident. A different noble had been instated in his place.

“I’d always wanted to try living here in Lune, so I decided to make the move. Under normal circumstances, I would have just shut down shop and lived an easy life considering my age and all. A bit embarrassing for an old man, eh?”

“Not at all. I don’t think anyone needs to worry about age when it comes to achieving their dreams. I think it’s wonderful what you’re doing,” Ryo said with sincerity.

Abraham Louis smiled bashfully.

Working hard to achieve your goals, regardless of your age, was something Ryo thought was dazzlingly fantastic.

Incidentally, after their encounter, people from Margrave Lune's staff visited Abraham Louis's shop and escorted him to the lord's estate.

Ryo wasn't aware of that, however.

Once their conversation ended, Ryo went straight to the crepe stand right next door, bought a crepe, and headed for the adventurers' guild.

"Back on Earth, crepes were originally a type of galette in France. By Louis XIII's reign, which just so happened to be the setting for *The Three Musketeers*, it was a well-established food among commoners... But this crepe, with its whipped cream and banana filling, is purely a delicacy, hm? If I take into account the origin of this type of crepe in the latter half of the twentieth century in Takeshita Street in Shibuya...it almost feels like the work of a reincarnate..."

He muttered quietly to himself on the walk to the guild. By the time he arrived, he'd finished eating the crepe.

"Hello, Nina."

"I'm glad to see you again after so long, Ryo. The guild master is waiting in his office. Let me show you in."

He'd hardly visited the guild since moving to his new house five months ago.

It definitely feels like it's been a long time... Because even without taking jobs regularly, we used to see each other every day in the cafeteria when I lived in the dorm.

He followed Nina while smiling ruefully on the inside.

She knocked on the door to the guild master's office then opened it.

"Oh, Ryo, yer here. Take a seat over there 'n' I'll be with ya in a jiff."

Hugh sat down across from Ryo three minutes later after finishing his paperwork.

"I invited ya here today b'cause there's a job I hope you'll take. Wait, let me finish first then ya can decide." He held up a hand to stop Ryo's attempt at

interjecting. “It’s an escort job for a merchant, but a few o’ the things he’s transportin’ just so happen to be the magic stones you ’n’ Abel got yer hands on. He bought *two* as well.”

“I see... Based on how much you transferred to me last time, can I assume you fetched a nice price this time as well?”

“Even better ’n last time. Yer gonna see a deposit ten digits long in yer account, Ryo.”

“Ten...” Ryo said, shocked. “That’s... That means over a billion...”

That was beyond anything he’d imagined.

“Damn skippy. That’ll be yer cut after takin’ out taxes ’n’ the guild’s fees. As far as the merchant hisself, he’s lookin’ for escorts for his journey back home, but he ’n’ I go way back. He works directly for his government, but he’s an honest man, so I doubt anythin’ fishy will happen.”

“Understood. How long will it take? Based on what you said, it sounds like he’s from another country, which means the trip will be long, won’t it?”

“Basically, yeah. His name’s Gekko and his destination is Aberdeen, the capital o’ the Principality o’ Inverey. To get there, you’ll need to go through Redpost, located on the Kingdom’s eastern border. From here to there, I’d say roughly eight hundred kilometers headin’ northeast. Takes ’bout twenty days one way via carriage. Master Gekko’s got his own band o’ personal guards, so all ya have to do is work together with ’em. We’re sendin’ five ’venturers from Lune, you, and Rah’s party, Switchback.”

“Ahhh. Rah, hm...”

Rah was the swordsman he’d met at Abel’s homecoming party, the one who respected and adored Abel. He’d taken a serious liking to Ryo for Abel’s safe return and talked his ears off. They’d met and chatted a few times after in the guild and the canteen, so Rah was someone Ryo knew relatively well. At the very least, he was relieved to know he wasn’t being paired with a stranger.

“The members o’ Switchback are a C-rank party with a solid reputation. Long as ya do what Rah tells ya to, there shouldn’t be any problems. Ryo, ya’ve only traveled domestically since only ’venturers C-rank ’n’ higher can even accept

jobs that cross borders, right? Well, though this job will take ya beyond our borders, it'll be to a nation the Kingdom's friendly with. So whaddya say to broadenin' yer horizons, eh?"

Aside from trips to the margrave's estate, the library, and the Fill-Up station, Ryo had holed himself up in his new house ever since buying it. In that case, it might be nice to see other cities once in a while.

"Very well. I accept."

"Oh, yeah? Glad to hear that. I'll introduce ya to Master Gekko three days from today at 10 in the mornin'. Ya leave the day after."



Ryo's introduction to the merchant Gekko yesterday went well. So today was the first day of his job escorting him to the Principality's capital of Aberdeen. He'd arrived at the rendezvous point earlier than the meeting time because he believed being early meant being on time.

Alongside the usual robe gifted to him by the Dullahan, he wore the sturdy but inexpensive set of clothing Abel had bought him and boots, with Murasame and the Michael-made knife hanging from his belt. In addition, he'd modified the bag he'd made during his journey with Abel just a bit and it was currently slung across his shoulder. In it were several varieties of his homemade potions as well as condiments that didn't take up too much space, like salt and black pepper. He brought those with him on the off chance he might be able to use them.

Gekko's ten canopied wagons and his cadre of escorts were gathered at the rendezvous point near the east gate. A thorough inspection of the goods was being conducted before departure.

"Ah, Ryo, good morning."

"Good morning, Gekko. I look forward to working with you."

Ryo bowed his head politely.

The merchant Gekko was a wealthy one who represented his country. In Ryo's

head, someone of his status should be sitting in the president's chair in the headquarters giving out orders... Yet here he was, leading a merchant caravan himself to and from the Principality.

Curious about the man, he'd asked Hugh yesterday and the guild master had answered, "Ya see, the route b'tween Aberdeen 'n' Lune is special. Only that one though. 'Course part o' the reason Master Gekko goes on it hisself has to do with wantin' the young folks under his command to gain experience. The other is simple—for him, it's basically a pastime."

An eccentric merchant indeed. However, he seemed like a good person, which relieved Ryo.

"No, no, the pleasure's all mine. Master McGlass was veritably singing your praises, telling me I can place my faith in your combat prowess. So, really, I must thank *you*. Let me introduce you to the captain of my unit. Max!"

Upon hearing the merchant call his name, a lancer in his mid-thirties walked over. He emanated the aura of a powerful, seasoned fighter.

"Max, this is Ryo, one of the adventurers assisting us on this trip. As I mentioned yesterday, he's a D-rank adventurer who has Master McGlass's wholehearted stamp of approval."

"I'm Max, captain of the escort team. You might have already heard, but we lost five of our people on the way here, which is why you and the other four are filling in. For the most part, you'll be helping us fight and keeping watch at night. We'll have plenty of time to get to know each other over the next twenty days or so, so I'm looking forward to working with you."

Then Max shook Ryo's hand before returning to his preparations.

"There you have it. He's been leading my men for the past five years. An excellent young man who handles most challenges with ease," Gekko said.

Ryo had worried that the leader of their group would be unapproachable, but he was relieved to discover that Max seemed like a sensible sort.

After that, he and Gekko discussed a variety of topics, like the goods being transported, the cities they would be stopping at on the way, and the route they'd be taking. Incidentally, the magic stones didn't come up at all when they

talked about the goods, which made sense considering the security of the caravan. Though the adventurers on this escort mission had all been recommended by the guild master himself, the fewer people who knew such important information, the safer the job would be. Essentially, they didn't want to share any information that didn't need to be shared...

A short time later, Rah and the rest of Switchback arrived. The C-rank party was composed of Rah, the leader and a swordsman; Sue, a scout; Tan, an air magician; and Nuda, a priest. So, including these four, the entire group left the city of Lune and set forth on a straight path toward Aberdeen, the capital of the Principality of Inverey.

Ryo and Switchback were stationed by the fifth and sixth wagons. The road leading out of Lune's east gate was the same one that led to Kailadi until the halfway point of their route. Since it passed near his house too, the path was a familiar one to him. And on that same road, the group passed a rider on a fast horse.

"Hey, isn't that one of the margrave's horses?" Rah commented after the rider had gone by.

"While I'm curious too, whatever the reason for the urgency has nothing to do with us," quipped Sue, Switchback's scout. She was a twenty-four-year-old, winsome young woman, her dark brown hair tied in a ponytail and her huge black eyes constantly scanning their surroundings. The only reason Ryo knew her age was because she'd told him herself. "I'm older than you, you know," she'd said deliberately, like a bossy older sister.

And unfortunately for them...the situation with the fast rider would definitely have something to do with them.

Three hours after their encounter with the rider, the group stopped to take a break for lunch. Unless adventurers stayed in towns and cities, their meals basically consisted of preserved foods. In the case of escort missions, the clients usually prepared the meals and this time was no different as Gekko's subordinates distributed dried meats and such. While they ate, a rider on a

horse came from the direction of Lune. Ryo and the others watched one of Gekko's people escort the rider toward the merchant.

"That's...an adventurer from Lune," Rah muttered.

"Huh?" Ryo blinked, wondering if something unexpected had happened...

The adventurer handed a letter to Gekko in full view of the group. Gekko read it, gave it to Max, the captain of the escort squad, then spoke to the adventurer.

"Please inform Master McGlass that I received his letter."

Upon hearing this, the adventurer mounted his horse again and galloped back to Lune. After seeing him off, Gekko and Max walked over to Ryo and Switchback.

"Rah, do you know him?" Gekko asked.

"I do. He's Shusnaka, a D-rank adventurer in Lune. Why do you ask?"

"I thought so. Which means the letter from Master McGlass was the genuine article."

At Gekko's reply, Max gave the letter to Rah.

"The Lowe Bridge on the East Highway collapsed? What the..."

"Do you remember the rider that passed us by not long after we left Lune? Apparently, he was on his way to inform them about it. And we were supposed to cross that bridge on our journey. Lune, the Lowe Bridge, Llandewi, Halwill, and Redpost on the country's border—these are the major places on the East Highway. But if we can't cross the Lowe Bridge, then...we'll have to go to Kailadi then take the old highway as a detour before we're back on the road again to Llandewi and the rest. Frankly, I'm concerned because the old highway isn't as safe as the East Highway, which is why I wanted to let you all know in advance so you can remain vigilant."

"Understood," Rah responded. He, the rest of Switchback, and Ryo nodded firmly.

After spending a night in Kailadi, the group finally found themselves on the

old highway the next day. Ever since the construction of the Lowe Bridge connected Lune, the largest frontier city in the southern part of the Kingdom, directly to Llandewi, the second-largest city in the eastern part of the country, the amount of foot traffic the old highway saw decreased considerably. Nevertheless, it was fairly wide considering it used to be one of the major trade roads of the east.

“It’ll take about five days for us to reach Llandewi from here in Kailadi. There isn’t anywhere we can stay on the way,” Rah explained to Ryo, who walked beside him.

“When this highway was active, a lot of villages and inn towns sprung up along the road, but...most of them became farming villages in the time since.”

Ryo shook his head a little and lamented the cruelty of the world. “The world can be a harsh mistress, hm?”

“Having said that, Gekko plus his subordinates makes twenty, and then add us plus the escort team means we’re a huge group totaling forty people. Not like we’d even be able to stay at a small inn anyway,” Rah said with a shrug. As someone far more experienced than Ryo in adventuring, even he thought their merchant caravan of forty was massive. “We have a lot of people and we’re on the move with a bunch of bodyguards too, so maybe the bandits won’t attack us.”

“Bandits!” Ryo blurted. Though Rah’s words were meant to be reassuring, Ryo couldn’t help but shout—not out of fear, though. No, no not at all. He shouted in excitement because this information fit his assumption about another trope in isekai stories—turning the tables on marauding bandits! Of course, Rah didn’t know all this, so he interpreted Ryo’s raised voice as fear about a bandit assault. Which explained why he continued speaking in an attempt to set Ryo’s mind at ease.

“Don’t worry. I’m pretty sure the bandits won’t attack. Though that doesn’t mean we can drop our guard. Can never be too careful, right?”



After leaving Kailadi, everything went smoothly until the morning of the second day. Then Ryo spoke to Rah during lunch break.

“For some time now, two people have been following our caravan at a distance.”

“What?!”

Taking Ryo along, Rah immediately rushed to Max, the captain of the escort squad.

“Max, Ryo said there are at least two people keeping an eye on us.”

“Bandit scouts maybe. Ryo, tell me their rough location but don’t look.”

“One is four hundred meters ahead up in a tree and the other is approximately the same distance away behind us but on the ground,” Ryo said without missing a beat, his eyes locked on Max’s.

“Four hundred meters... You can tell their exact location from that far, huh?”

“Well, it’s because I have the perfect water magic spell.”

Max was surprised that Ryo had noticed lookouts positioned at such an unbelievable distance. As far as Ryo himself, Active Sonar allowed him to ascertain such particulars at a range of more than five hundred meters. However, the magic could be detected by particularly astute opponents. At the very least, they would realize someone was searching for them.

In fact, the first time he used Active Sonar when sealed in the “cloister” by Leonore the akuma, she had fought back from outside his range, making her undetectable to him. That was how it worked. This time around, he used the passive version of the spell, which he named conveniently enough, Passive Sonar, so no one noticed his probing.

Right then.

“Presence.”

“The feeling of something there.”

Such words and phrases exist in this world. Of course, scientists on 21st-century Earth have not found evidence to support these phenomena, but few would doubt their existence.

For example, any given entity or object might emit an odor, affect the current of the surrounding air through its very presence, or even change the way sound is transmitted...but the elemental compositions of these disturbances were so minuscule it was hard to perform experiments to definitively determine their existence. This was the possible, supposedly logical explanation Ryo devised based on his own assumptions. In any case, the person sensing the presence doesn't take action. Either the object in question moves or a change in the atmosphere can be detected because of its presence... That was likely how it worked, according to him.

For example, let's say you hold yourself still in water. What do you think will happen if a fish suddenly jumps out of the perfectly level water's surface nearby? If you wait, the ripples created by the fish jumping will eventually reach you. From that, you'll be able to deduce the size of the fish and its distance from you. All the while, the fish remains unaware of whether or not others are cognizant of its presence.

Ryo's Passive Sonar was an extension of that. The water molecules suspended in the air transmitted all this information and he analyzed it. Changes induced by something that hadn't been there before, changes induced by someone who hadn't been there before, or changes induced by the movement of someone or something that *had* been there all along.

Max, the captain of the escort squadron, asked Ryo and Rah to keep doing what they had been until now and ordered his scouts to surveil the potential enemies. Having finished relaying the information, the two adventurers returned to the others and began eating lunch.

"I'm glad we were able to help," Ryo said.

"Yup. Water magic is amazing. You were able to spot those scouts from so far away."

"I heard before that there aren't any other water magicians in the adventurers' guild. Is that actually true?"

"Hmmm... It is, now that I think about it. Instead of dangerous work like adventuring, water magicians generally wind up working in settlements or are

in demand with merchants like Gekko. For example, aside from his bodyguards, a few of his other subordinates can use water magic.”

“Fascinating! If a merchant caravan has water magicians, you don’t need to stock up on water!”

“That’s right.”

Besides drinking, water was necessary in other situations too, like washing your hands or cleaning grime off your body. So the ability to use water magic made journeys significantly easier.

When Ryo surveyed Gekko’s group, he saw a few folks replenishing their water supplies via water magic. Though he had never once spoken to any of them, he nevertheless felt an affinity with them as he watched.

That evening, everyone in the caravan went about setting up camp. In the center of their encampment, dinner for forty people was being prepared in batches. From where Ryo was situated, he could see that soup-type items were being made in a cauldron for the caravan.

“I heard that adventurers supposedly received dried meat and bread for all three meals when it comes to escort requests, but...this particular trading company seems different, hm?”

“Yeah, probably because he’s a merchant in the official employ of his government and those are his people. Lunch might have been jerky, but dinner’s a different story, huh? I can’t decide if he’s just used to traveling or just that good at keeping morale high... Either way, Master Gekko understands what’s necessary in terms of food on a long journey.”

Rah answered Ryo by pointing out all the ways in which Gekko was an outstanding leader.

“Then the norm *is* dried meat and bread?”

“Pretty much,” Rah said with a vigorous nod.

Then Max, the captain of the bodyguards, approached them.

“I wanted to update you both about what happened this afternoon. Based on

my scouts' reports, the people you detected were definitely bandit scouts. If they attack, I think it'll be at some point in the next twenty-four hours."

"Meaning there's a possibility they may attack during the day?" Ryo blurted. Wouldn't it be more effective for them if they attacked in the shadows of the night?

"They might, if they have strength in numbers and think they can force us to surrender simply by showing themselves. That's one of the reasons they probably sent out their scouts."

"I see..."

Winning without fighting was the ultimate victory.

"Regardless, be aware there's a chance they might attack at night too. Oh, Ryo, I heard your defensive magic is incredible. Any truth to that claim?"

"That reminds me," Rah interjected. "Abel said the same thing. Any opponent is apparently helpless against your ice wall, Ryo."

"An ice wall, eh?! I have a favor to ask you then, Ryo. If we *are* ambushed at night, will you rush to Master Gekko's side immediately and protect him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he and the rest of his civilian team pitch the bare minimum number of tents in camp for themselves to rest in, to make it easier for us bodyguards to protect them. If something happens where we can't, I'd be grateful if you could erect an ice wall around them. What do you say?"

Protecting Gekko and his subordinates came first. Of course, the goods themselves were important too, but their safety was the top priority. After all, human capital itself is the greatest treasure of all. The essence of commerce...for the most part.

"Not a problem at all. To confirm then, in the event of a night assault, the first thing I should do is go to Gekko and the others and protect them by building an ice wall around them, right?"

"Exactly. Thank you. Now we can fight without worrying about them, if the worst happens." Max smiled appreciatively. "Oh, one more thing. The

nightwatch schedule and groups are the same as yesterday.”

After saying his piece, he walked away from the two of them.

The twenty escorts had been split into four groups of five for nightwatch duty, with each group taking a two-hour shift.

“Ryo, were you on the first watch? I don’t remember.”

“I am. I believe you’re third, Rah?”

“Yeah, from two to four, I think... I feel like they might attack during first watch,” Rah commented with a wry smile.

Twenty-two men gathered in front of a cave located about four kilometers away from the caravan’s encampment. From all appearances, they *looked* like bandits... No, they must be, because they certainly didn’t seem like the type in respectable occupations.

“Twenty guards, huh... That’s a pretty big unit.”

“Just goes to show how rich the merchant is.”

“But the info I got said there should have been only fifteen of them...”

“Maybe they counted wrong.”

The man clearly in charge possessed a terrifying aura, perhaps owing to the gruesome scar around his left eye. When he spoke, everyone fell silent, overwhelmed by him.

“It doesn’t matter. Everything we can steal will belong to us. In exchange, all we have to do is kill the merchant, Gekko or whatever his name, the client has a grudge against. What an odd job.”

“Still, the client was nice enough to set the stage for us by giving us all the info we need, huh?”

“I wouldn’t have accepted otherwise, you numbskull, considering no one wants to willingly deal with this old highway, least of all us.”

After spitting those words out, the man with the scar around his left eye downed the alcohol in his cup before continuing.

“A night raid at the usual time, three o’clock. Get ready, you useless dogs.”

Three a.m. Twenty-two shadows lurked near the encampment.

“Attack!” shouted the man with the scar on his left eye.

The bandits attacked all at once, slashing and shoving at the camp enclosure. But...

“No one’s here!”

“The campfire’s still lit though...”

“What the hell is this?!”

As if responding to the bandits’ cries, a deluge of arrows and magic came flying toward them from outside the encampment.

“Gah! We’ve been had!”

“It’s a trap!”

The bandits’ shouts could be heard all over the area. Half of them had already been taken down by the volley of arrows and magic.

“Charge!”

Max’s voice echoed across the encampment and Gekko’s guards plus Rah and his party rushed toward the center from all directions. They besieged the group of bandits in an instant and commenced hand-to-hand combat.

It was an intense but one-sided fight that ended in less than five minutes. While the others battled it out, Ryo had done what Max had asked him to and secured the safety of Gekko and his subordinates, twenty people altogether, by constructing an Ice Wall around them. It amused him to see the merchant’s water magicians touch the barrier curiously and test it out by punching it. He kept his amusement to himself.

Anyway, I completed my task without exposing them to danger. Good, good.

So Ryo thought. For some reason, lately he’d been getting the feeling that the people he knew in Lune saw him as some sort of battle maniac. They came to

such a judgment, apparently, because he was always smiling during his mock battles... Even Sera, his most frequent sparring partner, had wryly said, “Ryo, you always seem to be enjoying yourself.”

That, of course, was the pot calling the kettle black since she did the same during their fights...

In short, if he was a battle maniac, then he definitely wasn't the only one! He wanted to shout this to the whole world... Instead, he raged inwardly...

Back to the battle. Because of its one-sided nature, neither the escort unit nor the adventurers suffered any casualties, death or injuries. By the time the fight ended, only two of their numbers had scratches.

Of the twenty-two bandits routed, twenty were already dead. The remaining two who had surrendered were only left alive to interrogate.

“Normally, once bandits are captured, they're all killed on the spot,” Gekko, the merchant, explained to Ryo, who had dispelled the Ice Wall after the battle finished.

“Regardless of how close the nearest town or city is, bandits refuse to attack places like those in the first place...which is why they usually base themselves far from proper settlements. So, transporting them to the closest settlement is a nuisance *and* no one knows what could happen on the journey. And releasing them just means giving them the opportunity to attack another caravan... All of this is why there's an unwritten rule in the Central Provinces to kill bandits on the spot.”

Gekko's complexion remained pale the whole time he spoke.

“There's no such thing as making them slaves as punishment for their crimes?”

“Correct, because slavery of humans has been completely outlawed in the Central Provinces. Slavery of demi-humans is also outlawed everywhere except the Empire. I will acknowledge that murder is an ethical problem and a waste, economically speaking. But...that doesn't mean slavery is the logical next step.”

An economic waste...trust a merchant to use those words to describe murder.

As far as slavery being completely outlawed, it was actually Ryo's first time learning about this. At the same time, he found out that the Empire kept demi-humans as slaves... The word "demi-human" was also a first for him... Did elves and dwarves fall into that category?

"In the Empire, anyone who isn't human is considered a demi-human. Including elves and dwarves..."

Gekko nodded affirmatively, his expression troubled. It seemed any bipedal living thing capable of communicating with humans was defined as a demi-human. For example then, the lizardmen Ryo had encountered in the swamps of the Forest of Rondo weren't recognized as demi-humans but "monsters." Such was the order of things in human-built countries with human-made laws...

While Ryo discussed the topic with Gekko, Max approached them accompanied by one of his subordinates.

"Master Gekko, the area is secured. There aren't any more bandits nearby either."

"Well done. Were you able to get anything out of the survivors?"

"About that... Gün, tell him."

Max instructed the person standing behind him, a scout presumably.

"Yes, Sir. They're a group of bandits who call themselves the Wolves of the East and operate near the East Highway. In my interrogation, I prioritized finding out why bandits like them just so happened to be on the old highway at the same time as us. Apparently, their leader received information about a caravan of ten wagons passing through here and that the East Highway would be temporarily suspended."

Gekko was shocked to hear all this. "Then does this mean the Lowe Bridge's collapse wasn't accidental but deliberate? A scheme designed to hinder us?"

"Yes," Max replied. "The likelihood is high."

"But...the Lowe Bridge is a key point. It should have been protected by a huge number of troops stationed there. For goodness sake, it took more than five years to build the darn thing. So if people managed to slip past its defenses and

take it down...they must be part of a terribly powerful faction. And based on what you're telling me, they may be targeting *us*...?"

Gekko seemed to be sorting through the information as he spoke.

"Unfortunately, the remaining two members of the Wolves of the East don't know anything about whoever fed their leader the data. However..."

"What is it, Gün?" Gekko urged.

"According to the directive their leader received, they were supposed to kill you, Master Gekko..."

Those words stunned everyone except Gekko. From what they could see, the merchant himself didn't look particularly agitated by the news... Then he spoke again calmly.

"I understand. Well done. Max, Ryo, I'd like to discuss something in private. Gün, please ask Rah to join us too."

Once Rah entered the tent, Gekko started talking.

"As far as this ambush is concerned, someone is pulling the strings behind the scenes."

"In short, it wasn't an attack on a caravan coincidentally passing by but a deliberate, premeditated ambush, right?" Max clarified.

"Correct. They clearly wanted to kill me, although I don't know if there was more to their plot. The bandits' client or clients may have other aims as well, considering the precious goods we're transporting this time..."

Gekko explained, then took a sip of his tea.

"Basically, what you're saying is, there might be more attacks from here on out, so we should brace ourselves, right? Don't worry. Contrary to appearances, we're still adventurers of Lune. All of us are used to gambling with our lives." Rah grinned cheerfully.

"Well...I was afraid you might cancel the contract, but I guess that puts me in my place, eh..." Gekko smiled a little. It was hard to tell how much he was joking and how serious he was.

“Come on, now, give us a little credit. No way we’d tuck tail and run. We have a job to do and we’ll do it, which means we’ll get you to Aberdeen safe and sound. Leave it to us. Right, Ryo?”

“Yes, of course.”

Ryo nodded firmly in response to Rah’s prompting. He also didn’t like the idea of abandoning a job halfway through, not when he’d already accepted it.

“You truly don’t know how much I appreciate it. Thank you again.”

Gekko smiled happily and bowed his head.



“Makes me wonder what kind of people would go as far as destroying the Lowe Bridge just to accomplish their goal,” Rah said, his voice a little too loud to be a mutter.

The day after the ambush, the members of the merchant caravan resumed their journey after their usual morning routine of eating breakfast. Three days had passed since they left Kailadi.

“Is the Lowe Bridge really that large?” Ryo asked Rah directly after learning the structure’s name.

After last night’s attack, the others had discussed the possibility of the same bandits being behind the bridge’s deliberate collapse. The conversation had surprised Rah too then.

“Yeah, it’s pretty massive. The bridge span is forty meters wide and a kilometer long. It was originally designed over a century ago, but its construction was abandoned and resumed several times before it was finally completed fifteen years ago. Even then it took five years from start to finish.”

“Wow, it sounds like a sight to behold... I would have loved to see it at least once.”

A bridge forty meters wide and a kilometer long must be truly enormous. Ryo found himself disappointed that he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes.

“The report only mentioned a collapse, so we don’t actually know the extent of the damage. If you get the chance, why not check it out at some point? There

should be settlements along both its eastern and western banks. You can make a sightseeing trip out of it.”

Rah recommended Ryo head to the area as a tourist.

As Ryo relaxed after lunch, five of Gekko’s subordinates approached. If memory served right, they were all water magicians.

“Um, Ryo, we apologize for interrupting your leisure time...”

“How may I help?”

“Please teach us water magic.”

The oldest youth bowed his head and the other four followed suit.

“Huh? I... What?”

The sudden request startled Ryo.

“Your magic saved us yesterday, Ryo. While we’re thankful for your presence on this trip, we have many more journeys to undertake after this one ends. Until now, we were satisfied with simply being able to produce water. Such magic is a tremendously important resource for merchants on long journeys. However...we think it would be even more beneficial if we could use our magic to actually defend ourselves.”

“Ahhh...so that’s why you want to learn how to use the Ice Wall spell?”

“Yes!” the five boys answered in unison. Their ages ranged from around sixteen—the oldest who had initiated the conversation—to the youngest who couldn’t have been more than ten years old...

“Hmmm...”

He didn’t mind teaching them, but Ryo had never taught magic to others before. Moreover, he didn’t know how much mana Ice Wall would consume. He worried that if someone other than him attempted the spell, they would run out of magical energy immediately...

As he mulled over what to do, his Passive Sonar detected a presence. He stood up abruptly and spoke.

“We have an emergency. We can talk about this later!”

Ryo surveyed their surroundings, looking for Max.

“Max! Several monsters are coming toward us from the east!”

The captain of the escort team hurriedly ran toward him. “How many, how far, and how long before they reach us?” he shouted.

“More than a hundred, about five hundred meters away, and one minute. I’ll erect an Ice Wall around us. Tell everyone to get inside the circle of wagons.”

In contrast to their camping formation, the ten wagons were set up in a circle during lunch breaks.

“Everyone, move inside the circle! Hurry!”

Gekko and his subordinates quickly obeyed Max’s shout. In less than thirty seconds, everyone was inside the circle of wagons.

“Do it, Ryo.”

“10-Layer Ice Wall Package.”

A wall of ice formed, encircling the wagons. The first of the monsters arrived at their encampment at almost the exact same time the barrier finished generating.

Klang. Klang. Klang klang klang... The monsters slammed into the Ice Wall, creating a cacophony of noise. Over and over again. Though the monsters consisted mostly of the boar type, other varieties were in the mix. Those who crashed into Ryo’s Ice Wall and fell to the ground quickly clambered to their feet before running off toward the west—as if driven off by something from the east.

This continued for five minutes before the stampede of monsters finally disappeared. Then Ryo’s Passive Sonar detected five humans in the forest.

They’re a hundred meters away... When did they even show up?

“Ryo?” Max questioned, his voice puzzled. Even though the hoard had passed, Ryo’s Ice Wall still stood.

Ryo held up a hand to silence him and continued thinking.

A hundred meters... I think I can just barely reach? Ice Bind.

His aim true, he bound the closest suspicious character's limbs with whips made of ice. At the same exact moment, however, his victim's vital signs flatlined. They were dead.

"What?!"

Ryo hadn't expected this. To kill someone the instant they were captured...no normal person would abandon their ally like that. Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of it.

Whooom. Flames exploded violently into the sky from the area in which he'd bound the person.

"No way! *Squall. Ice Casket.*"

He used Squall to create an intense deluge of rain to extinguish the flames and Ice Casket to shield the corpse. The remaining four individuals tried to attack his Ice Casket, but when they realized all of their attacks were useless, they retreated to the east.

"Phew."

Ryo sighed, finally taking a breather. Then he noticed everyone nearby was staring at him.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Gekko, Max, and Rah. Please let me explain..."

The three men walked toward him and the others gave the four of them some space by moving away.

"I more or less figured out what happened, but..."

"It would be difficult not to, with the blaze and all, hm?"

"Well, I for one wasn't worried at all because it was you handling things, Ryo."

Max, Gekko, and Rah each expressed their opinion.

"Still, I need to explain. Five people were advancing on us, using the monster stampede as a diversion."

“What did you say?!” Gekko exclaimed.

“I waited to see what they would do, but they remained hidden in the forest, so I tried to apprehend one using magic. However...the others immediately killed the one I captured.”

“Wha...”

Ryo’s explanation stunned Max. Never in a million years would he have imagined something like that happening in the shadows...

“Then they set the blaze?” Gekko asked.

“In a manner of speaking. I believe they tried to incinerate their comrade’s corpse. Meaning our opponents are the type who won’t even leave any dead behind.”

“I see... Extremely thorough, aren’t they?”

Despite being their target, Gekko reacted calmly. He was fully prepared for anything and everything. It was perhaps the mark of a great merchant, cunning and worldly.

“I encased the corpse in ice to prevent them from burning it. They tried to break through it, then fled east once they realized it was impossible.”

“Hm...” With a wry smile, Gekko scratched his head. “Some very dangerous people are clearly determined to put my head on a platter.”

The remaining four unknown individuals might have laid a trap around the individual encased in Ryo’s Ice Casket, a trap that’d kill whoever came to check on the corpse. Once he’d explained everything to the others, Ryo, along with Max and Gün, the scout, went to inspect the dead enemy. Gün was in charge of searching for and disabling any traps. To no one’s surprise, the trap they had set would have burned to ash anyone who stepped close carelessly, but Gün disarmed it deftly.

“I...” Max whispered upon seeing the corpse within its icy casket. “This is something else.”

“I’m going to dispel the spell then.”

With that, Ryo's Ice Casket disappeared. He left the examination of the body to Max and Gün as he surveyed their surroundings.

Including this person, five of them in total hid themselves here. But...there are hardly any broken branches. The only trace of their presence is the slight indentations in the grass. Are they just that proficient in moving through a forest, or...could there be another reason...?

Of course Ryo didn't possess any ranger-like knowledge. Everything he knew about tracking came from random info he'd stumbled across on the internet or heard in passing during conversations with his friends in junior high, high school, and college. While he continued his survey, he listened to Max and Gün's conversation.

"Nothing. There isn't a single damn thing on the body to help us."

"Right, not even any kind of identifying information. No weapons except for a dagger... I see marks of some kind burned, but I don't know what it is."

"So all we can glean is this person was wearing black from head to toe?"

Ryo turned around and stared at the remains the two were inspecting.

Black clothes from head to toe? That sounds familiar... Ahhh, yes, in Whitnash. The dead bodies around Nils and the others during their fight against the fire magician on the beach. If I remember right, they told me later that those people had targeted the imperial princess. Does this corpse...resemble...those? Hard to tell since all bad guys seem to prefer black outfits.

Ryo's extremely arbitrary thoughts were based on his own opinions and biases.

Wait. They deliberately burned this body, didn't they? What was the point of such precautions if the person couldn't be identified regardless?

"What is it, Ryo?" Max asked. He seemed to realize Ryo's mind was churning with possibilities as he stared fixedly at the corpse.

"Well...I was just wondering why they went to the trouble of burning the corpse..."

"Because there was something they couldn't risk leaving behind... The body

itself!”

Max immediately started stripping the clothes from the dead person.

“Captain, I didn’t know you were into that kind of stuff...”

“Gün, you idiot! I’m doing this because there has to be something distinct about the body. Help me.”

The two of them undressed the corpse, revealing hideous burns all over the skin and clothes. But they somehow succeeded in taking off everything and found a tattoo on the chest right over the heart.

“What...*is* this tattoo?”

“It looks like a two-headed bird...?”

“With...a sword piercing through it...?”

Max, Gün, and Ryo spoke in turn as they all looked at it.

A coat of arms bearing a double-headed eagle pierced with a sword? I’ve never heard of anything like it. Well, I suppose that’s a given considering I know practically nothing about this world called Phi.

The three of them stared at it for a while. Then Max suddenly pulled out a knife and began cutting out the part of the chest with the tattoo.

“C-Captain, what are you doing?!” Gün exclaimed in surprise.

“We don’t have a choice. This is our only proof. It’s not like we can carry a corpse through the forest either. Maybe Master Gekko will know something about this tattoo,” he said, continuing to carve out the piece of flesh.

“Hmmm, I haven’t seen the likes of this crest,” Gekko commented after looking at the tattoo. Nothing in his store of knowledge fit the design.

“In fact...I’m skeptical that this is even a coat of arms at all because of the sword piercing the bird. Having said that, I have no doubt the design is important to them. I have a feeling this is a vital piece of the puzzle that we’d do well to remember. Well done, Max. You two as well, Ryo, Gün.”

Then he gave each of the three a large gold coin before returning to his tent

with the tattooed flesh in his possession. Though he was curious about the tattoo, it didn't seem like the problem would be solved anytime soon, so Ryo decided to stop dwelling on it and returned to Rah and the others.

"Ryo, welcome back. Looks like we'll be leaving soon."

"Understood. I'm assuming you haven't been informed yet, yes, Rah?"

So Ryo gave him and his party a quick summary of what happened.

"A double-headed eagle with a sword thrust through it? Weird. Who knows, maybe they have some kind of deep grudge against double-headed eagles," Rah replied, his head tilted quizzically.

"Oh, you're right. That *is* a possibility too."

At that point, they heard a voice coming from up ahead.

"We're heading out."



Somewhere in the forest five kilometers away from the merchant caravan were five people clad in black.

"Forgive us, Mistress Natalia."

The woman named Natalia listened to the four's report upon their return.

Afterward, she shook her head. "A wall made of ice... And you say Gey's hands and feet were also bound by ice?"

"Yes."

"Seems we have a particularly annoying magician on our hands, hm? This certainly poses a problem... Do you have anything else to report?"

The four others looked discomfited by her question, but they *had* to answer her.

"To be honest...we failed to dispose of Gey's remains."

"What?!"

For the first time, displeasure tinged her voice. Fear struck them when they heard it.

“O-Our deepest apologies...”

“Enough apologies. Why did you fail?”

They told her they had tried to burn the body but a sudden downpour extinguished the flames. At the same time, Gey’s body was encased in ice, which they couldn’t break through no matter what attacks they used. So they had retreated.

“Ice, again! This has become much more than a mere nuisance...”

I reconnoitered with the detached force after the Lowe Bridge’s collapse only to discover their failure in disposing of Gey’s body. I don’t care if the caravan had adventurers, they had any number of methods to deal with the twenty escorts. However...the fact that there’s a water magician among those adventurers is an unexpected threat, and a serious one at that. I don’t think we should make any more moves right now. Not to mention headquarters ordered me to return and make a report on the bridge’s collapse. I thought I could assassinate Gekko on the way, but getting too greedy at this point could put everything at risk.

“We’re returning to base to report on the bridge’s collapse. Contact headquarters right now and inform them. While you’re at it, let them know we have yet to assassinate Gekko. They’ll likely send another unit to finish the job.”

Then Natalia murmured to herself after ordering her subordinates.

“I honestly thought water magicians were useless...but it seems I need to change my perspective on that score.”

Llandewi

Two days had passed since the monster stampede and the group of five's attack. Since then, the journey along the old highway went smoothly and the merchant caravan arrived in Llandewi, the second-largest city in the eastern part of the Kingdom. If the Lowe Bridge had still been functional, they would have made it from Lune via the East Highway in two days. The detour through the old highway had cost them six days.

They were in a large settlement for the first time in a while, so lodgings were secured for everyone in the caravan at the Ruby Inn, Gekko's preferred establishment in the city.

"It's been some time since we last enjoyed the amenities of a proper inn, so rest well. Oh, and please eat whatever you like in the first-floor canteen. My shop is covering the meal expenses here."

Ryo and the members of Switchback pumped their fists in excitement at those words. The journey to Aberdeen, the Principality's capital, was supposed to be nonstop. Of course, they would stop on the way to rest, but there were no plans to trade or engage in business negotiations in any of the towns or cities en route. Their first priority was to deliver the goods in the wagons as quickly as possible to Aberdeen.

This was why Gekko had informed them at the beginning that whenever they stopped in cities along the way, it would be only for a night. All of the places they had been to so far were new to Ryo. While he wanted to tour the sights, he understood that it wasn't possible. He was working, after all. So he'd decided it would be more practical to go sightseeing on the journey back to Lune from Aberdeen.

However, there was an impractical C-rank swordsman among them too. When Sue, the scout, discovered Rah attempting to sneak out of the inn, she forcibly dragged him back. Ryo had no way of knowing where in the world he'd been attempting to go... Later on, though, Rah would be grateful to Sue for

dragging him back.



On the outskirts of Llandewi, a group of ten—all wearing black—gathered.

“Master Sherfi, an urgent message has arrived from headquarters.”

One of the black-clad men politely handed over a letter.

“What? Now?” the man named Sherfi said. Scowling, he took it from him and read it. “Damn it all to hell,” he growled quietly. “Headquarters is run by a passel of imbeciles. I suppose it can’t be helped. There’s a change to our third objective. We’re to assassinate the merchant Gekko during his stay in the Ruby Inn. By any means necessary. Consequently, the destruction of the nobles’ quarter has now been downgraded to fourth, which can be accomplished by any unit that completes their first to third objectives.”

“Understood.”

They knew the faces of everyone close to each country’s pillars of power. Gekko, as a merchant directly employed by the government of Inverey and the civilian closest to its ruling prince, was one such pillar, hence why they had long since memorized his face.

At half past two in the dead of night, Ryo jumped awake when he heard a sudden boom.

“An earthquake?”

Then he remembered he had yet to encounter one since arriving on Phi. In any case, he changed from the loungewear provided by the inn into his regular clothes, thrust both of his knives into his belt, slung his robe around himself, then opened the window to look outside. He saw a huge building on fire.

“Isn’t that the mayor’s residence?”

The atmosphere was disquieting. He charged out of his room and sprinted up the stairs. Gekko and his subordinates as well as Max and half the escort squad were in rooms on the floor above his. When he arrived on the landing, he saw Max already in the hallway handing out orders.

“Max!”

“Ryo, protect Master Gekko and the others.”

He had earned Max’s complete trust with his actions over their journey so far. Ryo found Gekko and his people gathered in the largest room at the end of the hall. They must have acted quickly given they too had already changed into their usual clothing.

“Ryo, thank goodness you’re here,” Gekko said. “It seems something terrible is happening outside.”

“Yes. I saw the mayor’s house on fire from my window.”

“That’s outrageous...”

Ryo’s words shocked Gekko. The slatted shutters on Gekko’s windows had been shut for his own protection, so he hadn’t seen the blaze consuming the lord’s estate. Regardless of the town or city, its lord’s estate had the strictest security measures. So the fact that this one was currently up in flames meant something had gone very, very wrong.

During their brief conversation, another roar echoed outside. It felt even bigger than the first... Perhaps it would be better to describe it as an explosion than a roar.

“Excuse me.”

Ryo headed toward the window in the back of the room and peeked through the shutters.

“Master Gekko, looking from here...on the left side of the mayor’s estate, there’s a stone, three-story building...”

“I think that houses the knights’ garrison and armory,” Gekko answered while staring at his subordinates’ worried expressions. He was the epitome of a merchant whose life depends on information, which made sense given his detailed knowledge of other countries’ cities.

“Well...it’s less on fire and more...exploding, I suppose...”

Fake Michael said gunpowder isn’t commonplace in this world yet... But any way you look at it, that feels like a controlled explosion...

“Does it seem like the effect of the Firestorm spell used by fire magicians? Or it might be black powder burning...”

“Do you mean...” Ryo hesitated to use the word “gunpowder.”

“It’s produced only in this part of the Kingdom’s eastern region and stored here in Llandewi for safekeeping... Gah, this is classified information. I’ve already said too much.”

Then Gekko grinned.

Ryo didn’t know why, but it was clear the merchant had wanted him to hear the words. “Among merchants, knowledge really *is* power, hm?”

“Heh heh heh. You should know that merchants aren’t all that different from intelligence operatives. The Kingdom and Principality are as cozy as allies, which is precisely why I can move about so freely on my travels.”

Ryo felt like he’d just gotten a glimpse into the complexities of being a merchant.

“Master Gekko,” Max said as he rushed in. “Fires are erupting near the inn as well. We’ll be in serious danger if they move any closer. Let’s evacuate outside.”

They decided they would take only the essentials with them.

“Be ready to leave in forty seconds,” Gekko ordered his subordinates.

Ryo too only took his shoulder bag with him. Having stored all his valuables inside earlier, he was already set to go.

I got ready in ten seconds... Just like the boss of some anime...

Ryo was genuinely impressed with himself.

“Ryo,” Max said, drawing close to whisper. “Master Gekko’s safety is your top priority.”

“If I tell him that, he’ll instead tell me to prioritize everyone else, but if the worst happens to him, our country won’t survive. I’m counting on you.”

That was all Max said before leaving the room to hand out orders to his squad.

Just like I thought, being a merchant is complicated... Going from one country to the next like a spy... Then on top of all that, having an entire country's fate rest on your shoulders...

With his bag slung over his shoulders, Ryo went down to the reception room closest to the first-floor entrance.

“Master Gekko, I’m going to construct an ice barrier around everyone. I’ll be moving it as we move along, so make sure everyone here moves as a group.”

“Understood.”

Gekko nodded, accepting the responsibility.

“10-Layer Ice Wall Package.”

He created a transparent, multidirectional, ten-layer wall of ice. Ryo believed ten layers would be enough to repel most attacks. Of course, it wouldn’t hold up against firepower on Leonore the akuma’s level, but...she was an exception. It had at least withstood the offensive launched by the oh-so-great or whatever Inferno Magician—even if it hadn’t been perfect!

Chaos reigned outside the inn. Even Ryo’s Passive Sonar wouldn’t fare well in this commotion...because both people and the air were moving too much. Therefore, an Ice Wall was necessary to ensure their safety. A stitch in time saves nine, as the saying goes.

With Max leading the way, the escort squad secured the way forward for Gekko and the others. A public square stretched out in front of the Ruby Inn. Not only did the inn’s guests gather there, but residents of the city did too as an evacuation point.

Gekko and the others moved together as a group toward a corner of the plaza. Things were starting to calm down when—

Klang.

Out of nowhere, a knife flew straight at Gekko’s throat...only to bounce against Ryo’s Ice Wall and fall to the ground.

Ryo looked where the weapon had come from and saw someone in the

shadows of an alley between buildings. Three someones, actually. They were approximately twenty meters away. A distance his magic could definitely traverse.

“Ice Casket 3.”

Last time, when he tried to restrain one of them using Ice Bind, the person had been silenced forever *and* their comrades had tried to incinerate the body. If their enemy this time was from the same faction, it stood to reason they would take the same measures. In that case, he might as well encase them all in ice right off the bat. A slapdash assessment and plan typical for Ryo...

At this point, Max and three of his men raced toward the shadows where the villains hid.

“Whoa.”

A soft shout of surprise. Though Max had seen Ryo’s Ice Casket once before, anyone would be startled at the sight of three frozen objets d’art in the middle of a city street.

Ryo joined them.

“Ryo...”

“Yes, I tried to capture them before they were burned.”

He nodded firmly, confirming Max’s unsaid suspicion.

“Having said that...what’s our next move? I doubt these three are the only ones who have infiltrated the city.”

“Good point. Since these guys failed, then their other comrades will probably come after us next, huh... It’s not like I can interrogate them given their state. Should we just leave them here? The others couldn’t break through your ice a few days ago. We can pick them up after everything is over.”

Apparently, Max liked to fly by the seat of his pants too.

“There’s a chance their comrades will come looking for them before we’re finished,” Ryo said, his sudden smile at odds with his words. “If they do, I’ll capture them too.”



“As for our fourth objective of destroying the nobles’ quarter... Well, this should be enough. I’d estimate we killed half of them. Hm?” Sherfi suddenly noticed three of his people were missing. He turned to the captain of the first unit standing nearby. “Oy, where’s the third unit?”

“They haven’t returned yet.”

“What? The hell are they doing? Assassinating one merchant should be easy.”

Then he realized something.

None of them are back yet? That’s strange. I didn’t think it was possible that all three would be defeated, but...maybe there’s someone absurdly powerful among the bodyguards? Ahhh, shit. This is what happens when our targets are changed at the last minute! Damn those nitwits at headquarters...

Sherfi unleashed a litany of curses in his mind, which helped calm him down.

“For now, we’ll go check the area around Gekko.”



“What in the hell is that...”

Three quadrangular prisms stood in one of the avenues leading to the plaza where Gekko and his group were. Sherfi’s men were inside them.

Are people even capable of accomplishing such a feat...? I remember hearing once that, in the same way a fire magician can’t burn an opponent through internal combustion, water magicians can’t encase their opponents entirely in ice. Is this the work of some sort of powerful item? The fact that people are inside means it won’t be easy to break through the ice, right? But I can’t just leave them there...

Sherfi watched from a spot some distance away from his frozen subordinates, using the chaos of the situation to keep himself hidden... While he worried over his next actions, a collective cheer rose from near the city’s gate.

“The vice commander’s triumphant return, eh?”

He muttered the words with a small smirk before he and the six subordinates

accompanying him left.



Around forty knights arrived in the public square where Gekko and his group waited.

“This is His Excellency Baldwin, vice commander of Llandewi’s knightly order,” one of the knights said. “I take it you’re Gekko, the merchant from the Principality of Inverey? We received a report that you and yours apprehended suspicious individuals. Moving forward, we knights will investigate the matter, so we request that you turn over the suspects to us at once.”

“Wha... Who the hell do—”

Before Max’s voice rose any further, Gekko stopped him with a hand. And then...

“So this is how they intend to handle the situation?” Gekko whispered, his voice so soft no one heard except for Ryo, who stood beside him.

“Thank you for your service,” he continued. “I am indeed Gekko. The suspects are in that alley over there. I’ll lead you to them. Max, Ryo, please accompany me.”

He began walking toward the street he’d indicated.

10-layer Ice Wall Limited Release. Ice Armor.

Ryo applied his Ice Armor spell to Gekko just in case. Though its defensive capability wasn’t as high as Ice Wall’s, it was good enough to fend off throwing knives and such.

“Right then, here we are.” Gekko pointed to three ice pillars.

“What in the world is this...” both the knight who’d spoken earlier and Vice Commander Baldwin mumbled in unison, stunned by the sight.

“One of my escorts captured them in these caskets of ice. Please wait a moment.”

“Y-Yes, of course. A laudable feat. I’ll be sure to remember your people’s aid

in this matter,” Vice Commander Baldwin commented with a magnanimous nod.

“Then, do I have permission to dispel the spell?” Ryo asked the group at large.

“Indeed,” Baldwin answered.

“Unbind their limbs. Ice Casket, Release.”

In his usual slapdash manner, Ryo chanted the impromptu incantation and the Ice Caskets encasing the three vanished. The individuals collapsed on the ground.

“A-Are they alive?” Baldwin asked.

“They are,” Ryo answered in his own polite way, “which is why I strongly recommend restraining them with handcuffs or something similar.”

The vice commander instructed his subordinates to do just that and the knights shuffled the three, with their hands and feet shackled, onto a prisoner transport vehicle.

“Master Gekko, when are you planning on leaving the city?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Gekko responded clearly to Baldwin’s question.

“Is that so? My knights and I will take over the interrogation of these three. Please be careful on your journey.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

Then Gekko bowed deeply, after which the order of knights headed toward their burned-down garrison.

“Master Gekko, aren’t they...”

“Yes, in all likelihood, they’re connected to whoever is behind this turmoil.”

“Then why?!” Max responded furiously to Gekko’s calm remark.

“Max, don’t misjudge the gravity of the situation. Our first priority should be the safety of our company. Trade comes next. And everything else comes after that. Now that Lord Baldwin has his eyes on us, any errors on our part risk endangering the people under our command. Setting aside everything that’s

occurred up until yesterday, if we consider the state of the mayor's residence, I very much doubt His Lordship and the knight commander are alive and well. That means, at the moment, Lord Baldwin is the most powerful person in this city. So we must leave this place before they can harm us physically."

Then Gekko turned toward Ryo and bowed his head.

"I sincerely apologize for handing over the witnesses you captured without your permission, Ryo. But I hope you understand that it was necessary to protect my people."

"Of course. Please don't worry about me. I think it's wonderful that you're prioritizing the safety of your employees," Ryo said with a firm nod.

"Thank you very much." Gekko smiled and bowed his head once more.



The next morning. The fires had thankfully spared the Ruby Inn, where the group woke up early, ate breakfast, and then departed the city of Llandewi before sunrise.

"We'll hit Halwill in three days, then three days after that we'll reach Redpost on the country's border," Rah said, picturing a mental map.

"Assuming things go to plan, hm?" Ryo quipped.

"Ryo, don't jinx us..." he said with a frown.

Last night, Sue had intercepted Rah when he'd tried to sneak out of the inn. Thanks to her interference, he'd been able to do his job as part of Gekko's team during the late-night chaos, so all's well that ends well. But if Sue hadn't caught him...he didn't even want to think about what might have happened to him.

That was why, to express his gratitude, Rah the swordsman had freely given the dessert—fruits—from his own breakfast to Sue, the scout...at least according to the official records of Switchback. In reality, he gave her the plate tearfully.

"We'll be traveling part of the East Highway to reach Redpost from Llandewi. The road is one of the most important in the Kingdom, so I don't *think* anything strange will happen... No, scratch that. Nothing will happen. Definitely not... It

shouldn't happen... Jeez, I hope nothing bad happens..."

Rah's voice grew quieter and quieter as he fervently expressed his wish, trailing off into a mumble by the end.

The first day after their departure passed without incident. And then the morning of the second day, just as they were about to reach the spot they'd designated to take their lunch break, Ryo suddenly sprung into action.

"Rah, enemies are approaching from up ahead. I'll inform Max."

He didn't even wait for Rah's reaction before running toward the head of the caravan. Gekko and a young water magician sat in the driver's seat of the lead wagon while Max and three of his subordinates walked, surrounding the vehicle.

"Max, there's a group of people up ahead. It includes the three we captured in Llandewi."

"What?!"

"Are you certain, Ryo?"

In contrast to Max's shock, Gekko's question sounded calm.

"When we released them, I implanted a transmitt...um, water into their navels that would alert me if they were near. I just received the signal now and they're approaching from the front. Their speed is quite leisurely... I'd say roughly the same as our caravan."

"Master Gekko, they might be pretending to be a caravan themselves. It's a common trick among bandits and other villains."

"I've heard of such tactics being used myself. Right then. We'll create a pretense of resting at that dry riverbed. That will make it easier for us to deal with them as opposed to if we were passing by on the road."

After Gekko's suggestion, Max gave the order and the merchant caravan moved down to the riverbed. Gekko, his subordinates, and the wagons clustered together while the bodyguards casually sat around them, making it seem like they were taking a break.

“10-Layer Ice Wall Package.”

Naturally, Ryo was part of the group surrounding the civilians and he constructed an Ice Wall around them for protection. By this point, Gekko and his staff had become quite used to being encircled in Ryo’s defensive barrier considering how many times he’d created it thus far.

“Ten people are closing in on us. That number includes those three,” Ryo whispered to Max, in command nearby.

“Got it.”

Max paced the perimeter where he thought the front line would be and gave detailed instructions.



Twenty minutes after Gekko’s caravan descended to the dry riverbed, the group of ten Ryo had detected passed by. Four people sat in the driver’s seats of two wagons, two each, and four escorts accompanied them on foot.

Meaning the remaining two are inside the wagons...

With this in mind, Ryo focused his attention on the ten...but made sure not to look at them directly.

It was right about the time the villains expected to intercept Gekko’s caravan when the man noticed their target had descended to the riverbed. In short, they’d been beaten to the punch... At least that was what Ryo surmised from the expression of the man sitting in the driver’s seat of the lead wagon. Of course, a lot of this was Ryo’s imagination.

However, he was almost positive he heard the man click his tongue quietly in frustration. And then he was *definitely* positive he heard the words, “Guess we have no choice” right after. Simultaneously, the four sitting in the driver’s seats hurled something at the space between themselves and Gekko’s group. It rolled on the ground, sending up a cloud of white smoke.

“Poison...? No, can’t be, since it would affect them too. Then it must be a smoke screen!”

Once he arrived at this conclusion, Ryo responded with the magic he usually

employed in these situations.

“Squall.”

A downpour instantly deluged the area and disappeared just as quickly. The rain wafted the smoke down to the ground, where it drifted along the surface. Any attacks hidden in the white haze were instantly nullified. Unfortunately for them, the attackers had already leaped from their wagons to charge toward the riverbed.



“Wha...?! Damn it, the smoke vanished in an instant.”

Sherfi, the leader of the assailants, was shocked. Smoke was their special item that created a very thick smoke screen even outdoors. In a sense, it was a deadly attack method that they had used to great effect up until now—yet the sudden rain had rendered it useless. But they were already running toward the merchant caravan, so it was too late to retreat now. Then the fighting started.

“Where’s Gekko... There he is!”

Sherfi surveyed his surroundings and almost immediately spotted Gekko’s face among the crowd of people. Then he lifted the spear in his right hand high above his head and threw it with all his might.

Klang.

Before it could even reach the merchant, the spear struck something invisible, which repelled it with a loud sound.

“A Physical Barrier? Bastards.”

Cursing, he raced toward Gekko. It went without saying that Gekko’s guards wouldn’t simply let the man have his way. They held their swords at the ready as Sherfi charged toward their employer. However, Sherfi didn’t stop running, dodging swords and slashing at the outstretched arms as he ran. From the corner of his eye, he could see his men being taken down one by one.

How are they so bloody strong? This wasn’t in the report!

Before they’d arrived in the city of Lune, Gekko’s group had been attacked countless times by others. That was how they’d lost five members of his escort

unit. Nothing in the report regarding the incident had mentioned they were this powerful. The ones responsible for defeating Sherfi's subordinates were the elite bodyguards, led by Max, and Switchback, led by Rah. Setting aside Max, it was no wonder Switchback hadn't been mentioned in the report because they hailed from Lune.

Amid all the commotion, Sherfi finally made it to a distance less than twenty meters from Gekko. There, he took the volleyball-sized bag hanging from his waist into his right hand and lit the string extending from it with the lit fuse in his left, which he'd been holding the entire time to prevent it from going out.

"Time for you to meet your maker!"

Then he threw the bag at Gekko. Even if a Physical Barrier was in place, this special Bomb Bag would undoubtedly destroy it.

"It's a specially made device you have no recourse against. Now, die. Don't take it personally."

Sherfi gave up on escape and crossed his arms over his face to protect it from the impending explosion, then watched the Bomb Bag's trajectory in that defensive position. The object sailed unerringly toward Gekko in an arc and then...before it could crash into the wall that blocked his spear, ice encased the Bomb Bag, at which point, it smacked into the invisible barrier and fell to the ground.

"...Huh?"

The stupefied sound slipped unbidden from his mouth. The frozen Bomb Bag, its fuse extinguished, rolled uselessly on the ground.

"Ice...?"

Sherfi fell to his knees and clutched his head in his hands. But he immediately raised his head once more and shouted.

"I surrender! I surrender!"

He tossed away the knife on his belt as well as the lit fuse in his left hand before raising both hands to show his lack of resistance.

“You what? Are you really surrendering?” Gün, the scout, blurted. He’d been closing in on Sherfi from behind.

“Yes, I am. You’ll find no more opposition from me. Gekko, spare my life and I’ll provide you with useful information.”

The villain’s words made Gün hesitate. At this point, all the other attackers besides him were dead. Having failed with their assault, his only sliver of hope was to beg for his life, a tactic that wasn’t...unheard of.

“10-Layer Ice Wall Package.”

Immediately after the voice spoke, a transparent wall of ice formed around Sherfi.

“Now even if he tries to blow himself up, we won’t suffer any damage. We’re safe for now.”

Of course it was Ryo. He spoke loudly on purpose, so that everyone around them, Sherfi included, heard him.

“Ha ha... Using ice is below the belt, don’t you think?” Sherfi spat the words out.

“Ironical for an assassin to complain about the fairness of my tactics, don’t you think?” Ryo retorted just as sharply.

Max and Rah approached the two.

“Hate to break it to you, but we killed all your men by the time you surrendered.”

“Yes, well...they were useful, though there isn’t much I can do about it now. Their sacrifice enabled me to get close enough to throw the Bomb Bag. Yet, in the end, I was unable to land the decisive strike,” Sherfi responded with a shake of his head.

While the two conversed, Ryo picked up the frozen Bomb Bag lying on the ground and studied it.

Hm... Since he called this a Bomb Bag, I’m assuming it explodes, right... Thankfully, the fuse he’d lit with the detonating cord is out... I don’t know what will happen if I keep fiddling with it, so I think I’ll just leave it alone to be safe.

And with that, he handed the object to Rah.

“Huh? Ryo?” Rah questioned, baffled as to why *he* had been given the Bomb Bag.

“Don’t worry, it’s frozen. It won’t explode,” Ryo replied, his answer not an answer at all. They were most certainly not on the same page.

“It’ll be fine, really. Please trust me.”

“Okay, you say that, but then why are you walking away, Ryo...”

Throughout their exchange, Max said nothing. He simply glared at Sherfi.

After some time passed, Gekko walked toward them.

“Well done, everyone. We’re tending to the injured right now. Fortunately for us, we have no deaths or serious injuries, so we should be able to manage with just potions.”

Then he looked at Sherfi, who was still surrounded by Ryo’s Ice Wall.

“So you’re the leader of the raiders, the one who surrendered?”

“Yes. My name is Sherfi.”

Gekko continued staring down at Sherfi impassively while the other man, kneeling on the ground, gazed unblinkingly back at him.

“You assailed us ready to die, yet at the very end you capitulate? Frankly, I find that hard to believe,” Gekko said matter-of-factly, his expression unchanged.

“Well...I suppose I’m not surprised to hear you say that... But think of it from my perspective. It’s impossible for me to kill you the way things stand. On the other hand, I let all my subordinates die and our ambush failed. Even if I were to return, my superiors would force me to take responsibility, so I see no other future for myself except death. It’s one thing to die for the sake of my mission, but another entirely to die in vain because my superiors demand it.”

“Hmmm...” Gekko merely hummed in response, as if pondering the situation. Then, a minute later: “Fine. Though I can’t trust you fully, for now, I’ll accept

your explanation and we can go from there..." He paused meaningfully.

"However, you should be well aware that outlaws and such are executed on the spot, even if they surrender, yes?"

"I know. But I'm not an outlaw. I'm an assassin. Moreover, I have information you'll find desirable. If you'll spare my life, I'm prepared to give it to you."

"Do you have an example of this so-called information?"

"I'll give you one after you agree to let me live."

Gekko tilted his head thoughtfully. "You've placed me in a difficult position since I can't determine whether the information in your possession is worth saving your life... Ryo, I can't trust this person after all, so please freeze him."

"As you wish."

Then Ryo started chanting.

"By the laws of heaven and earth and the will of the Creator of all things that fill this world, O sparkling Goddess of Ice, I offer unto thee this defiant fool..."

"W-Wait, wait, wait!"

"Lay down in yonder casket for sleep eternal..."

"Damn it, man, I told you to wait! I'll tell you why we tried to destroy Llandewi!"

At Sherfi's panicked shout, Gekko finally signaled Ryo to stop.

"You have thirty seconds."

"All right, I understand. The destruction of the city was designed to cripple the eastern part of the Kingdom of Knightley."

Everyone, including Ryo, gasped in surprise. None of them had expected such a bombshell announcement...

"I appreciate your succinct answer. Then might I presume that you and your people brought down the Lowe Bridge for the same reason?"

"We did. Also, I don't know if you're already aware, but we were also involved in Duke Shrewsbury's death. Our operations in the eastern part of the Kingdom have only just begun. This has only been the beginning of what will take years

to accomplish. Since I wasn't made privy to the complete picture, that's all I can tell you of our part of the mission."

Gekko sighed. "I had my doubts about the duke's situation and it turns out I was right... Well, it wouldn't hurt to inform Master McGlass about it, especially since my doing so will put him in my debt," he murmured, his voice so low it sounded almost like he was talking to himself.

"What other information do you have then?"

"Hold it right there. First, I want you to guarantee you'll spare my life. Once you do, I'd be more than happy to tell you everything I know. Not as if I have anything else of value now."

"Fine. Consider it done. On my name, I guarantee your life. Naturally, it's void the instant you behave suspiciously. I trust we have an understanding?"

"Yes. You have my thanks." Sherfi nodded in relief before continuing. "And, well...this is difficult for me to say, but I have a favor to ask."

His tone became awkward and he averted his gaze from Gekko's.

"You're not in any position to negotiate!" Max, silent until then, snarled at Sherfi.

"I know! I know, all right?! Even so...I have no choice. After all, I must remain alive for you to use me, yes? But at this rate, I'm going to die."

"What the hell does that mean?!"

Though Max was the only one who shouted, Sherfi's words surprised everyone there.

"The Sect...that is what we call the organization we belong to. They hex us to prevent us from betraying them. If we betray them, we die."

"Then I'm assuming your favor has to do with undoing the curse if we want information?"

"Correct." Sherfi nodded.

"Easier said than done. We need more details about this curse if we're going to get rid of it."

“I myself have no notion of how it activates, or whether it’s the curse itself or magic or something else entirely. One of the leaders mentioned that alchemy is involved too.”

“Alchemy?!”

Ryo’s voice unconsciously shot up in excitement at Sherfi’s use of the word. Alchemy, the thing that had recently become his favorite pastime! Perhaps then, it was no wonder he reacted the way he did when the topic came up.

“A crest is tattooed into our chests. From it, a stone spear arises and pierces straight through the heart, leading to death. I have personally witnessed the phenomenon twice, so I know I’m right.”

Everyone remained silent for several long moments after Sherfi finished talking.

Max broke the silence first: “So either erase the tattoo or tear it off, skin and all. That’s what it comes down to, right?”

“W-Wait! If you’re going to take the latter route, then you’ll need a high-ranking cleric on hand to heal me immediately.”

“This is why you surrendered, isn’t it?”

“Yes...I can’t deny that.”

If you want to close a wound, any priest’s Heal spell will do the trick. No matter how deep the wound, casting Heal repeatedly will repair the damage. However, for wounds in which the victim has lost huge chunks of flesh and muscle tissue, Extra Heal was the bare minimum magic needed to regenerate the body. And depending on the extent of the damage, it would need to be cast multiple times. Only high-ranking priests and priestesses were capable of this feat.

Even in large cities, you would only be able to find one or two of such powerful clerics...and most people lacked the connections to ask for their help. The “donations” needed to encourage them to perform such magic were considerable—more than even lower-ranking nobles could afford.

“There isn’t anyone powerful enough in Halwill, which leaves only Redpost as

a possibility..." Max muttered.

"Unfortunately, Hierarch Jariga of Redpost is in the royal capital at the moment, so that will be impossible," Gekko replied.

"Unbelievable..."

To no one's surprise, Sherfi looked plainly depressed by the news. It was only natural. Despite surrender being his only option, it all amounted to nothing if the curse wasn't removed quickly enough.

Gekko turned toward Ryo, who had fallen into a thoughtful silence after his excited shout of "Alchemy?!"

"Ryo, I suppose it would be too much to hope for a water magic spell suitable for this occasion?"

It was clear the merchant wasn't expecting a convenient solution out of Ryo.

"Well, in a way, yes, but...there might be a method I could utilize to protect his heart temporarily. If you don't have any other ideas, it wouldn't hurt to try it out..."

"So there *is* a spell?!"

Gekko's tone changed the moment Ryo spoke. It made Ryo realize how much he actually wanted to save the assassin's life. The fact that he wanted to use even a former assassin as human capital... Ryo was once again impressed. The man was a merchant through and through. Ryo's admiration was clear in his voice when he answered him.

"Simply put, it means covering the heart with a membrane of ice to block the spear emerging from the tattoo. Or I could cover the tattoo itself with the ice membrane, so that even if the spear emerges, it won't reach the heart..."

"I see!"

Then Gekko pondered Ryo's explanation for several minutes, nodding and muttering to himself.

"Um...excuse me...but an ice membrane... I... Isn't that cold? Wouldn't that stop my heart?"

The only one who wasn't convinced was Sherfi, the potential test subject. No, maybe he simply didn't *want* to understand...



Three days after departing Llandewi.

If things went well, they would arrive at Halwill before dusk. After his surrender, Sherfi had been stationed in the center of the caravan with Ryo and Rah.

He wasn't sure how he felt about the ice membrane around his heart, even if it was to protect him from the cursed tattoo. Out of consideration for the assassin, Gekko had decided it would be better for Ryo, the creator of the membrane, to remain nearby. Of course, the merchant's consideration didn't always work out in Sherfi's favor.

For example... Right now, he was walking on his own two feet. But his hands were behind his back, with his groin, waist, and neck covered in ice. From a distance, it looked as if he had been impaled on a pillar of ice. Ryo had taken these measures to limit his freedom and ensure he couldn't engage in any villainy.

"Hey...Ryo. Can't you do something about these ice restraints? It isn't just about the appearance either. Having my arms so close to my body all the time makes it difficult to balance myself when I walk. I always feel on the verge of falling," Sherfi whined.

"Ha! How many times have you repeated yourself now?" Ryo grumbled. "You should know better than anyone how dangerous it would be to leave an assassin's hands free. It's not like I'm doing this because I want to. I'm doing this because I *have* to. Because the truth is, I want to cover your legs and your face—actually, just your mouth—with ice. Assassins use their whole bodies as weapons, not to mention all the concealed weapons."

"Agreed," Rah added. "So the fact that we have to walk next to someone so dangerous...is just proof of how dangerous being an adventurer is, jeez."

"But you confiscated all my weapons... Also, you can't imagine how frustrating it is not to be able to scratch my head or my nose when it gets

itchy.”

“Good grief, you’re a pain...”

With that comment, Ryo used water magic to create an ice mask that covered Sherfi’s entire head, and connected it to the ice straitjacket that stretched to his neck. Then, after some more fine-tuning, he spoke.

“All right, it’s done. Like this, you’ll be able to scratch the top of your head just by moving your right index finger a little bit. By moving your left index finger a smidge, you can scratch the bridge of your nose. Now you can scratch away even with your arms held in place. Aren’t you glad? Please be grateful.”

“Awesome... Completely worthless, but awesome...” Rah murmured, surprised, as he watched the unbelievable sight from next to them. Since his mouth was also covered by the ice mask, Sherfi could say neither a word of thanks nor protest...

In the evening, they arrived at Halwill’s city gate. Ryo dispelled Sherfi’s ice mask because even he thought it was a bit much having him enter the city like that.

“Please bear with it for a little while, even if your head and nose start to itch,” Ryo said gently.

“That’s not the point! I don’t need that ridiculous ice mask!” Sherfi angrily shouted nonetheless.

Ryo had been quite proud of his ice mask, but apparently, Sherfi hadn’t liked it.

“I tried so hard too... Maybe I should have made the design a bit more modern, given it a few contemporary artistic touches... If something is obviously a mask, it will be underappreciated from an artistic point of view. But perhaps that’s inevitable.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s the problem, Ryo,” Rah quipped calmly in response to Ryo’s depressed self-flagellation and ideas to make up for his failure in the future.

“You think you’re so bloody clever, Ryo,” Sherfi, raging, swore at Ryo. “I won’t forget this.”

“All right, since you clearly weren’t a fan of the mask, I’ll make sure to have you rest in one of my ice caskets while we’re here. I think I’ll petition the city to put you on display as a frozen objet d’art.”

“Please...forgive me, Master Ryo. I was wrong. Anything but that, I beg of you.”

Sherfi, having seen his three subordinates encased in ice, sincerely wanted to avoid the same fate. Being in the middle of a city, no less, only made it worse, which was why he quickly acknowledged his own mistake.

Thanks to Gekko’s mediation, Ryo took off the ice straitjacket too. By the time they entered Halwill, he looked just like any other member of the merchant caravan. As far as his identity went, Gekko registered him as one of the five bodyguards he’d lost on the journey to Lune. Though Max’s expression had been complicated during the entry procedure, he had said nothing, simply following Gekko’s orders. Because even Max understood this was the best course of action.

Gekko’s inn of choice in this city was called The Mountain Stream. While Halwill wasn’t a huge trading hub like other places in the Kingdom, it was still a city that connected Llandewi, the second-largest city in the eastern part of the country, and Redpost, the city on its border. Many merchants and adventurers passed through on their journeys, which explained why it had so many lodging establishments.

Among all those hotels, The Mountain Stream was a cut above the rest. Both its popularity and price were incredibly high. Three of them were currently in the inn’s dining hall.

“I can’t believe an assassin is allowed to stay in such a high-class place...” Ryo said, his voice too loud to be a murmur.

“How in the bloody hell am I supposed to respond to that...?” Sherfi retorted with a scowl.

“Ryo, make no mistake,” Rah said, deliberating fanning the flames. “This assassin seems to have had a change of heart over his lifestyle, so we should be calling him a *former* assassin.”

“You know, I didn’t think of it like that, Rah. You’re so smart. Speaking of hearts, we could make quick work of extracting his...”

“Stop it,” Sherfi said. “I’ve had enough of you both.”

Ryo started to think maybe he’d gone a little overboard.

Given that an assassin was a mass murderer who had killed countless people, most people had a hard time accepting such people without prejudice. It wasn’t a matter of logic, but emotion. So perhaps people’s suspicions would naturally rear up when dealing with assassins, like what was happening with Ryo now.

On the contrary, it was more unusual to accept an assassin and try to use them as a human resource, like Gekko, the merchant... Could this be attributed to the extent of his talent as a merchant or his tremendous capacity as a human being...?

When he thought about it like this, Ryo decided he would do his best to emulate Gekko. No more rejecting the assassin in front of him unconditionally... First, he would utilize him as a human tool. No, even that seemed too much, so he’d use him as fuel for his own growth instead...

“Sherfi, I may have overdone it. I’m sorry.”

“What are you up to this time...?”

Even though Ryo apologized sincerely, Sherfi stared at him suspiciously. No wonder too, in light of Ryo’s poor treatment of him thus far... However, it was unclear whether or not Ryo was aware of his own behavior.

“All right, I think we should clear the air between us first, erase all the bad feelings. To accomplish this, we need to build trust.”

“R-Right...”

Despite Ryo’s words, Sherfi still seemed doubtful. Trust-building was truly a difficult endeavor.

“What exactly do you propose?”

Nevertheless, Sherfi was the one who initiated the conversation, reassuring Ryo that the man wasn't apathetic to the idea. A stroke of luck for him indeed.

"There's nothing in particular you have to do, Sherfi, because I'll pay for your dinner here."

"What?"

"Order whatever you want and however much of it you want." Ryo smiled. "This is the first step to building trust between us."

"Are you pulling my leg..." Sherfi said, smiling uncertainly.

Rah looked like he wanted to say something, but ultimately decided to keep his mouth shut.

Sherfi glanced at Rah and seemed to realize something. "Hey...Ryo."

"What is it, Sherfi?"

"Isn't Gekko paying for everyone's meals?"

"H-How did you figure it out..."

"Damn it, I knew it! The first step to building trust, my left foot! You tried to deceive me!"

Yes, trust-building would be quite the uphill battle...

"Ryo," Rah muttered to himself with a small shake of his head. "You definitely had this in mind from the beginning."

In spite of everything, Sherfi was able to spend his time in The Mountain Stream without any restrictions on his freedom of movement. Except for his room assignment, which ended up being with Ryo and Rah.

The next morning, the group departed. And the captured former assassin complained once more.

"Damn it, not this again."

With his groin, waist, and neck covered in ice, from a distance, it looked as if he had been impaled on a pillar of ice—just like yesterday. Ryo listened to his prisoner's dissatisfaction, surveyed him in silence for a few moments, then

noded broadly, making a suggestion.

“Sherfi, I have a brilliant idea. You won’t have to worry about falling, we won’t have to worry about you, *and* you won’t tire yourself out either.”

“Everything you’re saying *sounds* good, but...” Rah started muttering.

Sherfi stared silently, his gaze holding a deep, overwhelming measure of distrust...

Ryo ignored that gaze and used water magic to create...his magic Cart. Sherfi silently climbed into it, bound from neck to toe in the ice straitjacket.

The Cart spanned a length of two meters. If the people of modern-day Earth saw it, they might view it as a small tank of some sort... For the people of Phi, it was a self-moving curio... But with a human inside, it must look even stranger.

In fact, without exception, everyone who passed by their caravan on the highway stared at Sherfi in the vehicle. As an assassin who’d lived his life in the shadows, there was simply no way he could endure such humiliation.

“Ryo, I’m sorry. I was in the wrong. I’ll walk without complaining. No, I *want* to walk. No, no, no, *please* let me walk, I’m begging you!”

An odd expression crossed Ryo’s face at Sherfi’s incredible desperation. He didn’t need to worry about falling or becoming tired because he didn’t have to walk on his own two feet. Ryo had created the perfect conditions for him. So why wasn’t he happy?

Perhaps the very concept of humiliation had slipped Ryo’s mind at the time.

“Since the guy himself is asking, why not just let him walk?” Rah intervened on behalf of the pleading Sherfi.

“Well, if you think so, Rah, I suppose we could do that.”

He dispelled the Cart and returned the ice straitjacket to its original form, which extended from Sherfi’s neck to his hips. After that, just like he declared, Sherfi walked without a single complaint.



The resumption of their journey also brought back a familiar sight each

afternoon during their lunch breaks: Gekko's civilian staff, everyone besides the guards and adventurers, practicing their magic.

"Hey, what are they doing?"

Sitting on the ground, Sherfi watched them and questioned Rah, who sat next to him.

"Oh, them. They're water magicians. Ryo's teaching them how to make ice walls."

"Ice walls..."

Sherfi was at a loss for words. The ice walls were unbelievably hard. Initially, he'd thought it was a Physical Barrier, but he was shocked now that he knew the transparent wall was made of ice. So *that* had repelled his spear, forcing him to charge...and ultimately surrender. Were those boys also going to learn how to erect those ice walls?

"Impossible," Sherfi muttered with a shake of his head. "I don't see how they even can."

"I thought the same thing at first. But a few of them have actually gotten pretty good at the spell, and in just a few days too. Once more merchants become able to create those ice walls, the assassin business will be in bad shape, huh?"

Rah burst out laughing then.

In response, Sherfi mustered a small, dry smile. "Well then, how fortunate that I retired..." he murmured.

Gekko approached the two.

"A merchant's top priority is protecting themselves. If they can also secure their staff's safety through the same means, all the better, don't you think? Ryo's ice wall makes this possible. Even if it is difficult to use right away, I still want them to learn," he said, watching the boys with gentle eyes.

"Master Gekko, what precisely are the qualities necessary to be a good merchant?" Sherfi suddenly asked.

“What inspired this unexpected question?”

“Well, if I were hired as an escort by your firm, this is how I would travel as part of a caravan, yes? So I thought I’d like to learn more about merchants and commerce and whatnot...” Sherfi replied while staring at Gekko.

“It’s always nice to see someone motivated. However...as far as what makes a good merchant...that’s a very difficult question to answer. Especially since all sorts of merchants exist. Their methods differ too depending on their specialties. Although I would say the one thing they all have in common is their sincere approach to trade.”

“A sincere approach to trade... That’s too vague,” Sherfi mumbled with a thoughtful tilt of his head.

Gekko chuckled. “Hm, you have a point. I suppose it comes down to whether a merchant is always thinking about their business, their customers, and their employees. To discover if something is always on your mind, try asking a question. If it’s something you’ve thought about before, you’ll be able to answer right away, yes? For example... Sherfi, what do you think are the fundamentals of commerce?”

“Th-The fundamentals of commerce...” Sherfi replied, considering. “Hm. Isn’t it just profit?”

“Interesting. That is, in fact, an answer. It also reveals your thoughts and feelings about the concept based on your experiences with merchants and trade thus far.”

“Ah, you might be right...”

Sherfi ruminated on Gekko’s words for some time.

Just then, Ryo returned.

“Ryo,” Gekko called out, “what do you think are the fundamentals of commerce?”

“To secure regulars,” Ryo replied without missing a beat.

“Re-Regulars...?” Gekko did not seem to understand the word.

“Oh, I’m sorry... Um, it means regular customers.”

“I see. Why do you think this?”

Gekko looked far more interested now than he had been during Sherfi’s answer.

“By securing regular customers, you can estimate the scale of your sales for next year and the year after as well. This makes it easier to create a budget. Being able to forecast your business is the bare minimum requirement. Moreover, regular customers who recognize the quality of your products and services will also spread the word to their families and friends, which increases your reputation without advertising costs. And through the recommendations of close friends and acquaintances, you’re more likely to gain customers’ trust. That’s why I believe it’s important for a corporation—I mean, a trading company—to continue making quality products to maintain and increase its base of regular customers.”

Ryo said all this in a single breath, which left Sherfi staring at him in dumbfounded amazement.

“Ah ha. Ryo, it’s clear to me you have experience approaching trade sincerely, don’t you?” Gekko nodded happily over and over. “Would you consider quitting the life of an adventurer and working for me instead?”

“I respectfully decline...”



On the third evening after leaving Halwill, Gekko’s merchant caravan finally arrived at Redpost, the city located on the Kingdom’s eastern border. This marked the twelfth day since their departure from Lune.

Redpost was a territory under the direct control of the royal family, its magistrate dispatched from the central government. Economically, it was roughly the same size as Llandewi, the second-largest city in the eastern part of the country. It bordered the Principality of Inverey to the southeast. Due to the friendly relationship between the two countries, trade between them had been expanding for the past ten years. Incidentally, it bordered the Handalieu Federation to the northeast. In short, Redpost was the Kingdom’s border city with both these nations.

Gekko's caravan entered The Green Star, his preferred inn in the city, and finished checking in.

"Oh my gosh! It's Ryo!" a familiar voice called from behind their group.

When Ryo turned around, he wasn't surprised to see Lyn, the air magician of The Crimson Sword. Behind her stood the party's shield-bearer, Warren.

"Huh? Lyn? Warren? Why are you here?"

"For work, of course. Why else?" Lyn answered, her head cocked curiously.

"Right, that makes sense..." Ryo suddenly thought of something. "Wait, if you two are in Redpost, does this mean Rihya is too?"

"Rihya, not Abel...? Look, Ryo, I don't want to put a dent in your confidence, but you won't make her fall for you. A battle between you and Abel over her...I personally don't want to witness the bloodshed," Lyn answered with a shake of her head.

Behind her, Warren silently did the same.

"That wasn't what I had in mind at all, you know. Rihya's a high-ranking priestess, right?"

"Hm? Did someone suffer a serious injury or lose a body part? If the latter, there's a 24-hour time limit to fully repair the missing part before it's gone forever. But if it's something else, she should be able to handle it."

When he heard her response, Ryo nodded emphatically, like she confirmed exactly what he'd been thinking. Then he turned toward Gekko, who'd been listening to their conversation beside him.

"Master Gekko, this is Lyn and Warren. They're members of The Crimson Sword, an adventurers' party from Lune. Lyn, Warren, this is Master Gekko, a merchant from the Principality of Inverey. He hired me and Rah and his party to escort his caravan to Inverey."

He introduced the three to each other.

"The B-rank party, The Crimson Sword! Of course, I know of you all. I frequently conduct business with Master McGlass, so I hope we see more of each other moving forward as well."

After Gekko introduced himself, Lyn and Warren also gave brief introductions. Naturally, Warren's came from Lyn too.

"Ryo, am I correct in thinking you introduced me to these two because the priestess Rihya's healing magic is the solution to Sherfi's problem?"

"Yes, you are. However, if you would rather take care of it after we reach Inverey's capital, I don't think there's any need to force ourselves to take action here..." Ryo asked with a probing look to him.

To his surprise, Gekko laughed instead.

"Oh, no, I wasn't thinking that at all. If we can resolve the problem quickly, all the better is what I believe. I would be more than happy for The Crimson Sword's assistance in this matter. And of course, I'll prepare suitable compensation."

Then Gekko bowed his head at Lyn and Warren.

"This isn't really something I can decide on my own, so..." Lyn said with a glance at Warren. "Please ask the other two directly when they return. They shouldn't be long."

Warren nodded back in agreement.

After a while, Abel and Rihya came back to The Green Star. They held a meeting immediately in the inn's café... In modern terms, the area would be described as a hotel lounge. The participants were the four members of The Crimson Sword, Ryo, Gekko, Max, and Sherfi. They exchanged greetings and everyone was brought up to speed on the situation...

"Basically, you're ripping out the cursed tattoo on Sherfi's chest and you want Rihya to heal the wound, right?" Abel asked again in his own words to confirm his understanding.

This was an important process. One needed to clear up any confusion lest misunderstandings occur.

"Yes, that's correct," Gekko answered with a nod. "Of course, I'm fully prepared to pay a sum suitable for services rendered by a high-ranking cleric."

Abel looked questioningly at Rihya.

“I don’t mind,” she said. “Our party’s job here is done and all that’s left for us to do is start the journey back to Lune tomorrow. However, I do have one concern about the tattoo you showed me... Are you certain it *can* be cut out?”

“Yes,” Sherfi replied thoughtfully. “I once had an alchemist I vaguely knew examine it. He told me that a normal tattoo is simply ink inserted into the skin, so it can be completely removed by peeling the skin. But this has infiltrated even deeper... In short, the flesh itself will also need to be removed. The concern is the potential to damage my heart...”

Most of them began imagining the sight of peeling the tattooed flesh from his body. It was easy enough for them since they were adventurers and a part of their daily routine involved extracting magic stones from the hearts of monsters.

“I dunno, seems pretty dangerous to me. Hey, Ryo,” Abel said, looking at Ryo. “I remember you once created super thin streams of water. Can’t you use that?”

He was probably referring to the Water Jet spell.

Ryo tilted his head slightly in thought. “Huh? Have I actually ever used Water Jet in front of you, Abel?”

“I guessed you mentioned it after you cut off those three things’ heads using the technique. I gotta admit that I had no clue what happened when you actually did it. Oh, and I think the first time you actually showed it to me was on a golem.”

While Ryo didn’t remember using Water Jet to cut something in front of Abel, he *did* remember using Abrasive Jet to cut up the golems in order to extract their magic stones. He also remembered instantly beheading the three powerful devils in the dungeon’s fortieth layer.

“That’s my special supersecret magic, so you’re banned from disclosing it to others,” Ryo said, placing his right index finger over his lips for emphasis.

“What the heck is special supersecret magic in the first place...” Abel replied, exasperated.

Everyone else watched Ryo with expectant eyes. They needed answers.

“Ah... Um, unfortunately, that spell won’t work. At first glance, it will seem like the flesh is cut cleanly, but in reality, water will seep into the area around the wound and damage the surrounding tissue. I’m not sure healing magic will be able to repair the damage either.”

Injuries caused by water jets exist even on modern-day Earth. The damage to the area and surrounding tissues is apparently quite unique, and the manufacturers of water jet machines have even gone to the trouble of publishing information for medical personnel. But as far as Ryo was concerned, he felt that if Rihya’s healing magic really was superb, things would probably work out... After all, it could repair missing body parts.

If I master it properly, I wonder if I can use it in surgery... There was a scalpel that used a water jet... Right now though, all I would do is increase his risk of serious injury or even death...

The less risk, the better. However, if worse came to worse, he was prepared to use it as their last resort.

Everyone lapsed into a thoughtful silence again once they understood the task was difficult even for Ryo’s water magic.

“I think the only way is to gouge it out with a knife,” Ryo said, proposing an alternative. “But what I can do is extend the ice membrane covering the heart to include vital blood vessels around it. That way, Sherfi should be fine even if the knife penetrates too deeply.”

“That would work.”

Max was the first to agree with Ryo’s suggestion, likely because he felt that, given the current circumstances, there was a high chance he would be the one doing the deed. After all, he was the only one here with experience removing a tattoo, even if it was from a corpse.

“Ryo, if you don’t mind, I have a question...”

Sherfi sounded awkward, going so far as to raise his hand to ask.

“Go on.”

“Is the ice membrane around my heart cold?”

“Oooh,”

Lyn blurted. Apparently, she’d been wondering the same thing.

“If it was cold, your heart would stop beating, Sherfi.”

“R-Right...” Sherfi made a strange face. “I understand that. Obviously, it hasn’t stopped beating. It is most certainly functioning. Which is precisely why it makes me wonder... I mean, it *is* my body, so it would be nice to know one way or another...”

As for Ryo, he wasn’t afraid to explain things properly.

Recently, it’s become the norm for doctors to properly explain surgical procedures to their patients before the surgery. This is called informed consent. Submitting to a procedure, having your body cut into, without knowing what’s going to happen was almost certainly asking too much of a person. Having said that, an overly detailed explanation probably wasn’t helpful either since it might be too complicated to understand.

“First of all, ice steals heat from its surroundings when it turns into water. That’s why it feels cold when you hold ice in your hand. However, Sherfi, the ice I generate in your body remains ice forever through magic. It never turns into water, so it doesn’t steal heat from its surroundings. That’s one. Secondly, I set it up to ‘forbid’ the transfer of heat from its surroundings to the ice membrane, so there’s no change in temperature.”

“You can do that?!” Lyn, the air magician, said in surprise.

“Well, it involves water and I *am* a water magician, so yes, *I* can.”

More accurately, he should be discussing molecular vibrations. The molecular vibration of the ice membrane itself, where both the temperature and molecular vibration were low, remained constant; meanwhile, the vibration from the area surrounding the ice membrane, where both the temperature and molecular vibration were high, wasn’t transmitted. But this was too difficult to explain here and it would be impossible to answer detailed questions. So he came up with his rough explanation of “forbidding heat transfer” instead.

“I-I wonder if I can do it for air...to help me weather cold days and such...”

Ryo didn't hear Lyn's whisper.



As the saying goes: strike while the iron is hot.

At the very least, they'd decided to approach the situation with a “won't know until we try” mentality. Resolved, the group borrowed one of the conference rooms in The Green Star to take action.

“I really think we should examine the matter more thoroughly...” Sherfi, the test subject, opined. Unfortunately for him...

“The sooner, the better,” Gekko said, encouraging them to carry out the plan tonight.

Sherfi swallowed a whole-body anesthetic the inn always kept on hand and soon found himself in dreamland. By this point, Rihya had also finished reciting a long incantation. All she needed to do to activate the spell was say the trigger word.

Additionally, hot water was available nearby, though most everyone there didn't know what it would be used for. Based on his dubious medical knowledge, Ryo had decided it was necessary for a surgery like this, so naturally, he himself had prepared it using his water magician.

Now, they waited for Max, who would be the one actually stripping the flesh from Sherfi's body, to finish his preparations. He knew which knife he would use. It was the same one he used to extract magic stones and...well, the same one he'd used to cut the tattoo out before, never mind that it had been a corpse. Max was a superstitious sort.

Gekko, Abel, Lyn, and Warren, with no roles to play in this operation, watched the proceedings a short distance away from Sherfi's sleeping form. Warren held his shield at the ready and Lyn peeked out from behind it...

I hope he knows that if a situation does arise where we need shields or such, none of us are going to escape unscathed...

Ryo complained internally at the sight.

Meanwhile, Max examined Sherfi's body by tugging at his skin and pushing against his muscles here and there. Next to him, Ryo focused on expanding the ice membrane surrounding Sherfi's heart to encompass the organ as well as the surrounding blood vessels. The largest ones could be seen attached to the heart whenever one is pulled out from someone's chest in manga and anime. The vena cava—a large artery that wraps around the heart—runs up and down, three carotid arteries stretching out of that, the left and right pulmonary arteries winding around it, and finally, the four pulmonary veins to the left and right. As long as Ryo covered all of that, Sherfi wouldn't die instantly. And Rihya was there for assurance against anything other than instant death...

With all this in mind, he extended the film of ice.

"The ice membrane is ready," Ryo announced to Max.

"Got it. All right, Master Gekko, here I go."

"Understood. Please do what's necessary," Gekko said, giving permission.

After a short pause, Max's knife penetrated Sherfi's chest. Then he sliced without hesitation through his skin and muscle. However, a minute into the planned four-minute procedure, a change occurred in the tattoo. The sword piercing the double-headed eagle in the design started glowing. A beat later, a stone spear began to form in midair, one that looked as if it would pierce Sherfi's chest.

"Ryo!"

"Don't worry. I'll protect Sherfi's heart," Ryo calmly replied.

The tattoo had a mechanism to kill the host if anyone tried to remove it, but the ice membrane accounted for this. Max continued to cut through with his knife as a third of the allotted time passed. While he did so, the stone spear in the air commenced its trajectory straight toward Sherfi's heart. It collided with Ryo's ice membrane.

Grind, grind, grind. The metallic sound echoed through the room even though it should have sounded like stone grinding against ice.

There's a lot of damage to his ribs, but it's inevitable... I'll just pray that Rihya can fix it later.

Though Sherfi's heart remained protected, the surrounding ribs were a necessary sacrifice. Unfortunately, a bigger problem cropped up at the same time.

Passive Sonar, the spell Ryo had deployed just in case, suddenly pinged.

Hm? People are heading straight toward us at incredible speed?

"Someone's going to come through the window!" Ryo declared loudly so that everyone, including Gekko and the others watching from a distance, could hear.

"Abel, please protect Gekko. It's possible the person is after his life."

"Leave it to me!"

Despite the questions burgeoning in Abel's mind, he understood this wasn't the time to ask them.

"10-Layer Ice Wall Package."

Ryo encircled everyone surrounding Sherfi—himself, Max, and Rihya—in the Ice Wall. Almost immediately, strangers leaped through the three windows that had been left wide open.

"They're wearing all black..." Rihya murmured upon seeing them.

Two of the three villains targeted Gekko while the third headed toward Sherfi.

"Master Gekko!" Max shouted, his knife still lodged in Sherfi's chest.

"Don't worry. Abel and the others will protect him. We should focus on removing the tattoo."

"A-All right."

With that, Max turned back to Sherfi and resumed cutting.

The three, black-clad enemies acted uniformly despite being separated from one another. They each took a fist-sized object from inside their clothes and flung it at the floor. Unfortunately for them, the members of Gekko's merchant caravan had witnessed a similar sight not too long ago...

"Smoke screens!"

They indeed used the same type of smoke bombs Sherfi had employed during

his surprise attack against the caravan.

“Let the wind whirl in my palm. Tornado,” Lyn chanted. The spell gathered up the smoke blanketing the inside of the room and expelled it through the windows.

Excellent work, Lyn. Quick on the uptake as always.

Ryo was honestly impressed. He had used his Squall to dispel the smoke screen on his previous encounter by pushing the smoke to the ground, but Lyn the air magician used her Tornado to funnel it outside instead. Her judgment was quick and flawless, as was her action. That made all the difference between life and death.

I guess attacking after throwing up a smoke screen must be a go-to for assassins seeing as Sherfi tried the same thing.

He smiled ruefully on the inside. Sure, it could be an effective tactic, but it was easily foiled if the defending party had someone like Ryo and Lyn on their side... Of course, they likely had a Plan B as well just in case... However, The Crimson Sword wasn't nice enough to allow them to execute it.

The moment Lyn's Tornado spell siphoned up all the smoke, Abel kicked off the floor and lunged at one of the villains, who just barely managed to parry his attack using the dagger held in their opposite hand. But Abel's second attack, flowing smoothly from the first, severed the assassin's arm and Abel's subsequent overhead, diagonal slash ended his assailant's life.

Warren, the shield bearer, was fending off the other enemy, giving Abel time to take care of the first intruder. Once Abel dealt with the would-be assassin, he rushed in from behind and lopped the second's head off in one sword stroke.

If the villains had succeeded in putting up their smoke screens and forced the people in this small room into a close-quarter battle, they might have been able to demonstrate their fearsome powers as assassins. To their misfortune, they were up against the B-rank party, The Crimson Sword, which easily dispatched the two assassins, turning the bloodbath the attackers had anticipated on its head.

Incidentally, the last of the three, the one who had raced toward Sherfi, was

encased in a coffin of ice before even reaching Ryo's Ice Wall...

"Bear with it for a little longer, Sherfi," Max said while cutting through the man's chest.

If someone unaware of the circumstances were to witness this bizarre sight, they would be horrified. That wasn't even counting the two corpses and black-clad man frozen in ice nearby.

However, serious as he was, Max didn't have the wherewithal to think about all this. Because even as the villains staged their attack, the stone spear moved relentlessly toward Sherfi's heart. It was a race against time between that stone spear and Max. Then, at long last...

"All right, it's done."

"Ice Casket."

The moment Max finished slicing off the piece of flesh sporting the tattoo, Ryo surrounded it in a coffin made of ice.

"Extra Heal."

Once she made sure the other two were finished, Rihya cast the spell on the massive crater in Sherfi's chest, through which his beating heart was visible. It was the most advanced healing magic rumored to be able to restore missing body parts. With perfection in mind, she cast Extra Heal a second time.

There were very few clerics capable of using the spell in succession. Ryo didn't know what made Rihya one of them. He didn't know, but it didn't matter as long as she *could* use it.

Extra Heal did its job superbly. The muscle tissue and blood vessels regenerated first, followed by skin to cover it all. The newly generated skin showed no traces of the tattoo. After Rihya took Sherfi's pulse, she announced to Gekko that there were no issues.

The merchant looked clearly relieved by the news.

"Ryo," Abel said, "are these bad guys who I think they are...?"

"Yes." Ryo nodded. "Members of The Sect, the same organization Sherfi

belonged to.”

“An order whose calling is assassination...” Rihya murmured.

“The Sect of Assassins!” Lyn exclaimed.

“Indeed... Their existence has been less a rumor and more a legend...” Rihya said thoughtfully.

Wow...even this world has its own Order of Assassins, huh?

Ryo was just the slightest bit impressed.

The Order of Assassins on Earth was founded by Hasan-i Sabbah, also known as the Old Man of the Mountain. Many stories and legends abound about him, and of course, he actually existed in real life. His death date is recorded as May 23 in the year 1124 in Alamut Castle, which was located in the western part of the country that would later be known as Iran.

One of the anecdotes about him describes his relationship with Nizam al-Mulk. It was written by the Persian historian, Hamdallah Mustawfi Qazvini, in his work, the *Tarikh-i guzida*. While Hasan-i Sabbah was in the service of the second sultan of the Seljuk Empire, Alp Arslan, Nizam al-Mulk was one of the sultan’s viziers.

The Seljuk Empire, founded by Tughril, reached its territorial heights under the combined leadership of Arslan and Nizam, leading to a golden age under the third sultan’s rule. There’s no doubting the tremendous talents of both these men.

Moving on. One day, Arslan instructed Hasan-i Sabbah to compile expenditure reports for the entire country, an exceedingly challenging task that Vizier al-Mulk said would take a year. Moreover, Hasan only had forty days. Nevertheless, he completed it.

Panicked by the other man’s success, the vizier destroyed the contents of Hasan’s report on the morning he was to present it to the sultan. Unable to answer Arslan’s questions, Hasan was disgraced. Naturally, Nizam further rubbed salt in his wound. As a result, Hasan-i Sabbah was banished from the imperial court. He later founded the Order of Assassins.

Vizier Nizam al-Mulk is a noted historical figure who appears in high school world history textbooks. The Nezamiyeh, institutions of higher learning he founded, also appear frequently on regular exams. Such a famous person was assassinated in the year 1092. By whom, you might wonder...

Wait, wasn't the Seljuk Empire's national crest the double-headed eagle...? Sherfi's tattoo had one pierced with a sword... Is this a coincidence?

Historically, numerous royal families and countries took up the double-headed eagle as their coats of arms and national emblems. Whether the Holy Roman Empire or Russia's Romanov Dynasty, the design has been common since antiquity. It went without saying that Ryo's knowledge of this topic was Earth-based, so it was only natural for him to wonder if the same applied to royals and countries here on Phi.

If he thought about this logically, the use of the double-headed eagle as a crest probably *was* a coincidence... But on the off chance it wasn't...then that would lead to a deduction—a reincarnate had something to do with The Sect of Assassins.

Well, there's no point wondering about it now. Not like I'm going to find the answer. I'll just ask Sherfi when he wakes up.

Thanks to the presence of curry, cafes, and crepes on this world, Ryo secretly believed in the existence of a reincarnate or reincarnates plural beyond himself. The only question was whether they were still alive, and in his honest opinion, it wouldn't even be a big deal if they were.

Ryo was definitely a mess in a lot of ways.

Sherfi, still sleeping, was carried to Ryo and Rah's room. Though Rihya's Extra Heals had completely repaired his wound, it hadn't regenerated the blood he'd lost. And the blood loss had been significant, considering the gouge in his chest had been large enough to expose his heart. Despite Ryo protecting the vital blood vessels using his ice membrane, bleeding is an expected part of surgery...so it couldn't be helped.

Rah, who'd been guarding the civilian members of the caravan, had been

waiting nervously, his heart pounding. Gekko had given him strict orders to stay here and protect his staff, so he hadn't been able to move from his spot even with the ruckus inside the conference room. He believed in Abel more than anyone else. When Ryo told him about Abel and his party defeating the assassins, he happily responded, "I'm not surprised," as if his idol's actions were his own.

Speaking of The Crimson Sword, Gekko thanked them profusely and promised to transfer a handsome reward to their guild accounts for protecting him. Ryo had no idea of the amount, but Max muttered that it would be a lot considering they were a B-rank party with a high-ranking priestess no less.

By the way, the assassin Ryo froze in Ice Casket remained that way until the next morning.

The Grand Duchy of Volturino

The morning after Sherfi's chest tattoo removal, Max questioned the third villain frozen in Ryo's casket. He'd been conscious the whole time inside it. Perhaps the night spent in that state had been effective medicine because he answered every question honestly. Unfortunately, the information he provided was minimal. In summary:

They were a unit based out of Redpost. They had received a signal that the tattoo had activated, so their primary objective in last night's attack had been to confirm the death of the tattoo's owner. However, Gekko's unexpected presence led them to go after him. After the destruction of the Lowe Bridge and ambush on Llandewi, their top priority became Gekko's assassination as part of their activities in the Kingdom's eastern region. They did not know the motive behind Gekko's assassination. The three of them had been the only ones in Redpost as of now. They hadn't been informed of the number of operatives in other locations.

The end. That was all the information he'd been able to offer. Once they extracted every scrap of knowledge they could from him, they turned him over to the garrison in charge of maintaining law and order in the city because of the surprise attack he and his team had conducted in the city.

"Everything he said was about what I expected," Gekko opined.

"To think you're their top priority, Master Gekko..." Max sounded determined.

"Wow, they sure put all kinds of fail-safes in that tattoo, hm?" Ryo commented on the tattoo in an impressed tone...which, in a way, indicated how he felt about alchemy itself.

While the rest of the group ate breakfast, there was a flurry of activity among Gekko, Max, and the escort unit. Even as he ate, Ryo kept Passive Sonar active. He knew it wasn't another attack by the brigands, but he didn't know why they

seemed rushed.

“I wonder what’s happening.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Rah responded just like Ryo thought he would.

Watching them, Sue, the scout of Switchback, shook her head and sighed. The only ones who noticed were her fellow party members, Tan, the air magician, and Nuda, the cleric. Neither of them said anything though; they simply smiled wryly.

“Um... My apologies, Master Gekko, for hindering your departure due to my recovery,” Sherfi said, lying on the bed. He was apologetic after hearing the merchant’s decision not to leave today.

“It’s fine. There are other factors in play, not just your situation, Sherfi. All you should focus on is resting.”

Then he nodded to the four members of Switchback, who’d been put in charge of guarding Sherfi’s bedroom. Rah nodded back in acknowledgment.

Sherfi had been ambushed yesterday. Just because the information they acquired only mentioned the three members of The Sect of Assassins didn’t mean reinforcements wouldn’t come from other locations nearby. That was why Switchback had been assigned as Sherfi’s bodyguards as well as...his surveillance team, so to speak.

Gekko, Max, and Ryo walked out of Sherfi’s room. As he walked, the merchant explained his other reason for not leaving the city.

“Huh? The border’s been locked down?” Max replied after his explanation.

“Indeed. It seems we’ll be stuck in Redpost for the time being. As you’re aware, Redpost is a city that lies on the Kingdom’s eastern border. The Handalieu Federation is to its northeast and the Principality of Inverey to the southeast, meaning it straddles the borders of three countries. I conducted some inquiries and discovered that all three countries have closed their borders.”

“So the merchant caravan is stranded here in Redpost indefinitely?” Ryo asked.

“Correct,” Gekko answered, his expression resigned. “Our hands are tied. These things happen occasionally when it comes to international trade. But the circumstances are a mite different this time around. I reached out to the magistrate’s office earlier and they informed me the blockade wouldn’t be lifted for another two or three days...”

Redpost was a territory under the direct control of the royal family, with a magistrate dispatched from the central government. The magistrate’s office was where this official worked.

“Therefore, I’d like to ask a favor of you and The Crimson Sword, Ryo. I suppose you could call it a new job.”

“Beg your pardon?”

Seven total people were inside The Green Star’s canteen, including: Gekko; Max, the captain of the escort unit; the four members of The Crimson Sword; and Ryo.

“I don’t know why the borders have been shut down. Without knowing the reason, I simply can’t estimate how soon they will be reopened. This poses a real problem for me, so I’d like to hire you all to investigate the cause and acquire information that will provide insight on the border reopening. Naturally, I’m fully prepared to provide compensation as I would for an urgent and designated job. What do you say?” Gekko, the merchant, proposed to the four members of The Crimson Sword.

Abel, the party’s leader, looked at Rihya, Lyn, and Warren in that order and replied only after each of them nodded.

“We accept.”

“Thank you very much.”

Despite remaining seated, Gekko nevertheless bowed his head politely.

“I shall try my odds at the Temple’s branch here in Redpost. Although

Hierarch Jariga is currently in the royal capital, the Temple's network is not to be underestimated," Rihya said.

"Then Warren and I'll question the garrisoned forces," Lyn remarked. "There should be people stationed here from the Bureau and the Royal Order of Knights, so we may find folks we already know who'll be willing to talk to us."

Warren nodded.

Since Redpost was under the direct jurisdiction of the royal family, the Kingdom's eastern garrison was stationed there. The Royal Ministry of War operated the Kingdom's garrisons. It conducted personnel exchanges with the Bureau of Royal Magicians and the Royal Order of Knights and also deployed orders for direct transfers from within its own ranks.

Evidently, this was the approach the two would take.

Gekko nodded with a smile. He had likely anticipated that the three of them would take the initiative to conduct the separate investigations. The fact that his prediction had been spot-on spoke volumes about his experience as a veteran merchant of power.

Incidentally, Ryo nodded along in agreement, caught up in the atmosphere. For Abel, it was beyond obvious that he was just nodding along without really understanding what was going on... But he wisely chose to keep his mouth shut. He could guess how things would turn out if he didn't.

"Max and I will pay the magistrate another visit. Along with your avenues of inquiry, that should be more than enough to cover the city itself. As far as the Inverey's role in the equation, I have people from my organization ready to relay information as it comes in."

Gekko paused then, letting them all digest everything. As he continued, his eyes landed on Abel and Ryo.

"Which leaves us with one problem."

"Right..." Abel said, nodding. "The Federation."

"Precisely. It borders Redpost to the northeast. Normally, the Federation wouldn't even be relevant since we're traveling to Inverey via the city.

However...if the Federation turns out to be the cause of this blockade, then it will take quite some time before it's lifted. As long as the Federation's issues remain or we have no prospects in sight, both the Kingdom and the Principality will have no choice but to keep their borders closed."

"Basically, you want me and Ryo to sneak into the Federation and do some digging, right?" Abel asked, determining where Gekko's explanation was going.

The only one surprised was Ryo.

"I'm not sure how I feel about partnering up with Abel..." he griped.

"Look, man, if you got something to say, say it to my face!" Abel growled in response.

"Excellent. It's so nice to see two friends get along so well," Gekko said with a laugh. Then, he continued, "Redpost borders the Grand Duchy of Volturino in the Handalieu Federation. I'll furnish you with ample funds for your investigation, so do your best to provide results, hm?"



The Handalieu Federation was one of the three major powers making up the Central Provinces, alongside the Kingdom of Knightley and the Debuhi Empire. If the Empire and Kingdom were positioned directly north to south, then the Federation was located to the east of them. However, with the Federation's tremendous defeat at the hands of the Kingdom in the Great War a decade ago, it ceded various territories and granted independence to a number of its smaller vassal states. One of them being the Principality of Inverey.

As a result, the relationship between Inverey and the Federation was extremely strained. In fact, it could very well be described as hostile considering that the Federation took every opportunity to annex the Principality again... Or so the rumors went...

As its name dictates, the Handalieu Federation consisted of several countries. In other words, it was a group of mostly independent nations unified under a single coalition government. Among the nations that made up this union, there were ten central ones. One of them was the Grand Duchy of Volturino, the state Ryo and Abel were asked to infiltrate.

After accepting the job from Gekko, the two made their necessary preparations and sneaked close to the border. Under the cover of night, they crossed it and entered the Grand Duchy.

“We’re going undercover into the city of Zimarino. It’s near the Grand Duchy’s border with the rest of the Federation. Just like Redpost, it’s a commercial hub, making it pretty a big city.”

“Then doesn’t that mean its city gates are closed too? Considering the universal blockade across all the borders. I suggest you charge in on your own and act as our decoy. While you’re creating a commotion, Abel, I’ll sneak into the city itself.”

“Hell no!” Abel said, soundly rejecting his suggestion of the perfect diversionary tactic.

“You know, I heard that the most beautiful thing one can do is sacrifice themselves.”

“If it’s so beautiful then why don’t *you* sacrifice yourself instead, Ryo?”

“Because I’m a magician, which means it’s only right I let a swordsman who’s capable of brute-forcing his way through things have the honor of such a beautiful self-sacrifice.”

“Thanks but no thanks!”

The negotiation between the magician and swordsman failed spectacularly. No matter how far you go, the mindsets of the vanguard and rearguard will never intersect. How sad...



With night blanketing the vicinity, the two of them sprung into action. First, they circled their target, the city of Zimarino, from a distance.

“No surprise that all the city gates are closed.”

“Abel, you’re incredibly serious about all this snooping around, hm?”

“Uhhh, isn’t that a given on a job like this? How else are we supposed to plan

our course of action?”

“Well, we could have just used my Active Sonar to find out whether or not the gates are open right away. It can reach quite a fair distance if I have specific data points to work with, you know.”

“Why the heck are you telling me this *now*? Why didn’t you lead off with that?!”

“Sheesh...that’s such an irrational request...”

Even in Phi, everyone’s a critic, apparently.

“Whatever. Anyway, we know all the city gates are shut. They were shut all day today too, so...it’s obvious this isn’t normal, right?” Abel wondered.

“At least Redpost’s city gate leading to the Kingdom was open. Never mind the heavy security.”

Although the borders were closed, the cities themselves weren’t locked down like this—usually, at least. But the city of Zimarino before them seemed to have shut itself off from the rest of the world. There must be a reason.

“Those ramparts are really tall, hm...” Ryo said idly.

“Yeah, they sure are. Probably over ten meters I’d say? Should have expected as much from a border city.” Abel sounded impressed.

Being a border city meant that the city would be on the front lines if war with neighboring regions ever broke out. Moreover, Zimarino was close to Redpost, a major eastern city in the Kingdom, itself a major power in the region. Perhaps the government built such high defensive walls with the expectation that the city would be attacked by a sizable army.

“Lots of campfires on top of the walls, huh...”

“Yes. There are sentries on patrol too. But...”

Both Abel and Ryo conducted their own inspections of the tops of the ramparts.

“But?” Abel prompted.

“It’s bright up there, but don’t you think it’s dark down toward the base of the

walls?”

“I mean, I guess, yeah.”

“Which means the folks up there can’t see the ground below them, hm?”

People in the light generally couldn’t see what was happening in the dark.

“True,” Abel said with a nod. “Normally, if you’re on the lookout for movement from the outside, you’d set up bonfires at the bottom of the wall and outside it, right?”

“Then they’re not wary of what’s outside but trying to keep whatever is *inside* the city’s walls from getting out?” Ryo concluded.

“Chances are good, yeah. Ya know, Ryo, I think we just discovered the cause of the borders being closed. Zimarino.”

Ryo and Abel glanced at each other and nodded silently in agreement at the same time. Because they had very likely just arrived at the right answer.

“All right, Abel, this is where we circle back to the beginning.”

“What?”

“You know, my plan for you to create a commotion so I can slip into the city...”

“Ah, yes. As I recall, I distinctly rejected it with a ‘Hell no!’”

“Grrr...”

Once again, Abel shot down Ryo’s idea.

“Then what do you suggest we do? Considering the gates are all closed, it’s not like we can hide ourselves in a wagon or pretend to be traveling musicians.”

“I think it’s insane you thought such sloppy methods would ever get us inside in the first place.”

“I can’t believe the day has come where *you* make fun of *me*, Abel...”

Infiltration wasn’t actually as easy as novels and movies made it out to be.

Ryo stared up at the ramparts for a bit then clenched his right fist and

punched it into his left palm. Of course, Abel, who watched from next to him, had no idea what he was doing. This was something people did in the good old days in Japan whenever they hit upon a great idea.

“A wise man would hide a leaf in a forest. So the saying goes.”

“What now in the where?”

“Yes, exactly, a leaf in a forest.”

“Oh, sorry, let me be clear. I’m actually seriously confused, which is why I’m asking you...”

“Huh... I *did* think it was strange for you to be so slow, Abel.”

Abel fumed in silence.

“Anyway, I’m thinking if something shockingly unexpected happens, they’ll be so distracted they won’t have the time to pay any attention to us while we slip inside.”

“Yeah, okay, that makes sense.”

In an unusual turn of events, Ryo’s plan actually sounded solid to Abel, who nodded in reply.

“Here’s my idea: I collapse those massive walls using Abrasive Jet, then we use the ensuing chaos to sneak in.”

“Yeah, no, let’s not do that.”

“Why?!”

“The guards up top will die.”

“Ahhh...”

Abel’s logical response convinced Ryo to abort the mission. He wasn’t particularly opposed to taking life, but even he could acknowledge that it would be awful to kill needlessly...

“Wait a sec, Ryo.”

“Yes?”

“Can you actually chop away at the walls?”

“I can. How do you think I made it to Layer 40 of the dungeon? By cutting through the floors, of course,” Ryo said proudly, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. It was totally fine to humble-brag in a situation such as this one.

“Then instead of taking the entirety of the wall down, why not just bore a hole we can go through?”

“Oh...” Ryo paused, realizing how stupid he’d been. “Abel, please say things like that sooner!”

“How, when I just found out about it now?”

Looks like everyone’s a critic...in *every* world.

Taking advantage of the darkness cloaking the bottom of the wall in front of them, Ryo drilled a hole in it and the two of them successfully entered the city of Zimarino.



“All right, now we have to decide our next move,” Abel muttered to himself, as he did not expect the water magician next to him to offer anything useful.

“Abel, if you want information, the best place to visit is a tavern! Everyone knows that!”

It went without saying that Ryo based his suggestion off his dubious knowledge of role-playing games. Pubs and the like had been sources of information since time immemorial. Because alcohol loosened the information people possess from their lips. No matter which era or world, this fundamental phenomenon didn’t change...or so Ryo believed.

Naturally, Abel didn’t have a clear reason to refuse him either.

There wasn’t a great deal of foot traffic in the city at the moment. But it didn’t seem like there was a curfew either, so there might be people in taverns.

“Might as well,” Abel agreed half-heartedly. “Especially considering we don’t have any other leads.”

They arrived at a tavern. The moment they stepped through the door, everyone inside immediately stopped talking. Was it caution behind their piercing stares—or perhaps curiosity? No wonder too, considering all of the city gates were shut down, meaning no one could get into the city. Then where had these two come from?

Abel headed to the counter, completely ignoring the stares. He was the epitome of calm and self-possession. Ryo, beside him, had drawn his usual robe's hood over his head. Before entering, he'd said he might not be able to endure the staring, hence why he decided to pull up his hood.

Ryo's mouth was the only part of his face visible to Abel. And his lips trembled ever so slightly. Abel knew what that meant. It meant Ryo wasn't thinking anything good! He ended up being right.

No doubt about it! This is the kind of situation, not just in light novels but manga and movies too, where something is definitely going to happen. The minute we order for ourselves, the other customers will ridicule us. "Hey, how 'bout ya go home and suck the milk from yer ma's teats?!" Something like that's going to happen for sure! There's even a chance someone will try to trip us by sticking their foot out before we even reach the counter! Heh heh heh... What a fantastic atmosphere. Absolutely electrifying.

While those thoughts ran through Ryo's mind, he and Abel arrived at the counter. Completely uneventfully, to Ryo's dismay.

H-Huh? No one tried to trip us. Perhaps the folks we passed are well-mannered?

"Beer, thanks," Abel said when they reached the counter.

And still, nothing happened. Not a single voice raised in objection or mockery.

Well, this is a disappointment! Gasp! I know why! Because Abel ordered something as pedestrian as beer! A nonalcoholic beverage is the right choice here.

So Ryo placed his order.

"A glass of milk, please."

But still, nothing happened. Not a single voice raised in objection or mockery. If anything, it felt even quieter in here now than when they first stepped foot inside...

Why...

Ryo was down in the dumps. Then he looked at Abel next to him. That was when he realized the problem: Abel's composure.

Is he so strong that even drunkards can sense it...? How frustrating... My plan, defeated...

The barkeep answered the depressed water magician.

"Uhhh, Mister Robe, a cup of milk is gonna cost ya a large gold coin. Ya still want it?"

"That's fine, but please pour it into a tankard!"

The air became even more hushed after he blurted those words out. Normal people didn't spend an entire gold coin on a drink and even fewer requested said drink be poured into a tankard. At this point, it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

This was another reason no one bothered them. Not just because of Abel but Ryo too...except the only one unaware was Ryo himself.

Abel ignored Ryo, who'd fallen into a pit of despair after being let down by the uneventfulness despite his firm belief that something would definitely happen. The swordsman was focused on extracting information from the barkeep. Unfortunately for him, he was having a hard time striking up a conversation—mostly because of the alarming silence blanketing the tavern. He knew its source too.

Ryo, you dumbass...who in their right mind spends an entire gold coin...ten thousand florins on a drink...and then asks for it in a damn mug...

Of course, Gekko the merchant had given them plenty of funds, a shockingly huge amount. Ryo could go on a spending binge for an entire month and they still wouldn't run out. That wasn't the problem. No, Ryo's words and actions

attracted the eyes and ears of everyone here, putting their every move on display. *That* was why he couldn't ask the shop proprietor what he wanted.

Now what are we supposed to do...

Abel's expression didn't change at all as he racked his brain for ideas. Next to him, for some reason, Ryo mumbled to himself like he was drunk.

"Gosh darn it, not a single person told me to just go home and get my milk there...! Honestly, these fiction writers need to rein it in. Even if it's fiction, they need to incorporate at least a few harsh realities into their stories..."

With the tankard of milk in one hand, Ryo continued muttering unhappily to himself. Naturally, Abel had no idea what he was rambling about. The same went for the customers eavesdropping.

"Ugh...I'm so annoyed now. The best thing to do in times like these is splurge extravagantly. Barkeep, a round on me for everyone please."

"Huh?"

"Folks, feel free to order your favorite foods and drinks. My treat!"

"Whaaat..."

Everyone—the customers, the barkeep, and Abel—was baffled by this surprising turn of events.

"I'm paying for everything!"

"Whoooa!"

After that, it didn't take long for drinking and singing to erupt in the tavern.

Ryo babbled into his cup—just from milk, weirdly enough—and ate a cubed steak he'd ordered for himself.

"Meat really is the best thing for stress relief."

Though he kept saying things like this, Abel deliberately paid no attention. The din in the establishment allowed Abel to ask its owner questions without being questioned himself. Ryo lavishing everyone in here should have upped the man's sales too. So it was worth the barkeep's while to be generous when it

came to answering the questions asked by the big spender's companion.

But the very first thing Abel asked him was irrelevant to their mission because he *had* to know no matter...

"Barkeep, why is milk so damn expensive?"

Yup, one large gold coin in a city tavern was an unbelievable price... And for *milk*, of all things. Obviously, Abel himself didn't know how much milk normally went for in pubs and such. Even so...milk wasn't hard to find, at least in the Kingdom. For example, those things called crepes Ryo loved so much? Bananas and whipped cream made from milk wrapped in a thin dough. Though few shops sold them, they weren't a luxury food.

"Your question makes me think you're from the Kingdom. Am I right?"

"I—"

The tavern owner's guess left Abel at a loss for words. He realized he'd screwed up. However...

"Ah, I don't mean that in a bad way or anything. Especially considering yer friend saved my hide by padding my ledgers with his generosity. I was real worried about making ends meet what with the city and our national borders suddenly being locked down. Right, ya wanna know about milk. Ya see, most of us common folk in the Federation, particularly here in the south—which includes the Grand Duchy, and the west—don't really drink it. I'd say pretty much only the nobles do."

"I see."

The lower the demand, the lower the supply. And the lower the supply, the higher the price. This was an inescapable truth regardless of the time period and world.

"Normally, we get our milk from a vendor in Redpost, but the borders being sealed means the price shot up literally overnight," the barkeep explained with a sigh.

Though Abel nodded in understanding, he still had another question.

"Um, well... I hope you'll listen without getting angry... Does it, you know,

actually *sell* at that price, especially in, well, establishments like this one...?”

“It sure does,” the man answered with a chuckle, then leaned close to Abel, lowering his voice to a whisper. “Shops like ours sometimes get their share of the aristos as customers, ya know. ‘Course, they’re in disguise when they do come.”

“Seriously...?”

“I bet it’ll shock ya even more to learn they usually order cubed steak and milk just like yer buddy, Mr. Robe, there.”

“I gotta be honest... I’m not sure how I feel about that combination of food.”

“Different strokes for different folks, eh? As long as they enjoy it, that’s what makes me happy.”

Then the barkeep let out a bellowing, cheery laugh.

“That brings up another question,” Abel said. “Why is the meat already cut up like that? Isn’t a giant slab of it better?”

“Heh heh heh. Ya just don’t get it, do ya, Mr. Swordsman?”

The man jerked his chin meaningfully in Ryo’s direction. The water magician forked up pieces of the cubed steak with his right hand while holding the mug of milk in his left...

“A fork in his right hand and a tankard in his left...”

Abel understood now. A slab of meat would have forced his comrade to hold a fork in his left hand and a knife in his right to cut through it.

“Now do ya see? If yer gonna chow down on meat in a pub, that’s the best way to do it, dontcha think?”

The barkeep seemed chuffed.

“Abel, I won’t lose to you or fiction!”

Ryo felt reenergized after eating meat! He excitedly started on the last few pieces of the cubed steak while recovering from the psychic damage he’d suffered at the hands of Abel and fiction. But...it was already all gone.

“Master! Another order of cubed steak!” Ryo called out cheerfully.

“Coming right up,” the barkeep said with a grin.

Incidentally, chefs were working furiously in the kitchen to sling out orders. The barkeep-cum-tavern owner was in charge of the bar counter and customer service.

Four other customers walked toward Ryo, who had recovered from his doom and gloom.

“Just wanted to say thanks, lad.”

“The spirits here are divine.”

“Sorry to be rude, but...we noticed you’re drinking some mighty fine stuff yourself.”

“This is a great way to lighten up the misery of the lockdown!”

They had apparently come to thank him for treating everyone.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. Please, eat and drink all you can!” he replied with a sunny smile. Of course he could afford to be generous since he was spending Gekko’s money instead of his own. After all, by spending their budget, they were contributing to the city’s economy! Nevertheless, said budget allotted to them for the job meant they actually had to *do* the job itself.

“By the way, if you don’t mind my asking... Would you happen to know the reason for the blockade?”

Such directness was par for the course in taverns, so they didn’t even bat an eyelash at his question. Plus, beating around the bush would get you nowhere fast when questioning drunks. Best then to be blunt. This was the Ryo-style Bar Questioning Technique!

“Pretty sure it has something to do with gems or something being stolen from the government office.”

“Nah, I heard it was because the Grand Duke’s daughter tried to elope and he wanted to stop her.”

“Really? What about the rumors that some legendary assassin showed up?

Supposed to be dangerous as hell.”

“No, no, no, you’re all wrong. The truth is that a dragon larva fell in the city.”

Each of the four gave Ryo a wildly different answer, meaning the city’s residents hadn’t been told and whatever happened wasn’t blatantly obvious either. Abel had been quietly listening too by his side. He gave a small, frustrated shake of his head once he realized none of their responses were helpful.

The four thanked Ryo again before leaving. While chewing on his second plate of cubed steak and drinking his second glass of milk, Ryo announced the following to Abel:

“There we have it.”

“Riiight...” Abel, having also been listening in, came to the same conclusion: “Basically, not even the residents know what’s going on, huh?”

Even though a lot about this situation was out of their control, this still didn’t bode well for their course of action moving forward. They didn’t have a hard deadline, but the sooner they figured out the cause of the blockade, the better for everyone.

Just as Abel was quietly exhaling, he saw the tavern door open. Nobody heard the creak because of the din inside, but the moment someone stepped inside, everyone stopped talking just like they had when he and Ryo entered earlier. Unlike their entrance, the tavern’s clamor resumed immediately this time. The three people who walked in were clearly regulars not worth the other customers’ interest.

All three wore identical black robes with red embroidery, the hoods pulled up over their heads. Someone could tell at a glance that the fabric was high quality and the embroidery detailed and stunning... Definitely not something working-class folks would wear or could even afford.

The trio sat down at the counter. Next to Ryo. They looked at the cubed steak he was eating and his mug of milk. For just the briefest moment, they froze, and

Abel noticed. As for Ryo, he blithely continued eating his meal, clearly enjoying himself...

Of the three new regulars, the middle one ordered.

“Cubed steak and milk please.”

“Ya got it.”

It was a woman. A young one, at that... Abel guessed she was probably around the age of majority, maybe a year or two past it. He analyzed the situation more carefully now. All three were likely women. The one sitting directly next to Ryo was a swordswoman. The one on the other end was a magician, considering the wand in her possession. He had no idea about the one in the middle who had put in the order, but based on what the barkeep had told him, she was probably a noblewoman.

Incidentally, she was the only one who'd ordered. The two flanking her said nothing, maybe because they were her bodyguards, judging by their vigilance of their surroundings. While the tavern's regulars knew them, none of them approached the trio. They merrily carried on drinking and eating.

Abel suspected the three must have *some* thoughts about the rowdier-than-normal atmosphere. The middle one in particular kept glancing surreptitiously at the lively customers. Then, amid all this...

“Yes, indeedy, meat is good for the soul. Mmm, I'm torn now. Should I or should I not... You know what? When you don't know what to do, simply follow the age-old adage of ‘Ask and ye shall receive.’ Barkeep, another order of cubed steak please,” Ryo called, requesting thirds.

“I'll bring it out to ya in a jiff.”

A moment later, Ryo noticed Abel staring impassively at him, which instantly flustered him.

“D-Don't look at me like that. It's not my fault. Blame the restaurant for making such scrumptious meat.”

“I didn't even say anything.”

“Liar! Your eyes said it all, Abel. ‘You're eating too much, Ryo.’”

“You’re eating too much, Ryo.”

“Grr... That’s playing dirty, Abel.”

Fleeing Abel’s gaze, he turned toward the three sitting on his other side.

“Oh, I’m paying for tonight’s festivities, so please eat whatever you like,” he said with a smile to the surprised trio.

“Ah...”

“That includes you two as well. Don’t worry about the bill. Just enjoy yourselves.”

Then he thumped his own chest with his right fist, implying they could count on him... Unfortunately for him, neither the trio nor Abel understood the gesture. During their conversation, a plate of cubed steak was set out in front of *each* of the three. You read that right, reader.

“Huh? I don’t understand, barkeep,” said the swordswoman next to Ryo quizzically.

“Ya heard Mr. Robe. Tonight’s feast is on him. I know alcohol’s off the menu for you lot, but food isn’t, right? Bodyguards gotta eat too, ya know. Can’t be weak from hunger when push comes to shove, eh?” the tavern owner answered with a cheerful grin. Him bringing out their plates at the same time meant he’d been planning on feeding them from the start. Ryo thought it was very considerate of him.

“Nala, Kala, it would be rude *not* to eat now. Go on, it’s delicious.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Understood.”

When the woman in the middle spoke, her escorts, Nala and Kala, replied with nods. They only started eating after their mistress did.

“It tastes wonderful...”

“Now I know why my lady wants to come here every day.”

Beaming, Ryo bobbed his head happily when he heard the two women’s murmurs.

Flavor is justice. Flavor reigns supreme. People live and die by flavor.

Then Ryo's third helping of cubed steak arrived. A huge smile spread on his face. But for a split second, a frown marred his expression and Abel noticed. It really was such a brief flash that he doubted anyone else even saw it...

"Ryo, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong," he answered, the smile returning to his face as he speared a piece of meat and began eating.

Ten minutes later, Ryo finished eating the cubed steak after savoring each bite. If you were to slap a caption under his expression, it would be: "Satisfied."

The three women sitting next to him had also finished eating. They looked happy too.

Of course, the boisterous air inside the tavern hadn't abated.

"Barkeep, may I have the bill please?" Ryo said, placing an amount nearing eight figures on the counter.

"Sonny, this is way too much," the tavern owner said, shocked.

He could have just kept the money. Most people would have... He was a good person, apparently.

"Oh, no, I included the cost of repairs too."

"What do ya mean?"

The barkeep cocked his head in confusion at Ryo's words. Abel's expression mirrored his. In any case, the man put the money in his hidden safe. Once he made sure it was stowed away securely, Ryo explained to Abel and the trio.

"The truth is, this tavern has been under a magical bombardment for some time now."

"Huh?" Abel said, dumbfounded.

The woman in the middle looked dubious. "What?"

"I'm protecting the entire restaurant with an Ice Wall... It's a barrier made of

ice. At the moment, the attack isn't all that severe, so it doesn't pose much of a problem. However," he said, pausing, "I assume it isn't the norm for someone to attack a random city pub willy-nilly, yes? Abel, I promise I won't get mad, so just be honest and tell me if you did something naughty."

"Why am I always your first suspect?!" Abel said in instinctive protest of Ryo's arbitrary judgment.

Of course, Ryo knew the truth too. They'd been together every moment since entering the city, meaning Abel wouldn't have had time to engage in mischief. Though he very well might have if time hadn't been an issue...

"Well, if we think about it logically, these three are obviously the targets," Ryo commented, looking at the trio of women. He kept his expression and tone as gentle as possible to avoid coming off like an interrogator. No matter how you looked at it, the people who were attacking the innocent tavern were definitely the bad guys here and not the women who so thoroughly enjoyed their meals of milk and cubed steak!

"I knew there was a reason you frowned when your third serving came out. Is that when you detected the enemy?" Abel questioned.

"Aren't you the cleverest boy? Yes, you're right though. We were probably already surrounded by then, but also my plate was ready, you know? So I figured best to deal with the situation after I finished eating. I can't believe those jerks are vulgar enough to interfere with my enjoyment of cubed steak... Honestly, this is beyond the pale."

Ryo answered with his cheeks puffed angrily. He was definitely fuming.

This was when the woman in the middle finally spoke. Up until now, she'd been watching their exchange in silence.

"Um, excuse me, but I think your guess is correct. Although, to be specific, I am the likely target."

Then she slipped her hood off. Flaxen hair brushed the tops of her shoulders and pale blue eyes glittered in her face. Her looks fell somewhere between beautiful and pretty. Or perhaps she could be described as a hybrid of the two... In any case, she was an alluring woman who could shift between those

descriptors depending on her clothes and makeup as well as external factors.

“I see. So the villains outside are targeting this beauty, hm?”

“It’s too soon to jump to conclusions, Ryo. Any magical bombardment from the outside would normally kill everyone inside.”

“Then do you think their goal is to kidnap her? If so, there’s a very good chance some other young noblewoman at war with this beauty and her companions dispatched a kill squad to go after her.”

“Kill squad...? What kind of weird operation is that?”

Abel was obviously not a fan of Ryo’s outrageous conjecture. It seems that, in any era, an overly advanced mindset is doomed to be misunderstood by the pioneer’s peers.

“Um... I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I think there’s a misunderstanding. I’m not a member of the aristocracy...” the woman said, blushing.

“Darn it, Abel, look how embarrassed she is thanks to your weird comments,” Ryo said reproachfully.

“Except it wasn’t me who said any of that!”

Be that as it may, the latter decided it was best to ask her who she actually was.

“Then, who exactly are you...?”

Before the woman in the middle could respond, the swordswoman proudly answered:

“We’re chivalrous thieves known as The Dawn’s Border.”

A hush settled over the tavern at the mere mention of that name. Despite the racket the other customers had been making, they still heard her words. For all of them to fall silent like this was...

“Wow, so this is the cocktail party effect...” Ryo said.

“Chivalrous thieves...” said Abel, the barkeep, and pretty much everyone else there in unison.

The difference in reactions was inevitable. After all, the world was made up of people from all walks of life.

“Didn’t the Dawn destroy that heinous trader, Gillan...?”

“I’m pretty sure they made a right mess of Zod, that slave-trading organization...”

“There’s a huge bounty on their heads, but no one is willing to help the bounty hunters because the Dawn’s Border is an ally to the commoners...”

And...it was inevitable that Ryo’s comment went entirely ignored.

Abel faced the trio of women. “Guess this means your group’s pretty famous, huh?”

“We’ve only done what’s right. However, we have yet to act in this city... You know as well as I do that the nation should take care of its people, but bribery runs rampant among its key figures... Rot festers everywhere,” the flaxen-haired woman declared forcefully.

The two by her side nodded in agreement.

“The people are always the first to suffer under an irresponsible government, hm... I wonder how the Kingdom fares in that sense then.”

“W-Well, I can’t speak for the entirety of the Kingdom, but at the very least, the southern region is doing well enough,” Ryo remarked quietly.

Abel nodded. “Margrave Lune is known as a just and honest man, a paragon of nobility in the Kingdom for his wisdom as a leader. Then there’s Marquess Heinlein, whose seat of power is in the south’s largest city of Acray. His bloodline has produced outstanding lords for generations, the marquess himself included. Establishing a system that produces talented people is something that no organization can afford to miss out on. You can call that a strength of the Kingdom.”

“I see, I see.” Ryo nodded vigorously in response to Abel’s explanation. “Those of us who live in the southern parts of the Kingdom are certainly blessed!”

Incompetent leaders are worthless. With competent leaders, however...everyone can live easy, happy lives! From the perspective of

leadership, this area of the Grand Duchy felt pitiful. Be that as it may, it wasn't Ryo and Abel's job to make its people happy. Their job was to discover the cause of the border blockade.

"Do you think...this is the reason for the lockdown?" Ryo whispered.

"Possibly," Abel replied.

If these chivalrous thieves were the answer they were looking for, then the two of them could return to Redpost. But...something didn't quite add up here. Ryo wasn't convinced and, based on his attitude, the same could be said of Abel.

"Why don't we stick around for a while longer and see what happens?"

"Agreed. Observation is vital."

For once, Ryo and Abel were on the same page.

As the two of them whispered to each other, the flaxen-haired woman pulled up her hood once more. Disappointed groans erupted here and there throughout the tavern when she did. Because everyone liked admiring beautiful things.

Then she turned to Ryo and Abel. "I think it's time for us to make our grand exit outside."

Her two bodyguards nodded in agreement. They looked ready to charge at any minute.

"Uh, I can continue providing magical reinforcement if you'd like?"

"No, thank you. I'd rather not trouble you any more than we already have. If escape is all we need to do, then I believe we can manage well enough on our own..." the flaxen-haired woman said.

"Understood. There are three magicians directly in front of the tavern responsible for the bombardment as well as another three nearby. Two more are lurking in the rear of the building. Around a dozen or more curious onlookers are around here too. Let's see, who else... Far to the north is a cluster of fifty people. Perhaps a garrison? That's all I have to report," Ryo informed

them.

The information surprised the trio, but that wasn't what the woman focused on when she replied.

"I do believe you're correct about the fifty being this city's garrison. The bounty hunters after us are outlaws and...they likely have ties to the garrison as well."

"Fascinating."

The woman's explanation made sense to Ryo. This kind of thing happened all the time...a very light-novel-esque development. And that's why he had no trouble understanding! As for Abel, who stared at him suspiciously, well... Ryo would simply ignore him! Yes, ignore him!

"Then, on my signal, I'll dispel the ice wall in front of the tavern. You can use that window of time to exit."

"Thank you very much."

The three of them bowed their heads. Then they turned toward the barkeep and...

"Our sincerest apologies for the trouble we brought to your doorstep."

"Nah, nah, nah, nah, don't ya worry about a thing. Because let me tell ya, I'm a fan of the Dawn myself. I'm proud I got the chance to meet ya."

The tavern owner nodded vigorously in response to the flaxen-haired woman's apology.

Watching them, Ryo warned them:

"I'm opening the barrier!"

"Lead the way!"

Then the trio raced outside.



Near the northern gate of the city of Zimarino, not long after midnight. A swordsman and a water magician lurked in the shadow of a building, going over what they knew of the situation.

“Sheesh, that light magic sure was incredible! Almost literally blinded us!”

“Yeah. Rihya uses it too, and it actually *can* blind if it catches someone completely by surprise. Apparently, only top light magicians are capable of producing light on that scale...”

Both Ryo and Abel were impressed by The Dawn’s Border trio’s swift flight. Of course, the two of them used the ensuing chaos to slip out of the tavern themselves.

“Me, personally? I’m still kinda amazed by bandits chowing down on milk and steak without a care in the world.”

“Abel, you’re so rude! They’re not bandits but chivalrous thieves!” Ryo tutted, wagging his right index finger reproachfully.

“R-Right... But ya know, chivalrous thieves *are* a type of bandit...”

“Their intentions are different though!”

“All right, okay, fine...” Abel said, helpless in the face of Ryo’s zeal.

“I know we talked about it before, but...do you really suppose The Dawn’s Border is the reason for the border blockade?”

“I’m not sure. Honestly, it doesn’t feel right,” Abel said, cocking his head thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the barkeep told us those three in particular are basically regulars at his pub, right? So does it really make sense to corner them by completely shutting down the country’s and city’s borders?”

“Isn’t it possible the authorities only discovered some kind of truth about them yesterday...?”

“I mean, yeah, it’s *possible*. But still...”

Abel didn’t seem too keen on Ryo’s suggestion. Having said that, Ryo was well aware that Abel’s intuition in situations like these was almost always correct. It would be a bad move on his part to ridicule the instincts of a B-rank swordsman.

“Abel, your hunches are always on the mark, huh? It’s too bad we can’t say the same about your logic.”

“Thanks for pointing that out, man. No, really, you’re the worst.”

Ah, how difficult it is to understand others...

“Should we do a little more digging then? Though considering it’s past midnight, most of the shops will be closed. What do you suggest?”

“I’m not sure, but...for some reason, my gut is telling me to head toward the city center. How about we try that?”

So Abel’s intuition decided their next course of action.

Thirty minutes later.

“I was a fool for listening to you, Abel!”

“Oh, put a sock in it! It’s not like I’m running for *fun*, ya know!”

Ryo and Abel were currently running from their pursuers.

“A ferocious-looking man carrying a sword on his back this late at night in a city locked down from the rest of the world? Of *course* people would think you’re suspicious. We can’t really blame them, hm?”

“Well, *sooo* sorry! But I definitely think they’ve mistaken us for someone else!”

“Why?”

“Uhhh, maybe cuz they shouted ‘There they are!’ when they saw me?”

“Ah, now that you mention it...”

Normally, someone would say ‘There they are!’ when they found what they were looking for. Ergo, the garrison members chasing them must have been seeking something, or *someone*, before they encountered the two of them.

“Are they still on our tail?”

“I think we managed to give the slip to most of them. The out-of-shape ones dropped out a while back and...there’s only two left by my count.”

“Then let’s catch them and ask why they’re chasing us.”

“Aye, aye, cap’n.”

Ryo nodded in agreement to Abel’s plan.



“Tell us your name.”

The voice sounded muffled to the man.

“Huh? What? What the hell? I can’t move...”

The moment the man spoke, the pressure on his face lessened and he was able to move his head. However, the rest of his body from the neck down remained immobilized... He was apparently locked in ice.

In front of him stood a swordsman carrying a sword on his back. Beyond him was a magician wearing a robe, but...the terrifying smile on his face made him look otherworldly.

“I-I’ll tell you anything you want, anything. So please, spare my life...”

The robed man’s evil smirk widened. The frozen man shivered when he saw it...

“Good man. Now tell us your name and who you work for,” the swordsman asked.

“It’s Kinko,” the man encased in ice replied honestly. “I belong to the external affairs division of the Zimarino garrison’s government office.”

At that moment, Kinko saw something from the corner of his eye. Too afraid to turn his head in that direction, he tried his best to look using only his eyes. He couldn’t see clearly, but it looked like his comrade, Grabay, who’d been chasing the suspects with him was...frozen all the way to the top of his head... There was no way he was still alive.

The thought made him tremble even more and tears welled in his eyes.

“All right, Kinko. Here’s a question for you. What were you guys doing?”

“Huh?”

He could only make the gormless sound in response to the swordsman's question. No wonder since he didn't understand what the question meant.

In response, the robed man immediately produced a saw of some sort and began waving it around. As if he was about to start cutting with it.

The shudders wracking Kinko's body now surged from the depths of his soul. There was nothing sane about this situation no matter how he viewed it. He cursed the misfortune that had led to him being captured by the terrifying man and his companion.



“Let me ask you again. What were you guys doing?” the swordsman repeated.

He still didn’t understand the question, but Kinko knew he needed to answer because he was afraid of what the robed man would do otherwise. So he said the first thing that popped into his head.

“I-I was protecting the garrison’s government office since that’s where I’m stationed...”

Fear made Kinko’s words polite. Yet his answer didn’t seem to satisfy the swordsman, who tilted his head curiously. He needed to keep talking!

“A-And then...the pair of you showed up, so when I was told to give chase, that’s what I did,” Kinko elaborated. He felt like the swordsman’s expression only became more puzzled. Unfortunately, he didn’t know what else he could say at this point... A tear slid down his cheek.

“When you first spotted us, one of you said ‘There they are,’ right?” the swordsman said, staring at him contemptuously.

It was Kinko’s turn to cock his head in confusion. He didn’t remember saying that. Grabay and the rest of the external affairs division hadn’t either. Which left...

“Th-That wasn’t us. It was... I think it was Captain Roster, who manages the internal affairs division of the garrison office.”

“Hm...”

“Frankly, Captain Roster is a man of poor judgment. He also accepts significant bribes from all sorts of people. I only know this because I used to be under his direct command...”

The complaints tumbled unthinkingly from Kinko’s mouth before he realized what he was saying and trailed off.

“Bribes, huh... You didn’t file a complaint during your time working for him?”

“I couldn’t... I was too scared. One of my friends did and he ended up being transferred to the security forces manning the ramparts... I felt awful for him too. He’d been so accomplished up until then... I heard his salary was cut in half too.”

As Kinko spoke, the robed man's eyes widened. Such a horrified expression on his face... "Despair" or "fear," either of those could be used to caption it. He unintentionally averted his gaze.

"All right, I guess we won't be getting much else out of you. Basically, what you're saying is that you don't know why you were chasing us, right?"

"That's correct..." Kinko nodded in reply to the swordsman. "There they are. Capture them." Once he and his comrades had heard the orders, they reacted reflexively to fulfill them, but when their targets fled, they gave chase... Any member of the garrison would have done the same. All Kinko and his squadron had done was act according to standard procedure.

"One last question. What do you and your people know about The Dawn's Border?"

"Dawn's... The chivalrous thieves...? Well, I know they ambush merchant companies, which isn't exactly something worthy of praise. However...they target individuals we members of the garrison can't apprehend ourselves. That includes powerful people who persecute ordinary folks and dastardly villains who destroy their rivals through inhumane methods. Frankly...we're grateful to them."

"Is that right..."

"Which reminds me, I heard they're in town today, although my division in particular isn't involved in managing the 'problem' of the Dawn. There was also a rumor about the garrison higher-ups joining forces with notorious bounty hunters to capture them. I can't tell you how serious they are about it though..."

Unlike his earlier answers, Kinko sounded heated now. He hadn't meant to. Once he finished, the swordsman walked back to the robed man and began talking to him. He could hear bits and pieces of their conversation.

"Need to silence... Get found out... No choice... Necessary sacrifice."

"No way... He's not bad... Helped us... Sense of justice..."

The robed man obviously wanted to kill him. There was no other conclusion he could arrive at... In contrast, the swordsman was trying his best to stop him.

So Kinko prayed fervently.

Swordsman, please find a way to save me! I'm begging you!

When the pair finished talking, the swordsman walked back to him.

"You gave us some pretty useful information, so in exchange, we'll let you and your friend go."

"Friend?"

"The frozen guy over there."

"Then...Grabay's still alive?"

"Yeah, he is," the swordsman replied, nodding.

At that moment, the other man looked like a god or angel to him—the complete opposite of the robed man behind him, who might as well have been the personification of a devil.

When the swordsman turned around, the robed man nodded...and the ice entrapping Kinko and Grabay disappeared.

"Grabay!"

"Kin...ko..."

He was alive! Grabay was really alive!

And then a voice spoke:

"In a little while...I'd say, five minutes or so, both of you will be able to move again. Oh, I'll make sure you can speak too, but try your best not to raise your voices, hm? I strongly recommend you remain here quietly until we're gone."

It was the robed man.

The second he heard those words, Kinko swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth. He couldn't move yet, so to know that the robed man was capable of such a terrifying act boggled his mind... Moreover, he deliberately flaunted his power to further inflame Kinko's fear... When he glanced over at his friend, he saw terror on Grabay's face too.

"Of course. We won't scream at all. We'll just stay here quietly."

That was the only thing Kinko could think to say. Grabay too nodded vigorously again and again.

Upon seeing their reactions, the robed man smiled a shockingly savage—no, *demented*—smile. Then he and the swordsman exchanged meaningful glances, nodded, and ran, leaving the two of them behind.

Finally, *finally*, Kinko exhaled in relief. He could see Grabay crying. His friend's reaction made sense, considering he'd been encased completely in ice for so long. And it was the robed man's doing... He was likely a water magician...

"I'm so glad we're alive..."

The words came from the bottom of his heart.



"Gosh! Don't you feel awful for those two? I certainly do."

"Uhhh, yes...?"

After leaving the two city guards behind, Ryo and Abel once again reviewed the information they had.

"Abel, you were so intimidating that—what was his name? Kinko?—Kinko was crying the entire time you were interrogating him. So unnecessary of you when he was being cooperative."

"Are you seriously blaming me again...?"

"Of course," Ryo replied confidently.

"And you don't think it has *anything* to do with whatever the hell you were swinging behind me?"

"Ope, did you see that? I was putting on a one-man show of decapitating someone with my ice saw. I thought a torture-esque atmosphere might encourage him to confess."

"So it wasn't *me* he was scared of, but *you*, Ryo."

"No, you're absolutely and categorically wrong."

Ryo sounded even more self-assured now.

“No matter how hard I try, I just can’t contort my face into a scary expression, which is why I always end up smiling instead... And that makes me a poor torturer, doesn’t it? It seems I’m simply not cut out for activities like that.” Ryo shook his head despondently, apparently dissatisfied by his own performance.

“It is what it is. Anyway, back to this Captain Roster. Why do you think he shouted ‘There they are!’ when he saw us?”

“Doesn’t it sound like a case of mistaken identity?” Ryo wondered.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Abel replied enigmatically, shaking his head. “His words aren’t enough for us to go on.”

They simply didn’t have enough information to make a solid judgment.

“Then there’s the fact he’s accepting bribes and even forcefully demoted someone who lodged a complaint against him,” Abel continued. “Someone that has pull with the top brass is dangerous. I mean, he’s probably bribing those above him to secure an easy life for himself...”

“When he said his colleague had been transferred to rampart security *and* his salary halved,” Ryo said, “I honestly couldn’t believe it. Something so abominable should never happen!”

Abel’s response must have been based on his own knowledge and past experiences. His tone had been exceedingly calm and composed. Then there was Ryo, driven by righteous indignation from a combination of a sense of justice and the value he placed on money...

Regardless of their motivations, both Abel and Ryo were good men.

“Though I have to say I was a little surprised to learn that the Dawn’s Border’s popularity has spread even to the garrison.”

“Yeah, that Kinko seemed like a decent enough guy for a city guard. I’m sure his reaction would have been way different if he’d been someone like Captain Roster.”

“Isn’t that the truth... Money and women are temptations in every world, hm? What a pickle.”

“Except there are plenty of men who aren’t swayed by either of those.”

“So you say, but then the bad guys hold their families hostage and blackmail them into obedience! ‘If you don’t want anything to happen to your family, be a good man and just take the money.’ They say things like that. And when those good men *do* take the money, it gives the villains proof of their victim’s wrongdoing, which they leverage to threaten them even more. Such a terrible cycle...”

Abel frowned as he listened to Ryo’s entirely plausible raving. “Ryo,” he said, “you sure do know a lot about this stuff, huh?”

“You may call me Master Strategist Ryo,” he replied, smug.

“The hell I will!”

“Anyway... He said they knew the Dawn was in town today, right?”

“That’s right, even though they were there the whole time eating cubed steak and drinking milk. The counterintelligence in this city sure is lacking, don’t you think?”

“Probably ’cuz the widespread corruption means a lot of folks don’t take their jobs seriously.”

Evidently, neither Ryo nor Abel were fans of bribery.

“If you ever feel like giving me money, Abel, just know that I’ll be happy to accept.”

“The hell I will!”

Neither Ryo nor Abel were fans of bribery...probably.

“In the end, we let those two go, just like that...”

“Yeah, you sure were worried about them, Ryo.”

The two of them had discussed what to do about Kinko and his friend earlier when Abel had walked away to talk to Ryo.

“How could I not be, when there’s a chance they’ll be silenced now? The captain or someone else might become afraid of their wrongdoings being exposed. He might report to his superiors that he had no choice but to pursue the fugitives, or that they were a necessary sacrifice in capturing them.”

“Kinko and his friend were decent enough for garrison men. Sure, I don’t feel too good about it, but I figured it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world if they end up being locked up somewhere. People who are willing to cooperate with us are rare, and guys like Kinko with a strong sense of justice are even rarer. Better to have him locked up or on house arrest and alive than dead.”

Kinko had caught bits and pieces of their earlier conversation, resulting in his unfortunate misunderstanding of Ryo’s intentions.

Perhaps the world is full of misunderstandings.



In a certain part of Zimarino stood the secret hideaway of the Dawn’s Border. After giving the special signal, the three women wearing black robes with red embroidery stepped through the door.

“We have returned.”

“Welcome back, Mistress Flora!”

When the flaxen-haired woman called out a greeting, a man with his hair dyed light blue replied and bowed his head respectfully. The other ten men inside followed suit.

“Welcome back, Mistress!” a chorus of aggressively masculine voices rang out.

“Thank you, Jigiban and everyone else,” Flora of the golden tresses and leader of the Dawn’s Border responded, smiling.

Incidentally, her two companions had already entered a room farther inside the house. Nala the magician’s face remained ever expressionless while Kala, the swordswoman, shook her head. There were about four people in this room as well. Compared to the ten in the outer room who looked more like actual bandits than chivalrous thieves, these four looked like adventurers. And in fact, excluding one of them, they were all former adventurers.

That one exception, a gentlemanly individual past middle age, bowed his head respectfully. “Welcome back, Lady Floria.”

“Thank you, Dolotheo.”

Then the three former adventurers, two women and one man, stood and bowed their heads.

“Welcome back, Mistress Flora.”

“I’m back, Viviana, Tatiana, Octavio.”

Viviana and Tatiana were twins and Octavio was their younger brother. All three were in their late twenties and top-tier adventurers. Since they were registered by the Federation’s adventurers’ guild as B-ranks, their skill was undeniable.

This ensemble made up the group of chivalrous thieves known as the Dawn’s Border. At a glance, they seemed nothing alike, which was true in a sense since they all had different backgrounds and experiences and had lived their lives in their own ways. However, they had one thing and one thing only in common—they would happily die for Flora. It was the sole thing that united them.

The meeting started in the spacious room inside the house. Aside from Dolotheo the butler, the other seventeen individuals sat in chairs facing Flora. Dolotheo poured tea for them all.

These bandit-like men didn’t seem like the type to sit quietly and talk in meetings...but that was exactly what they did, intent on not missing a single word. They rarely spoke up during proceedings, but they nevertheless participated very seriously. They did so for one reason alone—because it was what Flora wanted.

“It’s been two weeks since we entered the city of Zimarino and they finally ambushed us,” Kala, the swordswoman-cum-bodyguard, announced, commencing the meeting.

“Two weeks...that’s longer than we anticipated, hm? Proof of the city’s barely functioning counterintelligence network,” Viviana said.

“Which means it isn’t just the garrison but the higher-ups running the city who are corrupt,” Tatiana commented.

By measuring the length of time it took for them to be discovered, the Dawn’s Border speculated on how rampant bribery was in this city and how corrupt its

upper echelons were. In places where bribery was rare, the top brass were upright folks and their subordinates, including the garrison, performed their duties seriously. In such cities, their group was usually discovered quickly and they left soon after. However, in cities with widespread bribery and systemic corruption, it easily took a week or longer for them to be discovered... Just like it had in Zimarino.

The reason the three, including Flora, went to the taverns at night was to determine how well the city's security was functioning and, by extension, the extent of the corruption. Naturally, Flora's supposed obsession with cubed steak had been part of the act... At least it should have been. Before she knew it though, she actually *had* become genuinely obsessed with the delicious dish.

"I know this is our usual strategy, but it still always puts me on edge whenever they find us," Octavio, the adventurer, remarked with a rueful smile.

"Doesn't help that the bounty hunters of Vanzan attacked using magic without so much as a 'how do you do' the moment they thought they had you surrounded."

"That surprised me too. I don't remember an attack that violent before. Do you?"

Viviana and Tatiana spoke while exchanging meaningful glances.

"Well, we ourselves didn't realize we were being bombarded even though we were inside," Kala said with a shake of her head.

In response, Flora nodded with a smile.

"That's right! Some sort of Magical Barrier was repelling their attack!"

"Interesting. Octavio, even you can't erect a barrier that powerful, right?"

"You know I can't."

The three former adventurers conversed excitedly. Incidentally, Octavio was both a swordsman and a magician. A very talented man indeed. The siblings were responsible for protecting Flora from a distance and had watched the pub from afar. When the bounty hunters had commenced their attack and the commotion had attracted onlookers, the trio had slipped into the crowd to get

a closer look...

“What is it that magician said? An ice wall, was it?” Flora said.

“Yes,” Kala agreed, “the one who was enjoying cubed steak and milk just like you, my lady.”

“Wait, an *ice* wall...?” Octavio asked with a small shake of his head.

“Indeed. *And* he covered the entire tavern with it,” Flora recounted with excitement. “Told us we would be fine.”

Then Nala, the magician, finally spoke up. She’d been listening silently until now.

“No normal person can do that. He’s a monster.”

“Language, Nala, language,” Kala gently chided with a wry smile.

However, Nala’s words created a stir in the room.

“A magician *Nala* is calling a monster?”

“Somebody that crazy is *here*?”

“But he protected them, so he’s an ally, right?”

“Just because he was on our side this time doesn’t mean he will be in the future too...”

“So you think you can fight him if he winds up being an enemy?”

That last remark left everyone at a loss for words. They all knew how powerful Nala was based on their activities together up until this point. So would any of them really be able to hold their own against someone she obviously considered a monster?

“I can fight anyone for Lady Flora’s sake!” Jigiban, the leader of the bandit men, declared without hesitation. “I can fight anyone for Lady Flora’s sake!” he repeated, more determined.

“Aye!”

His ten underlings exclaimed loudly in unison. Their feelings came from the heart.

“I appreciate the sentiment. But we’ll likely be fine. Those two won’t become enemies,” Flora said with a bright smile.

She didn’t tell them the reason she thought so. However, they didn’t need one. They trusted her and her word was enough for them.

“Right then, Jigiban. As to who’s at the heart of this city’s corruption...”

“It is indeed the merchant Elmeevna based on the information you gathered, Mistress Flora. He’s the one who hired the bounty hunters of Vanzan too. In fact...” Jigiban paused. He wanted to verify his shocking news before telling her. “Three years ago, the wife of this city’s viceroy died in an accident. However, I got my hands on conclusive evidence that Elmeevna was responsible for the accident.”

The shocking news made everyone but Flora and Dolotheo gasp. None of them had expected it.

There was nothing normal about planning the murder of a viceroy’s wife. Of course, there was nothing normal about investigating said murder either.

“Well done, Jigiban.”

“Might kind of you, my lady. Had plenty of time these past two weeks, you know? All of the perpetrators involved at the time were already dead, but your information helped me find a letter one of them left to his younger brother.”

Flora nodded in response to Jigiban’s report.

It was completely unnecessary for Mistress Flora to go around the taverns to inspect the level of corruption in a city. After all, she already possessed accurate information about a place from the start. Perhaps her visits were more of a pastime and the investigations were simply an excuse to go to the tavern in the first place. Kala, the swordswoman, had always suspected this.

Experience had shown them that the amount of time it took for city officials to find them did have a direct correlation to the extent of the city’s corruption. Kala couldn’t deny this possibility. Even so, she had misgivings.

Nevertheless, her doubts didn’t affect her loyalty to Flora. Not at all. In the end, she didn’t want their leader exposed to danger...

“We must make a spectacle of ourselves in order to force the viceroy to see the truth.”

Everyone nodded in response to Flora’s smiling declaration. They already had a plan and they had readied everything they needed in these two weeks. Unfortunately, the corruption in Zimarino had continued unabated during this time, just like they’d expected. Now they knew who was responsible for it: Elmeevna the merchant.

Though they didn’t know the details of how the bribes were handed out, it didn’t matter. This group wasn’t an official organization. They were chivalrous thieves. At their core, they acted according to the sense of justice deep in their hearts... That was the sort of group they were. That was the Dawn’s Border.

The Flame Emperor

Around the same time a group of seventeen comrades were dreaming of a better future in a hideaway somewhere in Zimarino, a swordsman and a water magician in the city center were most certainly not carrying the same hopes for tomorrow.

“Abel, Passive Sonar is telling me people are walking inside there.”

“Shit. That means they’ve added more patrols.”

“Considering it’s three o’clock in the morning, barring a late-night walking club, I’d say you’re right about the garrison increasing patrols.”

“Walking club... What the hell are you on about...”

“They invite their neighbors to come at the dead of the night—let’s say two thirty in the morning—and they walk around as a group, holding torches and wearing white cloaks that cover them from head to toe... They can make the event even more atmospheric by wearing creepy white masks.”

“So anyway. We agree on the garrison cracking down on security.”

“And we make our escape while the walking club is distracted with their shenanigans!”

Of course a group like that didn’t exist. It was all in Ryo’s imagination... Surely you’d scream in terror if you ran into one like it...

Whoosh.

Abel leaped back instinctively.

Ryo did the same, surprised. Even though he had been speaking, he was still somewhat aware of Passive Sonar.

This street corner *should* have been empty except for them. He’d detected nothing in motion... So the man in front of them clutching a glowing red sword must not have been moving... Had he held himself still in order to avoid triggering Ryo’s Passive Sonar?

His deep blue cloak was so dark it might easily blend into the darkness. However, his light brown hair—more of an orange, actually—stood out conspicuously, at least to Ryo. But he was more concerned with the sword in his hand...

“A sword glowing red means it’s a magic blade, right?” Ryo murmured.

“Yup,” Abel replied, gripping his own sword.

For a moment, the orange-haired man’s eyes narrowed. He likely realized Abel also had a magic sword.

“A thief with a magic blade? You think too highly of yourself,” the orange-haired man said in a voice devoid of emotion. His words seemed genuine rather than provocative.

“Why don’t you come test that yourself?” Abel replied, definitely provocative.

“Very well.”

The orange-haired man closed the gap between them instantly and swung his blade down. *Klang*. Abel deflected it cleanly with his own. His expression never changed, like he was saying, “This all you got?” Naturally, his opponent inferred the taunt.

“I’ll kill you,” he said simply.

Just before he swung, Abel had glimpsed something in his expression for the briefest of seconds. Composure? Carelessness? Either way, it was completely gone now. The single strike was enough to tell the would-be thief with the magic blade that this opponent wasn’t to be taken lightly.

Then there was Abel. Though his expression never changed as his blade intercepted the orange-haired man’s, he found himself panicking on the inside.

Wait, wait, wait, wait. What the hell is this guy?! His sword is ridiculously heavy and his swings are shockingly sharp. Not to mention the weird aura cloaking him. He’s definitely not a member of the garrison and...he doesn’t feel like an adventurer either. We seem to be around the same age, but I think the carnage he’s endured is probably different... I mean, I’ve experienced my fair

share as a B-rank adventurer, but...I think he's gone through entirely different sorts of trials. If I'm an adventurer, then he's a...warrior? Or an assassin? I don't think he's part of the Sect of Assassins or something like that though... But I also don't think I'm far off by estimating he's killed at least a hundred or two hundred people.

Frankly, Abel had rarely encountered his type until now. It went without saying he'd crossed swords with criminals, including murderers. Captain Nimur of Lune's garrison often asked him for help with arrests and such. However, the aura of this orange-haired man was nothing like theirs... Because they had all been mere criminals...

"A slayer's blade..." Ryo murmured.

A slayer's blade... Abel thought. Yeah, that tracks. Actually, no more thinking. He's not the kind of opponent I can fight while thinking stupid thoughts.

Then Abel exhaled a soft, short but deep breath. He took the moment to focus his attention completely on his battle with a first-rate technician.

In the next instant, the two began their clash of magic blades.

Thrust, parry, slash. Each man used his whole body to dodge his opponent's sword.

Their swords were completely different from the one Ryo wielded... Perhaps it was a matter of swordsmanship, or perhaps a difference in philosophy... Of course, neither answer was entirely right.

Because the last man standing determined what was right. This is the truth of the sword that pierces everything—all eras, all places, all worlds.

"Amazing..."

Though Abel and Orange Hair's swords were totally unlike his, Ryo still recognized their incredible skills. They fused effort, talent, and experience through their respective blades... It was a state of mind unattainable without even a single one of those ingredients.

Each man likely only saw the other right now. And that in itself must be the

supreme experience for a swordsman.

Ryo was utterly captivated by the two swordsmen's battle. He knew he should help Abel but he couldn't. Interfering in their all-out clash wouldn't just be tactless—it would be an *insult*. That was how he felt.

He had rarely experienced the feeling himself. At least he didn't have any memories of such an occasion. However, he could say one thing for sure: stopping the fight unfolding before him, or intervening in any way, would be a mistake.

All this said, they were still in the middle of a street at three in the morning. As the *klang* of their swords echoed throughout the streets, it was no wonder that city guards on patrol nearby began appearing on scene.

"Ice Wall Package."

A wall of ice, covering an area of roughly twenty meters on each side, surrounded the intersection where Abel and Orange Hair engaged in their sword fight.

"Now no one can interfere."

Satisfied, Ryo turned back to enjoy the spectacle... Er, rather, he continued to *monitor* the scene, concerned for Abel. He most certainly wasn't entertained by the battle itself!

...Apologies. That was a lie. He was definitely enjoying it.

His hands and feet twitched slightly in concert with their movements and he unconsciously muttered sounds like "Gah" and "Ngh" while the fight ensued. He even thought about what he would do in the fight as he spectated. The higher the consumer's level, the more they'll glean from any given experience... The phenomenon applied to sword fights, spectating, and reading!

"Haaa... Haaa... Haaa..." Abel panted heavily.

"Shit..." Orange Hair swore.

"I'm vexed I even have to use it, but..." he muttered before continuing.

"Morarta, Flame Emperor Unleashed."

The moment he spoke, Orange Hair's magic blade glowed a fierce crimson.

"No way..."

Even Ryo heard Abel's whisper.

"Die."

Orange Hair swiftly swung his blade sideways. However, Abel, who'd adapted to his swordsmanship, parried it with his own sword...

Unfortunately for him, the magic, glowing blade slipped right past his own.

Slash.

With superhuman reflex, Abel bent his upper body backward and just barely avoided being cleaved in two. A deep, horizontal gash appeared across his chest.

Unbothered, he arched his torso and used the momentum to swing his sword down in one go. He figured that if Orange Hair's sword had passed right through his, it wouldn't be able to parry his attack. Unfortunately...

Klang.

Orange Hair's glowing blade struck Abel's weapon, stopping the trajectory of his swing.

"Ngh..."

The frustrated grunt slipped unbidden from Abel's mouth. Then he immediately took a huge leap backward.

"I think it's about time to call an end to this fight. *5-layer Ice Wall.*"

Immediately after this pronouncement, the two were divided.

Klang, klang, klang.

Orange Hair tried again and again to cut through the wall of ice separating them.

Keeping a close eye on the man through the corner of his eye, Ryo walked toward Abel holding a potion. As for Abel, he somehow managed to keep himself upright by using his sword as a cane. He glared at Orange Hair through

the ice wall.

“Abel, here, use this.”

“Thanks.”

He took the vial from Ryo, poured half on his chest wound, then drank the remaining half in one swallow.

“I know you’re not happy with how things have played out, but I think we should run away for now. There are too many guards here,” Ryo said, deliberately keeping his voice calm.

Ryo’s tone seemed to cool Abel’s heightened emotions. “You’re right,” he said after a moment.

An agitated person holding a sword... That was scary even for Ryo.

Quite a few members of the city’s garrison had gathered outside Ryo’s ice wall.

“Ummm, let’s see... If I adjust the Ice Wall’s reflectivity and create lots of them akin to labyrinths...”

He thought out loud on purpose out of consideration for Abel, who was still glaring at Orange Hair on the other side of the ice wall. Ryo didn’t know what he was thinking. However...it was clear his heart and mind were nowhere near calm. And who could blame Abel? He had lost, after all.

Ryo too knew the frustration of defeat... He lost practically every day, such as during his sparring matches against Sera in Lune... Then there were his nightly fights against the Dullahan in the Forest of Rondo. Ryo could empathize precisely *because* he lost every day—people grew stronger by losing!

“Abel, losing isn’t something to be ashamed of. Because every time we rise up from defeat, we become stronger.”

“Huh. That’s pretty wise coming from *you*, Ryo.”

“Here I am trying to be supportive and you treat me like that? How rude! I am *always* dropping nuggets of wisdom. In fact, wise words are the *only* words I know!”

“Aaand you just had to go and ruin it.”

“Geh, you’re right...”

Perhaps the word “serious” simply wasn’t in these two’s vocabulary...

In the end, Ryo created a maze of ice walls and floors to confound their pursuers and the two escaped.

“Running for our lives again...even though we’re not doing anything wrong. Absurd, don’t you think?”

“True enough. It’d still be a pain in the neck if we were caught, right?”

“Agreed. If they chase you, you’ll want to run... The first time I heard that, I didn’t understand at all. However, I understand all too keenly after being pursued. The ones who chase are the bad guys!”

“Y’know, that *is* part of the garrison’s job...”

“Even so, I’m still not convinced. What—or who—do they even think they’re chasing in the first place? And *why*?”

“Questions of the hour, huh?”

Then Abel gasped, like he’d just realized something. He spoke.

“There’s a reason for their pursuit.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Cuz we bore a hole in the rampart and sneaked in through it.”

“Are you saying they realized we were behind that?”

“Not...exactly.”

Even if they *had* figured out it was them, it didn’t explain a man hunt on so massive a scale.

“Well, I suppose what we did might be a crime. It would fall under property damage, right? Then it makes sense they’re after us.”

“You’re wrong on that front too. If that were the case, they’d only be after *you*, Ryo.”

“Excuse me? Explain.”

“Cuz you’re the one who drilled the hole, Ryo. Not me.”

“Abel, you craven son of a...”

Ryo and Abel discussed the situation while moving at a fast pace... Yes, the key word being “discuss” and not “blame.”

Since Abel and Orange Hair’s sword fight had drawn in guards from all over the city, the area they were running through now was basically vacant. Aside from the Ice Walls, Ryo had also created Ice Bahns to hamper and immobilize the guards who’d come to investigate the scene of the battle... He felt sorry for them.

“This is also all your fault, Abel. I simply obeyed your instructions and iced the streets because I had no other choice...”

“Shame you’re such a terrible liar. Remind me again who was cackling like a maniac, saying, ‘Enjoy the hospitality of hell for eternity’ as he cast the ice?”

“I was deliberately smiling like a villain to suppress the sadness in my heart. It was a ruse. What else could I do to fool myself?”

“Oh, yeah, like anyone’s gonna buy that load of crap.”

Abel sighed, exasperated by Ryo’s excuse, which wasn’t even a good one. Though he couldn’t deny that the water magician’s strategy had allowed them to escape successfully. Then he noticed Ryo staring at his sword.

“What is it, Ryo?”

“Don’t you think Orange Hair’s magic blade was extraordinary toward the end of your fight?”

“Yeah, there’s a few terms for what he did. ‘Ability release’ and ‘magic sword activation,’ something like that.”

“I’ll circle back to ‘ability release’ later, but ‘magic sword activation’ sounds...fantasy-ish in a modern sense.”

“I don’t really know how it works since all kinds of magic swords exist.”

Abel shook his head at Ryo, who was impressed by the weirdest things.

“Abel! Can you do some kind of amazing activation with your magic sword like Orange Hair did with his?!”

“Good question... I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know...?”

“Well, a magic blade is unbreakable and honestly, that’s good enough for me.”

“Huh? That’s all you know? You didn’t ask the person who gave it to you what it’s capable of?”

“No, we didn’t have that kind of conversation when I inherited it. Famous swords each have their own unique characteristics. For example, there’s Raven, the Empire’s treasured sword. It’s also a magic blade that improves its chosen bearer’s fire and air magics. Princess Fiona is apparently its wielder right now.”

“Oh, right, her...”

“But I heard its previous owner, His Majesty Rupert VI, never learned how to master it. So I figure it’s the same for me and mine. I just haven’t mastered it yet.”

Abel lightly thumped the hilt of the sword on his back. A magic blade that hadn’t yet recognized a swordsman of his caliber as its wielder...

“What an awfully high hurdle to overcome. But— But didn’t Orange Hair unleash his sword’s ability? To me, it didn’t look like there was much difference in skill between you two.”

They had seemed on par with each other to Ryo. He had been impressed to see two supremely first-class swordsmen with extremely high levels of swordsmanship.

“Even if our skills are equal, our combat experiences aren’t.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yeah. He’s definitely killed a staggering number of people. I know that beyond a shadow of doubt.”

“Wait, Abel, do you have an idea of who he is then?”

That was the feeling Ryo got from Abel's words.

"When he released his magic blade's abilities, he said 'Morarta,' right? That's his sword's name. The magic sword Morarta. Its owner has been the same for ten years now and his name is...Flamm Deeproad, the swordsman who's also known as the Flame Emperor."

"Does the moniker mean he's famous?"

"Yup. You know about the Great War between the Kingdom and the Federation a decade ago, right? The public champion of the Federation is the current leader, Lord Aubrey, but the hidden champion is Flamm Deeproad, the Flame Emperor."

"The hidden champion?"

"The rumors say he killed a thousand people."

"A thousand... Wait, what? But wasn't he the same age as you, Abel? So ten years ago would put him at..."

"Yeah, he should be about twenty-six, making him sixteen back then... Meaning he was active in the war at such a young age."

"*And* he's a legendary manslayer...?"

Was the man the protagonist of some manga?

Many master swordsmen were indeed prodigies. Okita Souji, known as the captain of the Shinsengumi's first unit, was a typical example, recognized as the number one master of Tennen Rishin-ryu by the time he was fifteen. Some sources say that he was also a master of Hokushin Itto-ryu...

In light of that information, a thousand kills at the age of sixteen wasn't so impossible...

"I can't imagine what killing so many people at such a young age must have done to his mind and heart..."

"Yeah, no way you can live a normal life after that."

Abel agreed with Ryo's compassionate remark from the bottom of his heart.

Never mind the fact that a thousand kills would be quite the feat even for an

adult...



In order to avoid dwelling on the mistake he'd made with Orange Hair, otherwise known as the Flame Emperor, Flamm Deeproad, Ryo searched his surroundings. He mostly used Passive Sonar to accomplish this while occasionally throwing in Active Sonar. Though Passive Sonar was an extremely stealthy way of gathering information, it couldn't pick up motionless things. For that, he used Active Sonar, despite there being a chance of detection by particularly sharp targets. As for the information he'd acquired through these dual methods...

"Abel, someone motionless has been there the whole time."

"Probably just a homeless person sleeping on the street, right?"

"Perhaps. However...sometimes they walk."

"You literally just said they've been motionless the whole time though."

"It's a figure of speech, darn it! Anyway, when they *do* walk, they remind me of a scout."

Ryo thought of Sue, the scout for Switchback, which was the party he had traveled with as part of Gekko's merchant caravan. The way people walk is unique to each person, but an individual's gait also varies considerably depending on their occupation. Even an amateur could tell the difference between a swordsman, a magician, and a cleric based on their walk.

And a scout's tread was even more distinct. Of course, scouts didn't make noise normally, but the way they put their feet on the ground, their rhythm, and even the way they moved their legs, including the thighs, was different.

"Ryo, your magic lets you figure out how people walk?"

"Of course! It's the result of my daily, diligent training. Even minor information like that determines the difference between life and death, you know. Because you can't say something like 'I should have tried harder' after you die."

"I gotta say, I respect that serious side of you, Ryo."

“Oh, stop, you’ll make me blush.”

Ryo felt embarrassed by Abel’s unreserved praise.

Regardless of doing what comes naturally to them, anyone would blush when someone praises them. And a single word of praise can encourage surprising growth. Praise is the foundation of education.

“In any case, the person seems like a scout to me. What do you suggest we do?”

“Well, we don’t have any other information, so...I kinda wanna check ’em out and see if we can extract some from them. Especially when you consider the presence of a scout at this time... Even if they *are* an adventurer, it makes you curious what they’re doing wandering out so late in a city that’s on lockdown, huh?”

“I agree. Ah, they’ll be within range of us soon.”

“We’re out of luck if they get too close to us... Wait, did you just say ‘within range’?”

“Ice Casket.”

Thus did the world see the creation of another coffin of ice with a person inside...

“Excellent, excellent, capture complete.”

Ryo cheerfully thumped the ice casket with those words, pleased by his own work.

Abel stared at the man encased in ice. “Uhhh...not to be a stick in the mud, but...I really don’t think your first resort should be freezing people.”

There was no denying he was closer to a scout than a city guard or a civilian... In fact, he actually looked like...

“A thief... This guy looks like a thief...”

“Abel, I’m not impressed by you labeling someone based on your own prejudiced views...” Ryo trailed off, staring at Abel. “Okay, but why does he

suddenly look like a thief to me as well?”

In the end, he wound up agreeing with Abel’s opinion.

Technically speaking, nothing in particular marked the man as a burglar, but the word described him much, much better than a scout, who was an adventurer.

“Maybe he only *seems* that way and in reality, he’s actually an incredibly honest person.”

“I mean...sure, there’s a chance, but...”

“I’ll dispel the ice covering his face and ask him directly.”

Ryo did just that to question him.

“Hey, you sons of bitches, what the hell’s the meaning of this?! You better let me out right...”

“*Ice Casket.*”

He covered the man’s head again with his spell, cutting off his furious words.

“Well, looks like you were right...”

“Yup...”

Both Ryo and Abel shook their heads in disappointment.

“I still don’t think it’s right to discriminate against someone based on their occupation.”

“Same.”

“However, any way I look at him, I can’t think of him as anything except a thief.”

“Makes you wonder why, huh? The Dawn’s Border sure didn’t give off the same energy when we met them in the tavern...”

“Of course not. They’re *chivalrous* thieves. Their intentions are entirely different!”

While Abel cocked his head thoughtfully as he recalled the three women of the group, Ryo pointed out the nobility of their cause.

“Intentions, huh... Whatever the job, if you work hard and honestly, and take pride in your work, that innate goodness will show itself. So I guess, in a way, that’s a sign of aspiration.”

“Well said, Abel. Meaning it isn’t about the job itself but about your aspirations, which show on your face, right? I see. In that case, this man’s aspirations...”

“Are probably not that noble...”

This was the conclusion Ryo and Abel came to after putting their heads together.

“For now, why don’t we ask him what he was doing here?”

“Yeah, good idea,” Abel agreed.

When he did, Ryo dispelled the ice covering his head again. But...

“Damn you to hell, you pieces of shit! My ambitions are none of your damn business—”

“Ice Casket.”

The man was once more sealed in ice.

“To no one’s surprise, a man with low aspirations is needlessly loud.”

“Y’know, I don’t know if those two things are actually related...”

“If it looks like a thief, acts like a thief, and talks like a thief, it’s a thief. There’s a saying that goes like that.”

“No way. I bet you literally just came up with that, Ryo.”

Ryo had tried to create his own version of an American proverb, which Abel was not a fan of... Poor Ryo.

Anyway, setting the water magician aside, Abel had more to say.

“Man, what a pain in the ass. Just to make sure though, he *can* actually hear us even though he’s inside the ice and we’re out here?”

“Yes, of course. He can’t hear us through the vibrations in his eardrum, but bone conduction should work.”

“Yeah, I have no idea what you just said, but as long as he can hear us, might as well do this.”

“When you’re right, you’re right, Abel.”

Ryo agreed to Abel’s suggestion on proceeding with the interrogation. However, there was a chance that the man with low ambitions would refuse to listen to them. So the first thing they needed to do was *make* him listen.

“All right, Mr. Low Ambition. If you insist on creating a ruckus, I think I’ll leave you here frozen for eternity. I bet you just thought, ‘That’s impossible,’ didn’t you? Well, you thought wrong. Normally, it would be impossible to freeze someone in the first place. However, there’s nothing normal about you currently being encased in ice. While I’m at it, let me tell you it would *also* be easy for me to crush you like this, ice and all.”

Then Ryo deliberately raised his right hand and snapped his fingers. Terror sparked in the man’s eyes at that moment.

“You felt your whole body being squeezed just now, yes? I tried putting a tiny bit of pressure using the ice. In the same way, I can focus on just your legs or an arm...and flatten you. Awfully scary, wouldn’t you say? I feel sorry for you as well. Unfortunately, I have no choice but to do as this heinous swordsman bids. *However*, if you answer his questions honestly, I won’t have to crush you. I won’t even leave you in ice for the rest of your life either.”

Abel, the aforementioned heinous swordsman, scowled at Ryo...who deliberately didn’t look at him.

Something told Ryo the frozen man was much more agreeable about listening to them now... At least that was how he felt. This unexplainable feeling also told him it was fine to remove the ice covering his head at this point. And that was precisely what he did.

Unlike the previous two occasions, the man didn’t unleash a stream of insults this time around. He said nothing. Fear warped his expression.

“Excellent. I can see you’re willing to engage with us now, hm? I’m glad. Now then, please answer this hein—ahem—swordsman’s questions.”

The man nodded frantically in response.

Abel let out a gusty sigh. “Whatever. Anyway, first things first. What the hell are you?”

“What...am I? What the hell does that—”

Rio raised his arm threateningly.

“No, stop! Don’t freeze me again! I just don’t understand his question!”

Apparently, he’d *wanted* to answer, but couldn’t because he didn’t know what Abel meant.

“Instead of giving him a difficult question, I think you should just give him yes-no ones...”

“Good point.”

The frozen man seemed to agree too.

“Are you a thief?” Abel asked.

“Uh... Well, about that...” The man hesitated.

Naturally, Ryo raised his arm...

“Wait, please! Not the ice again! I’ll answer! I-I’m a thief, I’m a thief...”

Even as his face twisted in terror, the man replied. Truly a confession of sin. Then he hung his head despondently. That might have been the moment he gave up completely.

“All right, next question. What were you doing here?”

“I was...waiting for someone.”

“Who?”

“Captain Roster.”

When he answered, Ryo and Abel looked at each other for a split second. They nodded to each other inside their minds.

“That’s the guy in charge of the garrison’s government office, right?”

“Yes.” The man nodded.

Kinko, an upright guardsman, had mentioned this captain not too long ago,

the same man who often took bribes. The one who had acted unforgivably by reducing his subordinate's salary after he filed a complaint against him!

"And what is this Captain Roster supposed to give you?"

"Um..."

The man fumbled for an answer to Abel's blunt question.

Abel suspected that Captain Roster had stolen something from the government office and intended to give it to this man.

"What. Is. He. Giving. You?"

As Abel deliberately repeated the question, Ryo raised his right hand in tandem.

"Stop! I'll tell you! Uh...I don't know what it's inside, but he's supposed to bring a box. My job was to take it from him and deliver it to someone waiting outside the city..."

He was mumbling by the time he finished probably because he'd anticipated the next question. Which was...

"Who's the person waiting outside the city?"

...the question the man had expected. He went pale.

"Well..."

He hesitated. But he couldn't *not* answer. He knew that. He knew, but if he told the truth...his life would be in danger as soon as he was freed from this situation...

"Gekko."

"What?"

"A merchant by the name of Gekko who works directly for the Principality of Inverey."

"Y'don't say..."

Abel looked at Ryo. They were both thinking the same thing without ever saying a word out loud.

Looking back at him, Abel sneered derisively. “You got a lot of nerve for a thief to lie now.”

At the same time, Ryo raised his right arm.

“Wait! I’m not lying! Please believe me! You two may not know this, but Gekko’s infamous for taking any means necessary to weaken the Federation... M-My legs...”

Something was happening inside the ice.

“Hmmm, where should I start squashing you like a bug... An arm? A leg? Oh, how about your right leg?”

Ryo’s voice was utterly dispassionate, which made even the hairs on Abel’s body stand up...

“Stop, please! I’m telling you the truth!”

“You’re lying. We work for Gekko.”

“You— What?”

The frozen man could only stare dumbfounded at Ryo’s announcement for a brief moment though. Why? That might have to do with the strange feeling around his right leg.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I— Forgive me! It’s not Gekko but Gongorad!”

“You should have been honest with us from the start.”

Ryo waved his right hand meaningfully then. The ice reverted to its original state and the man panted in relief.

“Gongorad is the most powerful merchant in the western part of the Federation.”

The man nodded wildly in response to Abel’s remark.

“Good grief... As if Gekko would ever employ someone who so clearly looks like a thief. Next time you think about lying, I suggest you look in the mirror first.”

Ryo muttered to himself. “Fuming” described him currently at the moment.

Abel pressed his face close to Ryo's ear. "You think he's telling the truth about Gongorad?" he whispered so the man couldn't hear.

"I do, probably because he was fooled by the illusion of his leg being crushed. I doubt anyone could lie at that point."

"Illusion? So you weren't actually applying pressure?"

"Of course not. I only tweaked the density of the ice around him to mess with his senses. I'm not above threatening someone, but *actually* torturing someone is a bit much even for me..."

"Uhhh... Good to know, I guess."

Sometimes, even Abel didn't understand Ryo's standards.

Ryo's attitude changed completely after Abel's sighing remark.

"Abel, four people are coming straight in this direction from the government office!"

"Maybe Captain Roster. Hey, what's your name?"

"Bagana."

The man's head was once more surrounded by ice after he answered.



"All right, wait here."

After ordering his three subordinates to wait by the side of the street, Captain Roster dismounted his horse.

"Remember, don't come no matter what happens. Stay here until I return."

"Yes, Sir."

With that order, Roster turned the corner and walked into the darkness. A short time later, he called out in a whisper.

"Bagana. Are you there?"

No answer. He took another seven steps, heading deeper down the alley... Only to find himself frozen. Behind the layer of ice, Captain Roster's face looked surprised.

“Suspect secured. No movements detected from his three subordinates,” Ryo informed Abel. The captain’s subordinates weren’t visible from their current location waiting in the darkness beyond the corner.

“Can you spot the box he’s supposed to be carrying?”

“Yes.”

Abel saw something shifting inside the ice coffin after Ryo answered his question. A few moments later, the ice spat out a box a little bigger than palm-sized from inside the captain’s clothes.

“I think this is it.”

Ryo handed the box over to Abel.

“Well, that sure is some dextrous ice, huh?” Abel mused, amazed.

“Just another result of my daily training,” Ryo replied, puffing his chest proudly.

It looked like slime or something had moved inside the ice... In any case, nothing about it had been normal.

Abel undid the latch and opened the box. A red, fist-sized jewel rested inside.

“This is...” The sight left Abel at a loss for words.

“A red...magic stone?” Ryo said the first thing that popped into his head.

But he realized something right after he spoke—he’d never seen a red magic stone. To be more precise, he’d only ever seen green and yellow magic stones. Making this red, fire-attributed magic stone, his first.

“That’s right, a fire one. It’s incredibly rare.”

“You know, I suspected as much, especially since I was thinking I’ve never seen one until now.”

“Course you haven’t. You can only harvest fire-attributed magic stones from fire monsters, but hardly any of them exist in the first place.”

“Huh? Actually, now that you mention it... I’ve only ever encountered air or earth monsters... Well, there were those sea ones too.”

“It’s almost impossible to get magic stones from sea monsters *because* of their location. Even if you defeat them, the stones just sink to the bottom of the ocean. The problem with fire monsters is their existence, or almost lack thereof.”

“I think I get it. If they used their fire magic in a forest for example, it would create a wildfire. So no wonder hardly any of them actually exist.”

Ryo understood why now too. Although fire magic had a high degree of attack power, it was very difficult to use because a spell could end up burning everything around it.

“Then what in the world *is* this red magic stone...?”

“Probably a salamander’s.”

“What did you say?!”

Salamanders often appeared in fantasy tales. Their appearances varied quite a bit story to story, with them being inferior versions of dragons, large lizards, or reptiles. However, they all had one thing in common—they lived in places with lava and magma. And depending on the type, they could spit fire too... Which made them perfect as fire monsters!

“But where would you even find salamanders? I’ve never heard of them.”

He hadn’t heard of their existence in the city of Lune. They also weren’t listed in *The Monster Compendium, Beginner Edition* that Fake Michael had created for him.

“There aren’t any in the Central Provinces.”

Ryo gasped in shock.

“Which makes this red magic stone *shockingly* valuable,” Abel said with a frown. Then he turned to face Bagana, who was still frozen. “Why were *you* tasked with transporting something this valuable?”

It was definitely abnormal, not to mention dangerous, for someone who looked so much like a thief, and a weak one at that, to be entrusted with the job of delivering a precious item like this outside of the city. Ryo wanted to know the answer too, so he dispelled the ice covering Bagana’s face.

“That’s because I’m the only one who knows about the cracks in the city walls, which means I’m the only one who can slip outside undetected.”

To Ryo, it sounded like he was...boasting. Just a bit. So...did he actually take pride in his work? His ambitions certainly couldn’t be called lofty. Plus, his work itself was of the criminal kind. And yet...

Abel reflected on Bagana’s answer for a few moments before he spoke. “All of this just begs the question... Why exactly does a merchant like Gongorad want a red magic stone?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Ryo said. “To sell it to the highest bidder, who’s probably the one that hired him. They must have told him they’d pay him handsomely if he got his hands on one.”

“Yeah, but we’re talking about something that belongs to the Grand Duchy. Why go so far to steal it when they must have known the Federation government would get involved?”

“If you think about it logically, they must be backed by a foreign power, considering the lengths they’re willing to go to. Either the Kingdom or the Empire or...”

“I *really* didn’t want that to be the answer, ya know...” Abel said with a grimace.

Things always became complicated whenever several countries were involved.

With a shake of his head, Abel plowed on.

“Bagana, right? I pretty much have a handle on you. Just wait here a bit.”

The moment he spoke, ice instantly covered the thief Bagana’s head. Abel now faced the frozen Captain Roster.

“All right, we know you’re Captain Roster, in charge of the garrison’s government office. We only wanna know one thing. Is the border blockade your fault or not?”

Of course, Captain Roster couldn’t answer him on account of the ice covering him from head to toe. To avoid what had happened earlier with Bagana cursing

them out each time Ryo dispelled the ice, Abel warned him ahead of time.

“It’s better if you’re honest with me. Cuz if you’re not...”

Ryo raised his right hand in concert with Abel’s words. All was quiet from within the ice...

Captain Roster’s face was twisted, though not from any actual pressure Ryo applied. Roster might have been under the illusion that he *would* be crushed... Basically, he was in a kind of panicked state.

Bagana’s expression didn’t look so good either even though Ryo wasn’t doing anything to him. The thief was merely reacting to the *thought* of what might be happening now...

Ryo gestured menacingly again with his right hand. When he did, Captain Roster’s expression smoothed out. For some reason, the same thing had happened to Bagana’s face too...

Seeing the results of their combined efforts, Abel turned to Ryo and nodded. Ryo dispelled the ice covering the captain’s head. And then—

“Heeelp!” Captain Roster shouted.

When his three nearby subordinates heard him, they came running.

As for Ryo and Abel, they remained...completely unbothered. The two simply sighed. The moment the trio rounded the corner and raced into the darkness...

“Ice Casket 3.”

Three new ice coffins with people inside were born.

“What...”

Captain Roster stared, flabbergasted. Meanwhile, behind his covering of ice, Bagana’s suggested he’d known all along this would happen.

“This is my error and mine alone. I should have created a soundproofing barrier. If I had, then these three wouldn’t have needed to be sacrificed... How unfortunate.”

“Stop exaggerating. They’re not even dead. They’re *not* dead...right?” Abel sounded a little worried.

“Correct. I just wanted to create the proper ambience. Can you blame me?” Ryo said nonchalantly.

“Wait, so you *can* soundproof?”

“It’s possible, theoretically speaking. *5-Layer Ice Wall Package.*”

His chant created the usual wall of ice around them.

“At first glance, it *might* seem like my normal ice wall. However, I created gaps between each of the five layers, which trap the air. A vacuum would be perfect, but this makes it harder for vibrations to be transmitted, so it will do for now. Even if they scream, I believe most of the sound won’t leak outside.”

“You really are something else...”

Although Abel didn’t understand the finer points of Ryo’s explanation, he *did* understand that anyone outside couldn’t hear them. And that was good enough for him.

“All right, Captain Roster, here’s what we’re gonna do since you thought you could outsmart us...”

“W-Wait, please!” Roster yelled, terrified. “I have money! I’ll give you however much you want, so please help me!”

“Five billion.”

It wasn’t Abel who spoke but Ryo.

“Huh...?” Roster sounded baffled.

“If you pay us five billion florins, I’ll consider it.”

Ryo thrust out his right hand in a “give it to me” gesture.

Abel said nothing. Because he couldn’t find the right words. But if he *had* found the right words to say, they probably would have been, “Not a chance in hell he has that kind of cash.”

“I— That’s impossible...” Roster replied weakly.

“So you’re saying you can’t even cough up a mere five billion florins to save your own life? I personally think one’s life is the most important thing they have...”

“There’s no way I’d have that much money...”

“Well, I do. It’s really not that hard, you know,” Ryo said, expression smug.

“Wha...”

Captain Roster was at a loss for words. This is the violence of money.

“Then tell us how much you were supposed to receive for stealing this red magic stone.”

Another pause, then: “Fifty million.”

“That’s it?”

Roster was completely defeated by the violence of Ryo’s money and words. This insane robe-wearing magician claimed to possess five billion florins and here he was taking dangerous risks for a comparably paltry fifty million... He lost all heart at the hopeless difference between them. He actually looked teary-eyed. Despair almost overwhelmed him at the feeling of his own patheticness...

Apparently, there were many ways to break people emotionally and mentally.

“Well, it is what it is. This haughty swordsman is going to ask you a few questions, so please answer him honestly. You *can* do that, yes?”

“Yes...”

Roster was truly beaten to his core. Watching him, even Abel felt a little bad for the man. But he quickly changed his mind once he thought about everything Kinko had told them about Roster and the things he’d done. The captain wasn’t deserving of pity. So for now...

“I asked you before, didn’t I? Are you the cause of this border blockade? Because you stole this red magic stone?”

“I’m half the reason, yes. I was told to steal it during a commotion...”

“Commotion? What commotion?”

“The crash of a small airship.”

“What the...”

Roster's answer stunned Abel. Ryo too was speechless. Abel was shocked because the crash of an airship, even a small one, would have caused serious damage to a city. As for Ryo, it was his first time learning of the existence of airships, which explained why he was at a loss for words.

Not a blimp or a flying boat or even a hot-air balloon. An honest-to-goodness airship.

Airships were fictional vehicles back on Earth. However, they actually existed on Phi—in the Central Provinces specifically. It was no wonder the thought excited Ryo.

"I've heard of them. An airship is a small flying vessel developed in the Duchy of Adlan, one of the members that make up the Federation's Council of Ten. It can hold two or three people. But I didn't hear about the experiments being successful."

"Well...it failed this time too. No, it might have been set up to fail... Anyway, it crashed last night in this city. You could call it the direct cause of the border closure."

"Except the city's residents don't know that, do they? A crash would have created a huge panic."

"It fell in the garrison's training grounds..."

"Now I get it. In that case, there wouldn't have been much, if any, damage to the city itself. But it probably caused chaos for the garrison itself, right... Including the personnel guarding the government office. And you took advantage of the chaos to steal the red magic stone."

"That's correct..." Captain Roster said, polite and honest. He had been broken, pummeled to the depths of his soul.

Now they finally had some concrete information about this whole situation.

Ryo and Abel moved a little away from the five ice coffins and began talking to each other.

"Roster is completely broken," Abel said, fixing a steady, unnerving stare on

Ryo.

“All the fault of the heinous, haughty swordsman named Abel. O-Of course I know you were just playing a role! The real you couldn’t be further from the villain you pretended to be, Abel,” Ryo said in a panic, hurrying to tack on that last bit.

“*You’re* the one who broke him, Ryo, not me. Pretty sure you dealt the killing blow when you told him you have five billion florins.”

“I see. I was just bluffing though... If he couldn’t even see through something so obvious, then it’s obvious he’s been slacking off as a captain!”

“You were bluffing? So you don’t actually have that much money?”

“Yes, I was. Though considering how much wyvern magic stones go for, I’m sure I’ll hit five billion sooner rather than later.”

Even Abel had believed his bluff because Ryo had seemed so confident. But apparently that self-assurance stemmed from his potential profits. Truly the violence of money.

In any case, Abel steered the conversation back to the topic he really wanted to discuss.

“We did our jobs. We know why the borders have been shut down.”

“You are correct, good sir. I have to admit I was surprised that an airship was the cause.”

“*That’s* what you’re stuck on?” Abel said, exasperated.

“Of course. I wouldn’t have been so shocked if you’d only told me airships exist, Abel... Speaking of, what kind of person doesn’t share information like that with their allies? Rude.”

“Rude? First of all, you never even asked, so how the heck was I supposed to know?”

“You should take the initiative instead of waiting for someone to broach the subject. I personally think that’s an important quality in a leader.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say,” Abel said.

“Anyway. The ordinary citizens don’t know about this airship business, right?”
Though Ryo’s tone was nonchalant, doubt festered in his eyes...

“Right. They don’t know a thing,” Abel replied just as calmly.

“I knew it! I know your true form, Abel!”

“What?”

Ryo’s gaze sharpened, like his prey had fallen into his trap. Abel could have sworn a drop of cold sweat trickled down his back.

“You’re an industrial spy who steals information about a country’s key figures and sells it to other countries! Someone like that is called a *traitor*, Abel!”

Abel had been on edge up until that point, but hearing Ryo’s ridiculous response made him sigh instead. Though he’d never heard the term “industrial spy” before, he decided it probably wasn’t anything important. This was his go-to reaction to Ryo’s mad ravings.

“Yup, waaay off the mark as usual.”

“No. It can’t be...”

For whatever reason, Ryo had been incredibly confident. So it genuinely depressed him when Abel pointed out he was wrong. However, it didn’t last long this time around. He recovered in five seconds.

“I won’t abide any of your slander, Abel!”

“Yeeeah, I have no clue what you’re babbling on about.”

“Right, so if the cause of the border blockade is the crash of an airship, then that means there should be a solution eventually. But I don’t think it’ll be lifted unless this red magic stone is returned to the government office,” Ryo said, thinking out loud.

“That about sums it up, yeah,” Abel agreed.

That left only one problem...

“How the heck do we return it...”

“We can’t just sneak inside and leave it there, hm? Someone else might steal it before a bigwig notices it’s back.”

Both Abel and Ryo racked their brains on the best way to return the object. If they screwed the pooch here, they'd end up right back where they started... Actually, the situation might *worsen*, and horribly at that, if someone else stole the thing, leaving them with no leads. They definitely wanted to avoid that scenario.

"I think...our only option is to hand it over to them directly," Abel said.

"I think...that would be the safest route, yes," Ryo replied.

They both exhaled quietly. Even though it was their best option, they knew it would cause trouble no matter what. Problems galore, probably. This definitely wouldn't end without incident... Unfortunately...

"We have no choice," Abel muttered.

They indeed had no choice. Truly a marvelous phrase that governs the universe. No one and nothing can resist it.



A state of high alert was in place in the area around Zimarino's city hall. All of the garrison members had been deployed to patrol the city and tighten security around the government building. Having said that, a deeper look beneath the surface revealed most of the guards simply loafing around, some yawning, others chatting to their coworkers. Perhaps this was inevitable as time passed, especially with dawn soon approaching. After all, anyone would be exhausted after being on duty all night...

It happened around then. One of the city guards noticed something approaching. However, he didn't raise the alarm—which was just proof of the lax discipline in the garrison. Normally, a guard would call out to their colleagues and superiors. However...raising the alarm when nothing was wrong would only result in earning an unreasonable reprimand. All things considered, raising the alarm wasn't so easy.

But just as the first light of day appeared, it became impossible *not* to raise his voice. Five objects drew closer and closer, glittering as their surfaces reflected the light from the slowly rising sun. By the time the objects were near enough to see clearly, most of the garrison members stationed around city hall had

gathered in front of the building, their gazes intent.

Self-moving wagons carrying...coffins made of ice? The sunlight glancing off the ice made it difficult to discern what was inside, but there was definitely something encased within the ice. What could it be though?

“Captain Roster...?”

No one knew who murmured those words first... But the closer the wagon came, the clearer it became to everyone that it was in fact Captain Roster. Three more wagons followed behind him, each holding the guards’ comrades. The last wagon held someone unfamiliar who looked like a thief, but he didn’t matter.

When they arrived in front of city hall, the five ice wagons disappeared, as if sinking into the ground. Only the ice coffins remained after they vanished. The members of the garrison stared cautiously. However, nothing more occurred.

“I suppose...we should help them,” someone finally said.

Then, finally, they crowded around the ice coffins and started trying to chip away at them using their knives and sword hilts. They kept at it for a while before they all stopped.

“The ice isn’t breaking at all...”

All the city guardsmen could do was stand there in front of the five, unbreakable ice caskets...



Bonito Beckis was in charge of Zimarino’s government office. He had been appointed viceroy four years ago at the age of fifty, a tremendous accomplishment for the third son of a poor noble family with not much in the way of land. Frankly speaking, he wasn’t the brilliant type. But he had spent his life working honestly, steadily, and dispassionately. And the position of viceroy of Zimarino finally came to him after a series of lucky strokes, including the misfortunes and arrests of other potential candidates.

It was a role he would never have been appointed to otherwise, even if he had dedicated his whole life trying to obtain it. Perhaps he was unworthy for

the job. He lacked the necessary competency, didn't understand what he was supposed to do, and had no one to assist him.

He used to have someone he could trust though. Warm and tender, one who always lent him an ear when he needed, who traversed the path of life together by his side... His wife of many years. However, a massive accident took place in Zimarino three years ago and she wound up caught in the chaos because she'd gone in Bonito's place to inspect the site.

Her death had been instantaneous.

That had marked the turning point. That was when he began falling apart...

Up until then, he'd been able to apply himself earnestly to the city's governance despite his lack of competence. And despite not understanding so many of the issues plaguing the city, by visiting people on-site and talking directly to the residents, he'd been able to find solutions even if it took time. His effort had made up for his deficiencies. Together with his wife.

But the moment he lost this irreplaceable person, Bonito lost all hope and meaning.

Zimarino had been known for its strong, albeit imperfect, system of law and order. Yet it had been crumbling for three years now. Unfortunately, Bonito, who rarely left his residence now, didn't realize this reality. Perhaps he would have thought nothing of it even if he *had* noticed. Because everything precious to him was already long gone...

But the knowledge that he was still viceroy of the city might have lurked somewhere deep in his heart. Even if he no longer acted in a way befitting of the position. Even if his subordinates no longer performed their duties properly. Even if the city's residents were no longer happy. And that must be what drove him to say what he did.

"Why did this happen..."

Surely these words have been uttered tens of thousands, hundreds of millions of times since the dawn of history. A similar phrase would be, "How could this have happened..." In these past twenty-four hours, Bonito Beckis, viceroy of Zimarino, must have muttered these two phrases countless times.

First, a small airship had crashed. Airship technology had been under development for many years in the Duchy of Adlan, one of the countries part of the Council of Ten, the Federation's nucleus of power. And this particular small vessel just *had* to crash in Zimarino of all places.

"It should never have crashed in a bloody city!" Bonito had shouted automatically upon receiving the news.

Just because he'd lost all motivation didn't mean he wanted to deliberately plunge his people into the depths of misfortune. Upon learning that the garrison's training ground was the crash site, he felt a measure of relief and set out to visit it immediately, propelled by whatever shred of sentiment remained in his heart.

But his decision ultimately backfired. Because when he returned to city hall, his subordinates reported the theft of the red magic stone. Instantly, the world went black.

The fist-sized, fire-attributed magic stone... An incredibly valuable object in the Central Provinces. Why then was something so precious stored in a border city like this one?

Privately, Bonito thought the decision was idiotic. Over a century ago, the first grand duke, Lord Chiaffredo, had ordered that the stone be placed in Zimarino's custody.

Why hadn't they simply kept something so important and valuable safe in the ducal treasure vault? Bonito thought this every time he looked at the red magic stone.

The object wasn't on display to the general public. Instead, it was stored deep inside the government building. It went without saying that its alchemical defenses had been perfect. Additionally, only a limited number of people were given access to the vault. Furthermore, the only one who could undo the final lock was Bonito himself... All of this *should* have been the case.

And yet...

"It's impossible for anything made by human hands to be perfect."

The captain of the city's garrison had said this to him once. Of *course*, Bonito

bloody well knew that!

After the small airship's crash, the country's borders had been temporarily locked down. Then the stone's theft forced him to close the city's gates too. At almost the same time, both the Principality of Inverey and the Kingdom had also evidently sealed off their own borders... It was inevitable.

This place was beset by perpetual challenges due to its position straddling three different countries' borders. Since the Great War a decade ago, not a single instance of armed conflict had occurred here. Moreover, the ducal house repeatedly admonished administrators of the city to make sure nothing like it ever happened, so Bonito was careful to follow their edict.

So if one of the three nations instituted a border blockade, then the other two would do the same out of conditioned reflex. After which they would wait and assess the situation to decide whether to reopen the borders or keep them closed...

Zimarino just so happened to be the cause of the current situation. That in itself wasn't a serious issue. The problem was the theft of the red magic stone.

Until it was found, not only would the international borders remain sealed, but the city itself would remain in a state of lockdown indefinitely. Because if he reopened the city, the stone would be forever lost to them and Bonito would be dismissed from his post. News of the theft would eventually reach the grand duke and his family, meaning they would likely send an inspector. Though losing his position as the viceroy was inevitable, it wouldn't end there. No, he would most certainly be sentenced to death.

So for these reasons, Bonito was extremely exhausted. That explained why he didn't immediately notice that something was off when he plodded into his personal quarters. Only once he reached the center of the room did he realize that someone sat on the sofa farther back. A man wearing a white robe, his feet crossed at the ankles...

The moment he spotted him, no sound escaped from Bonito's lips. Then, when he *did* try to raise his voice in alarm...

"Be quiet."

“Wha...”

“Be quiet, Lord Viceroy.”

The robed man spoke in a quiet but strangely pompous, or perhaps theatrical, tone.

“We can solve the problem you have on your hands. So please be quiet.”

“R-Really...?”

Under normal circumstances, Bonito would never listen to the words of someone who sneaked into the viceroy’s personal quarters in city hall. At daybreak, no less. However, he was utterly worn out, with every ounce of hope lost. To add insult to injury, the magic stone seemed lost for good, as they had no leads on how it was stolen or who did the deed. Recovery was essentially impossible at this point. Of *course*, Bonito bloody well knew that!

So when someone said they had a solution in this situation, it was no wonder he didn’t mind at least hearing them out...

“Y-You said you can solve my problem?”

“Yes. You lost a red magic stone, correct?”

The robed man’s reply provoked an intense response in Bonito. This problem had plagued him for too long now. So his answer was one he’d wanted so badly he could almost taste it. Now, what would this robed man tell him?

“There’s a wooden box on top of your desk, yes? The stone is inside it.”

You could say Bonito’s reaction to those words was violent. He rushed toward the desk and circled around it. Just like the robed man said, a box lay on top... One big enough to hold the magic stone in question...

He took a deep breath.

Then another one.

After a third, he finally picked up the box. He unfastened the latch, inhaled once more, then opened it.

“Wow...”

Inside lay an unmistakably red magic stone. The same one that had been

giving him so much grief this whole time... Then he picked it up and held it firmly in his hand.

For a moment, just a moment, Bonito was tempted to shout out and call for someone. Perhaps...it came from the feeling of getting what he wanted and wishing to ensure it was true. But his doubts passed quickly. The moment they did, he realized someone was behind him.

A swordsman stood there staring down at him. When did he get there?

“Gah...”

The startled sound escaped from Bonito’s mouth.

“That swordsman is an arrogant, atrocious person, so I would suggest you not do anything strange.”

“U-Understood...”

The robed man was satisfied by Bonito’s frantic nod. Apparently, the viceroy was truly afraid of the swordsman...

Then he turned toward the robed man and asked him, “What...what do you want?”

“I think you already know we don’t want money, hm? Because if we did, we could have simply sold off that stone. However, we had no such intentions.” The robed man smiled a little.

“Right.” Bonito nodded in agreement.

“First, we want the country’s borders reopened. We also want corruption eliminated and order restored to the city government. That includes the garrison.”

“Wha...”

“What? Are you saying you can’t do it?”

“No... I can fulfill your first request quickly. Today, in fact. As for your second...”

“If you weren’t aware, your own subordinate stole that magic stone in order to sell it off. Things are much too lax here. Isn’t that precisely why you were

driven into a corner?”

“Well, yes...”

“By the way, the thief is Roster, captain of the garrison’s city hall division.”

“What...did you...say...?”

The robed man’s words stunned Bonito. Captain Roster was definitely one of the few people allowed to enter the storage vault. Even so, he shouldn’t have been able to open the last lock...

“I can’t deny he had unfettered access to the vault. However, I’m the only one able to open the final door that guards the stone...”

“The code to unlock it is 1, 4, 1, 4, 2, 1, 3, 5, 6. Correct?”

Bonito stared, speechless.

“We know because Captain Roster told us. You should change the number sometimes, you know. After all, you don’t know when or where a bad guy might be watching.”

“R-Right...”

“Captain Roster is on the street in front of city hall. By the time you arrive there, the restraints will have come undone. There’s a man who looks like a thief with him and he heard all the crimes Roster confessed to. He’s your witness. His job was to take the magic stone from Roster and hand it over to a merchant named Gongorad waiting outside the city. If you separate him from Roster and make a deal with him ensuring his safety and a lighter sentence in exchange for his testimony, I’m sure he’ll tell you everything.”

“Gongorad? The one from...”

“Yes, the one who holds a great deal of power in the western part of the Federation. It’s entirely possible this incident extends beyond just the grand duchy to the Federation as a whole, maybe even other nations. Well, I can’t say for sure, since that’s only speculation on my part.”

While Bonito was stunned by the mention of the wealthy merchant named Gongorad, the robed man spoke indifferently, like the whole thing was someone else’s problem.

“I believe our job here is done.” With that, the robed man stood up from the sofa. “We’re watching you. Please make sure to uphold your end of our bargain, hm? I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how easy it would be for us to slip into your room unnoticed, just like we did today...”

His tone remained ever so relaxed. He even smiled, for goodness’ sake. But his words were terrifying. He might as well have been saying: “I can take your life easily, without anyone ever noticing.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll make sure both the borders and the city are reopened. And I’ll definitely ensure law and order is enforced once more in our government.”

Resolve overflowed on Bonito’s face. If someone who knew him before were to appear, they might have felt nostalgic at the sight of him now. Though his face was still gaunt, the light had returned to his eyes.

“Thank you for returning the magic stone.”

He bowed his head deeply in gratitude.

The robed man nodded in acknowledgment, then left the room together with the swordsman.

Bonito opened one of the drawers in his desk and took out a small, framed drawing. It depicted an elegant, gently smiling woman.

“Carolina... I was wrong... I’m sorry for everything until now.”

He could almost hear her reply thusly: “You’ve made many mistakes. Now it’s time for you to fix them.”



“Life sure does feel grand after doing the right thing, hm!” Ryo said with a smile, basking in the morning sunlight.

“I guess, yeah...” However, Abel seemed dissatisfied for some reason as he walked next to him.

“What is it? Are you still holding a grudge against me for calling you arrogant and atrocious? Gosh, I didn’t know you were such a small-minded man, Abel.”

“Kinda dumb to hold a grudge about something like that...at this point.”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Let’s just say it’s easy to get used to stuff like that when someone spends a lot of time with you, Ryo.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that explanation...”

This was just how the two were.

“Anyway, I was just thinking...whether or not we should have turned over that viceroy to higher authorities or something.”

“Why? Technically, he’s a victim too...”

“I mean, sure, when it comes to the magic stone, but definitely not as the one in charge of this city, right? Bribery is rampant and the residents are suffering.”

“This is true. Perhaps a key figure from the central government will come and dismiss him from his post. Then again, it looked like he had a change of heart earlier. The man was practically overflowing with resolve. Everyone makes mistakes. And we’ll continue to do so. But the most important thing is whether or not we can recover from them.”

“Damn, Ryo... You spout out real pearls of wisdom sometimes.”

“How rude! I’ll have you know that in some parts of the world, I’m known as Right-Minded Ryo!”

“Yeah, no, that’s one hundred percent a lie,” Abel shot back without missing a beat.

“No one wants the people involved in city-and national-level politics to make mistakes because that results in the citizens’ unhappiness. This is true for all of us. But people are creatures who make mistakes. And that means mistakes are unavoidable even in politics. So once you realize your mistake, you should fix it as quickly as possible... I personally believe that’s the attitude expected of everyone involved in politics.”

“That’s a good point...” Abel sounded deep in thought as he replied to Ryo. Perhaps he knew someone in politics.

“More importantly, Abel. Guess what?! I solved all the mysteries! Let me repeat in case you missed it the first time. All the mysteries have been solved!”

“What? What mysteries?”

Abel’s reaction seemed lackluster compared to Ryo’s enthusiasm.

“The mysteries here in Zimarino, of course. Pay attention, will you?”

“The airship crash was the catalyst for shutting down the country’s border, and then came the theft of the magic stone. We both know all that, so I wouldn’t exactly call anything a mystery...”

“Abel... That is *not* what I’m talking about. I meant what happened at the tavern. Do you remember what those four customers said?”

“Ohhh, now that you mention it...”

Ryo was referring to his questioning of the four when they had approached him to thank him, whether they knew the cause of the border lockdown. Each man had given him a different answer.

The theft of a gem from the government building.

The daughter of the grand duke eloping.

The appearance of a legendary assassin.

The fall of a dragon larva into the city.

“I *do* remember.” Abel nodded as the memory came back to him.

“Yes, and they were all correct! The answer wasn’t just one of those, but *all* of them.”

Ryo created an atmosphere fit for a great detective...or at least he tried to as he nodded quietly while thinking out loud.

“A gem was in fact stolen from city hall, the red magic stone in this case. Then there was the Flame Emperor, Flamm Deeproad, who killed a thousand people...”

“And I can see how the small airship could have been mistaken for a dragon larva when it fell in the city.”

Both Abel and Ryo recalled the night's events.

"The answer was right in front of us all along!"

Ryo spread both arms wide with that declaration, just like the pose a great detective would make toward the very end of a case. Naturally, there was no audience to hear his deduction—unless you counted the lone swordsman named Abel.

"Wait, Ryo. There's still an unsolved mystery."

"Huh?"

His lone audience member's objection surprised Ryo.

"The grand duke's daughter eloping. What happened there?"

"W-Well..."

The great detective Ryo was flustered by the hole Abel had just poked into his case. His eyes darted everywhere as he desperately tried to think of a solid argument, but, ultimately, nothing came to mind.

"Simple—we don't know. I mean, how could we? There's no way commoners like us would ever have access to information about someone like her, a member of the upper echelons of society!"

This is what was called backtracking...

"Darn it... My deduction was impeccable, yet as always, you just *had* to refute it, didn't you, Abel? You'll never help the people under your command grow with that attitude!"

"Why are you suddenly mad at me over something completely unrelated...?"

This is what's called misdirection...

"Moving on. Since the viceroy promised to lift the country's blockade, what should we do now?"

"Good question. I think we should go back to Redpost after we make sure it actually happens."

"I agree. We'd be in a real bind if we leave this city only to go back and find out nothing has changed," Ryo agreed. "*Passive Sonar.*" He paused, then

nodded. “Many of the guardsmen scattered across the city are on their way back to the government building. The ones on top of the ramparts are still there though.”

“Which means the viceroy put his plan into action. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to have a little faith in him, huh?”

Unlike Ryo, Abel still remained wary of the man.

“What the...?” Ryo muttered.

“Something wrong?”

“The east gate just opened and about twenty people entered. All on horseback, it seems.”

“But the city is still sealed off, right?”

“Yes. They closed the gate immediately after the group’s entry.”

“And they’re all on horseback, huh... Now I’m curious about who exactly these guys are.”



That morning, the atmosphere in Zimarino’s city changed completely when the five frozen individuals thawed and Captain Roster was imprisoned. The viceroy handed out several orders, the most important being announcements made throughout the city regarding the reopening of the country’s borders, notifying its international neighbors of the same, and the enforcement of law and order within the city’s government, including the garrison.

Normally, no one would willingly go out of their way to do something like this since it brought shame to themselves and their people. They would instead expose the corruption in their ranks and excise the rot themselves before the general public found out.

However, the government of Zimarino defied expectations with its transparency. A major reason was to allow the city’s residents to file their own accusations against corrupt officials. It was also announced that a formal body would soon be established for this purpose, to the delight of the citizens.

Furthermore, the remaining employees, including both civil officials and

guardsmen of good character, were pleased with the new policy direction. Despite the bribery and corruption having spread to the highest levels of city hall, that didn't mean the immorality had chased away all of the good staff.

Three years. The city of Zimarino had fallen into chaos three years ago with Viceroy Bonito's despair. It was too short of a time period for every single member of its government to stain their hands with vice. That would have required at least thirty years—forty, ideally. From obtaining employment there to retiring after forty years, if the environment had remained consistently sullied, then every single person on staff would have eventually been affected too.

But three years wasn't nearly long enough. The honest ones persisted as the "silent majority." They had kept quiet all this time for the sake of their families. Even if they themselves hadn't wanted to stray down the path of corruption, they knew complaining publicly would put their families in danger. So they said nothing.

And no one could attack them for their choice. After all, it was only natural to give up everything for the sake of their families, right? Even pride was easily thrown away if it meant protecting your family.

But these people felt ashamed over their actions. Yet that all changed suddenly this morning. The silent majority dedicated themselves to their jobs with shining faces... Conversely, those who had boldly accepted bribes now trembled in fear.

The story took another turn when the group on horseback visited Zimarino as it once more set itself on the proper course of governance.

"Lord Bonito, chief inspector Viscount Fanchini has arrived from the capital..."

"I told you there's no need to announce us!"

Brushing past the viceroy's secretary, the five men entered his office. Leading the group was a man in his mid-thirties with a medium build sporting a beard. His clothes were definitely on the luxurious side, though stained, likely on account of having traveled via horseback...

Bonito lifted his gaze from the documents and stared quizzically at the man.

“Bonito Beckis,” he said. “You are hereby dismissed from your post as viceroy of this city.”

The words sent a shock through the other city officials in the room. Bonito was the only one unsurprised by the news.

“Lord Inspector,” Bonito replied carefully, “thank you for doing your duty. If you don’t mind, may I ask the reason?”

“You know damn well what it is! We discovered that the fire magic stone entrusted to this city for safekeeping by the first Grand Duke Chiaffredo was stolen. Moreover, you failed to report the theft to the capital... Therefore, you’re unfit to be the viceroy! You are hereby dismissed and I will be acting as the interim viceroy until a new one is appointed.”

“Hm...”

Bonito mulled over the situation. Even riding the fastest horse, the journey from the capital to Zimarino took at least a day and a half. He himself had learned of the theft approximately thirty hours ago. No matter how he looked at it, that wasn’t nearly enough time for them to find out.

Be that as it may, it was meaningless to point this out. An inspector’s job was to surveil all the viceroys in the Federation as the role reported directly to the grand ducal family. The chief inspector was the only individual with the power to suspend or dismiss a viceroy. And that very person was now telling Bonito of his own dismissal from the post...

But he had to say what needed to be said.

“I have no choice but to accept your decision with good grace. However, there is an error in the information you possess, Lord Inspector.”

“What?”

“The fire magic stone is in the storage vault.”

“What did you say...?”

“Having said that, I can’t deny it was stolen. The garrison captain turned out to be the perpetrator. He has since been confined and the stone returned. I

shall report all this to the capital accordingly. In fact, I was in the midst of drafting the letter.”

Bonito offered Viscount Fanchini the document he’d been working on when the man and his entourage entered his office. The viscount took it from him and skimmed it quickly.

“Hmph. Then show me the stone.”

“Of course. Please, follow me.”

Bonito stood up and led him to the vault.

“I confirm this is the true artifact and that it is safe,” the head inspector said.

“Thank you very much,” Bonito responded with a bow of his head.

“*However*, the fact that it has already been stolen once remains unchanged.” Viscount Fanchini glared at Bonito, his voice cold. He wasn’t done either.

“Therefore, while I will not strip you of your title as viceroy of Zimarino, I *will* place the security of the city as well as the garrison under my command.”

“What would you have me do instead then?”

“Let’s see. You can act as my secretary. You’ll be in charge of record-keeping and whatnot. Only until I make my report to the capital and the grand duke hands down his judgment. I trust you have no objections?”

“No, my lord. I understand. I’ll set up the conference room in the garrison building as your new office. It’s more spacious than the viceroy’s office and will make it easier to observe the garrison.”

“Very good.”

Thus did Bonito retain his position as the viceroy while losing his command over the garrison. In other words, he had lost his policing and military authority.

“Lord Bonito...”

When he returned to his office, the officials who’d heard his conversation with the chief inspector in the vault stared worriedly at him.

“Don’t look at me like that. Though I’ve lost my authority over the garrison, there’s still much I can do with all of you. Now that the head inspector is in charge of the city’s safety, all we need to do is what we can. Starting with reopening the country’s borders.”

“Yes, Sir!”

The doubt and concern vanished from their faces upon hearing his determined words. Then they each set about fulfilling their duties.

Despite the calm and resolve filling his expression, there was one thing Bonito himself couldn’t understand.

Why did the head inspector arrive now, of all times, and take control of the garrison? There’s definitely something I don’t know. Which means I need to find out what it is...

The city of Zimarino still had a long way to go before peace and stability were restored.

And here was the garrison’s meeting room in Zimarino’s capitol building. Eyes closed, Viscount Fanchini, chief inspector, sat in the chair reserved for the commanding officer. A frown was on his face.

Around him, his direct reports and members of the garrison carried items into the room to turn it into his temporary office. No one approached the viscount, particularly his direct reports. Whenever the city guardsmen, unaware of how things worked in his presence, tried to ask him for instructions, one of his subordinates would immediately pull the guard away by the arm. His direct reports made sure none of the garrison members ever got close. Because they knew the depth of his shockingly bad...

Viscount Fanchini was indeed swearing relentlessly in his mind.

Shite... Shite, shite, shite! What the hell is this situation?! I asked Gongorad to collect the magic stone and lift the border blockade. I also told him the only time he should make direct contact with Captain Roster was if the stone didn’t fall into his hands as planned. The measure was an absolute last resort... Then the plan was to use the viceroy’s blunder against him and wrest power away to

secure the magic stone and reopen the borders... So what in bloody hell happened?! Because the damn stone was already back in the vault and Roster in custody... Even I can't acquire the stone in such conditions. If I try, the grand duke will suspect me! Which is why I tried to at least gain authority over the garrison to reopen the country's borders...only to find out it was already scheduled for nine o'clock. Stymied again! It's nine now! God damn it all to hell! This...this makes me look the fool, doesn't it?!

Viscount Fanchini squeezed his left hand with his right so hard the bones ached. When they saw the motion, his subordinates ducked their heads and avoided him even more cautiously... The wrath unfurling inside him was crystal clear to them.

Gongorad said he would pay five hundred million florins, but what's the point now? Shite, it might be best if I leave this city as soon as possible. Though he may grumble, I'm sure I can appease him with profitable information again in the future. If I remain here too long and issues arise that threaten the safety of the city, the blame will be placed on me. Absurd. I won't stand for it. For now, I'll see for myself how things are during the day. Should the viceroy pose no problem, I'll command him to make every effort to regain the people's trust and return all authority back to him. No doubt he'll be exceedingly grateful then... Yes. Yes, this is the way. I'll leave tomorrow.

He finally loosened the strength of his grip. Seeing that, his direct reports rubbed their chests in relief...

Unfortunately, the calm didn't last long.

"Lord Inspector, we have trouble!"

"What is this infernal racket?! Speak up!"

"My sincerest apologies. However..."

"Spit it out already."

"The Elmeevna trading company came under attack not long ago."

"What?"



“Mistress, this is the last of the goods.”

“Thank you, Jigiban. Please distribute them to the cityfolk as usual. This time, I want you to make a spectacle of it.”

Jigiban nodded in response and jogged toward his subordinates who had already headed out first. The chivalrous thieves who called themselves the Dawn’s Border—including Flora, their leader—all wore red cloaks with black embroidery and matching red masks.

Right now, they were at the trading firm of the merchant Elmeevna, the one who could be considered the heart of the corruption rampant in the city of Zimarino. The Dawn’s Border had attacked it at daybreak no less. Indeed, illuminated by the dawn, just like their name.

There were no fatalities. There were a few rules they mustn’t break as individuals who called themselves chivalrous thieves. One of them was not killing others.

Most of the people the group attacked had done terrible things and sent many to their deaths. Regardless of their opponents’ inhumanity, the Dawn’s Border refused to kill. Another factor they used when choosing their targets was their vast wealth, which they used to bribe others with outrageous sums.

This was how the organization operated, by attacking those who were responsible for spreading corruption. They stole the wealth the villains had amassed and distributed it to the masses. Furthermore, the Dawn’s Border revealed their misdeeds to everyone at large. In many cases, their actions led to the evildoers’ downfalls.

All of those villains’ so-called allies only joined forces with them because they’d been attracted to their fortunes and not because they actually *liked* the villains. So once they lost everything, it went without saying they lost others’ support too. In fact, almost all of them wound up being arrested to be made examples of. Not only were their assets seized, but their rights as citizens were also taken away.

Moreover, the Dawn’s Border’s flashy antics also worked to curb the activities of other villains... Because they knew things would end badly for them if they caught the group’s interest.

In other words, they had achieved tremendous results by identifying the key players and putting them out of commission. And this time was no different.

“Wow, the Dawn’s Border sure is amazing. What a magnificent theft they pulled off,” Ryo said frankly.

“That’s...” Abel began, sounding reserved, “definitely one way to describe them.”

“Abel, why can’t you just acknowledge that chivalrous thieves are *good*...”

“Right, well, I won’t deny their lofty aspirations, but...” Abel paused.

“Something deep inside is holding me back from giving them my full approval.”

Topics like these were always difficult. Fighting for the weak and oppressed... If you view groups like the Dawn’s Border from just that perspective, anyone will admit their actions are splendid. However, when individuals employ such methods by evading the net of justice, it amounts to nothing more than vigilantism. So the question of whether they’re right or wrong depends entirely on where and what you focus on... Which is why everyone has their own opinion on such subjects.

This was the conclusion Ryo came to in his mind, and it explained why he wasn’t particularly unhappy with Abel for having a different opinion. Everyone had their own viewpoint.

“You know, Abel, I used to think you had been a chivalrous thief yourself before you became an adventurer.”

“Me? What the heck gave you that idea?”

“Because you seem to thoroughly enjoy mercilessly hurting people who do bad things.”

“Maaan, I always wonder why your perception of me is so freaking warped, Ryo.”

“Oh, stop, you’re making me blush.” Ryo sounded bashful for some reason.

“It wasn’t a compliment!” Abel retorted, exasperated.

“Hm?” Ryo said suddenly, noticing something.

“What is it?”

“Well... Eight people are heading toward this plaza.”

The Elmeevna Trading Company, which the Dawn’s Border had attacked, was located in a prime commercial area facing Zimarino’s central square. The group of chivalrous thieves and the firm’s employees, unconscious after they’d been lured out, occupied one part of the square. Since it was still early in the morning, the residents living in the area must have realized something violent had happened, as there was no one else in the square.

Yet a group of people were headed straight toward them. Head tilted curiously, Ryo continued.

“And one of them is definitely...”

“They’re running toward us!” Kala, the swordswoman, shouted in warning when she noticed the group of people heading in their direction.

Six members of the Dawn’s Border remained in the plaza: Flora; Kala, the bodyguard and sword master; Nala, also a bodyguard and magician; and the B-rank adventurers Viviana, Tatiana, and Octavio. Jigiban and his crew had already left to distribute the stolen money and goods to the city’s residents while Dolotheo, the butler, was elsewhere securing their escape route.

Kala and Nala stood between Flora and the eight people running toward the square. Though there were only two of them, they were strong enough to weather through any situation under normal circumstances. They could take down more than ten of the city’s guards without sustaining any injuries themselves.

Except the group running toward them weren’t just members of the garrison. With the light from the rising sun illuminating them from behind, the Dawn’s Border couldn’t see their faces very well. And it was too late by the time they realized...

“Wind, by your will, be the blade that cuts through... Ngh!”

“You... Gah!”

The man leading the pack sped up lightning quick. He landed a hard punch to Nala's stomach as she tried to chant the spell for Air Slash then slammed the hilt of his sword into Kala's stomach. He quite literally defeated them in an instant.

Without sparing them a single glance, he accelerated again. Flora was his next target.

"I'll be taking you home now, Lady Flora."

"I don't think so, Flamm."

"Fine. Then force it is."

Klang. Metal rang against metal.

"You insolent cur...!" Flamm shouted.

The Flame Emperor, Flamm Deeproad, had tried to render her unconscious by hitting her in the stomach with his sword hilt. But someone blocked his attack.

"Well, hello there, Flame Emperor. What a coincidence, meeting again so soon. Dontcha agree?"

It was Abel.

Abel had leaped in between the Flame Emperor and Flora and parried the hilt of the man's sword with his own magic sword.

"You two! The bodyguards! Take her and fall back!"

At Abel's shout, Kala and Nala managed to stand up and staggered toward Flora.

"You cur..."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a cur. Is that all you can say? Oh, yeah, I don't think I introduced myself. I'm Abel. Nice to meetcha, Flame Emperor, Flamm Deeproad," Abel taunted. It was his way of gaining the mental upper hand. Somehow or other, he'd already lost once against the man. If he let the memory of the loss drag him down during a rematch, he'd be at a disadvantage from the start and he wanted to avoid that.

“Stay out of my way!”

“I respectfully decline. I’m definitely getting in your way.”

“Why, you...!”

Fury spread across the Flame Emperor’s face.

While keeping watch on the man, Abel saw a strange sight unfolding from the corner of his eye. Ryo had gone to where the Dawn’s Border were and took something from them.

A mask and a cloak?

Ryo bowed his head over and over as he accepted the items.

As for Abel, he jumped back away from the Flame Emperor after repelling the man’s sword hilt. Instead of trying to land another attack, his opponent also sprung backward, creating distance between them.

It was an opportunity for both of them to regroup.

Ryo stood next to Abel, who held his magic sword ready. He wore the Dawn’s cloak over his own robe as well as the mask they’d given him.

“Sooo, did you borrow those or what?” Abel asked.

“I had to. Otherwise, I risked exposing my true identity. But now that they don’t know it’s me, I can do whatever I want to the Flame Emperor’s companions.”

“Dang...and here I am with my face all exposed for the world to see...”

“Just so you know, masks really narrow your field of vision. I think it would be suicidal to fight at close quarters wearing one...”

“I-I guess you’re right...”

Abel didn’t know what else to say to Ryo’s explanation, which sounded kind of off.

“Don’t worry. I won’t let anyone interfere in your fight with him, Abel. I won’t stop it even if you die, all right? I’ll make sure to deliver your bones to Rihya, so you can rest easy on that front!”

“No. No, I can’t...”

That was when Ryo’s tone changed and became a smidge more serious.

“I don’t think you’re the type of person to die in a situation like this, Abel.”

“Heh. Well, sure would chap my ass if I bit the dust here of all places against the Flame Emperor of all people... Then that means I just gotta kick his ass first.”

Ryo’s left fist bumped against Abel’s right.

So the metaphorical bell rang on Abel vs the Flame Emperor, Round 2.

“You cur... Because of you, Lady Flora...”

With his magic sword unsheathed and ready to strike, the Flame Emperor, Flamm Deeproad, spat the words. Hatred burned in his voice.

“Yeah, she went away, right? Too bad for you, Flame Emperor.”

Despite his deliberately flippant tone, Abel was on high alert. It went without saying his opponent wasn’t someone he could let his guard down around.

“I’m guessing even the vaunted Flame Emperor is gonna feel someone’s wrath because he failed to collect the girl, right?”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, she’s Grand Duke Volturino’s daughter, right?”

For a moment, the man shook violently, as if struck by lightning... But more than anything, the change in him was enough to send fear racing down the spines of anyone who saw him then. It would have given them goose bumps.

Klang.

Abel parried his downward swing. Perhaps this was how their fights were always destined to start.

I’m concentrating so damn hard and I can barely keep up with his movements, much less his sword... This guy really is a monster.

Though he looked relaxed on the outside, Abel was on edge on the inside,

cold sweat trickling down his back. Because each strike required the man to exert his full strength—*every single time*—such blows couldn't be delivered in succession. That was why even Abel failed to track the movement of his body.

However, he still managed to parry the attack. After having fought the man once, Abel was familiar with his swordsmanship. And that was how it became possible for him to intercept his strikes.

Nevertheless, he absolutely could *not* afford to get careless for even a second. That part hadn't changed. After shoving the sword away, Abel retaliated with a downward diagonal slash of his own.

The Flame Emperor deflected without parrying and thrust at him. But Abel was no longer there. He'd used his momentum to shift his entire body. While evading the man's thrust, he countered with an upward diagonal slash.

For example, his style was completely different from Ryo's. By attacking while moving, even if you're counterattacked, you'll no longer be where you were... This was the Hume style of swordsmanship, which Abel had mastered.

At the beginner level, you used your footwork to remain mobile because the primary goal was avoiding sustaining a fatal blow, thereby surviving. Only by surviving could you carry onward... This was true of all battles.

Things changed completely once you graduated past beginner level. Even stopping to strike came into play. One essence of the Hume style was eliminating inefficiencies, which was different for each person. At this intermediate level, you cut out any wasted amount from your sword and body. During a fight, however, when you went for the finishing blow or dodged your opponent's attack, you used your feet at that moment to turn the tide in your favor. Abel especially loved this technique.

And at the advanced level, offense and defense become one. By using your feet to dodge the enemy's attack, the evasive movement itself became an attack. Meanwhile, the footwork in your own attacks became a sort of defense... It was easy to discuss as a theory, but surprisingly difficult to put into practice. Why? Because the moves can't be achieved unless you have a perfect grasp of not only your opponent's swordsmanship, but also the stages of the battle itself.

Why did an evasive moment lead to an attack? Well, if you couldn't predict what your opponent was going to do after you dodged, you couldn't attack.

Why did an attack become a defense? Well, if your opponent planned a counterstrike after your attack, you'd be taken down in one hit.

It was all easier said than done.

But Abel was putting it all into practice. If he didn't, he had no chance of winning against this particular opponent. However, unlike their last match, he now had some experience with the Flame Emperor's swordsmanship.

To become the best of the best in any field, you must be a devoted student. The higher you climbed, the stronger your opponents became, and simultaneously, the more you yourself became the subject of others' studies. Tactics that had worked up until then would be countered, and weaknesses you weren't aware of would be exposed. In order to break this deadlock, you had to keep growing, refine your skills, and find new ways to progress.

Not so easy, huh?

The duel continued. They clashed fiercely countless times. The two were evenly matched in both power and speed.

But if you couldn't surpass your opponent physically, you could always surpass them mentally.

"Flora is the daughter of Grand Duke Volturino, right?" Abel asked.

"There is no need for you to know!" the Flame Emperor, Flamm Deeproad, answered with a furious expression. Which told Abel he was probably right.

"Let me tell ya, I was positively stunned by how strong her light magic was. Then there's the fact that the Flame Emperor himself came to take back a girl named Flora... The first Flora that comes to mind here in this grand duchy is Volturino's eldest daughter and hierarch of the capital's temple, Flora Leggiero Vigi. So that's her, huh?"

"Silence!"

Abel's explanation sent the Flame Emperor into a rage.

A break of the mind became a break of the sword. With his anger in control, the man swung his sword down. Abel dodged using his entire body and slashed, his blade glinting.

It should have been the perfect strike...

“Are you serious...”

The Flame Emperor crouched down in front of him, his speed so unbelievably fast it was hard to imagine humans being capable of that kind of movement. Then he spun forward using his momentum to dodge the attack. Once he finished spinning, he struck without checking his surroundings.

If Abel had followed up with a second attack, his legs might have been cut out from right under him. His opponent had executed the sharp strike even with a knee on the ground and only the power of his arms. Abel wouldn't have believed it possible if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

Apparently, the claim that he'd killed a thousand people during the Great War might have been an exaggeration but it wasn't a lie.

The Flame Emperor stood up slowly. As he did, Abel waited for an opening to exploit and attack. But...none came. There wasn't even a second of opportunity.

He could only envision his attack being promptly blocked and then counterattacked by the man. He knew this precisely because he knew Deeproad's swordsmanship. They were essentially at an impasse, a situation where he couldn't attack when he should be. At the same time, however, it also allowed him to avoid a tragic fate at the end of his opponent's successful counterattack...

Battle was such a difficult thing.

Standing upright again, the Flame Emperor held his sword at the ready.

Unable to attack, Abel gripped his own weapon in the same manner.

Their fight had come to a stalemate.

Meanwhile, Ryo was...busy playing the part of a demon lord.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha ha! Foolish humans, muster all your strength and attack

me if you dare!"



Spells flew in the air. Sparks of light flashed wildly.

“Wh-What the hell is this guy doing?!”

“He’s countering all of our attacks!”

“Maybe he is a demon lord...”

The plaza was divided in two by an Ice Wall. On one side, Abel and the Flame Emperor fought completely surrounded by an Ice Wall Package so that no one could interfere. The space was even large enough for both of them to run around to their heart’s content!

On the other side, Ryo fought the Flame Emperor’s subordinates in the style of a demon lord.

“Is this it? Is this really all you can do? You have disappointed me!”

He was having the time of his life.

The Flame Emperor’s seven companions included not just magicians but swordsmen and lancers too, and right now, they were struggling against his continuous barrage of blunted Icicle Lances.

“Shit! It doesn’t matter how many we cut down, those damn ice spears still keep flying at us.”

“Does he have a bottomless well of mana?!”

They couldn’t even get close to Ryo since they had their hands full defending themselves. Amid all this, one of the magicians made a decision.

“I’m going to unleash a powerful attack! Protect me with a shield.”

“You got it!”

The shield-bearer moved in front of the woman when she shouted and braced himself in a defensive stance against Ryo’s magic.

“Oh ho! Seems you intend to entertain me, eh? I await with bated breath,” Ryo taunted like a demon lord would.

“Don’t underestimate us!” a swordsman and lancer shouted back at him in unison as they charged together. It was clearly a suicide attack that indicated

they were prepared to weather a few hits.

Dropping your guard against opponents like these and making light of them inevitably leads to having the rug pulled out from under you. Ryo knew this. Which was why...

“Ice Bahn.”

“Gah!”

“Nuuuoooo!”

Without warning, ice covered the ground and the swordsman and lancer slipped and fell—almost as if they’d had a rug pulled out from under them. Even as this went down, the woman magician continued chanting her long incantation. In addition to the shield user protecting her, three magicians kept up a steady attack on Ryo. Clearly, they were buying the woman as much time as possible so she could complete her spell.

Mana wasn’t unlimited. Once it ran out, the front line would collapse. But as long as the woman finished her incantation, then they had a chance... They all believed in that and staked everything they had on it.

Ryo absolutely loved passionate plot developments like this. He was also very interested in what sort of magic the female magician would unleash.

How many minutes had passed since the lady magician began chanting? Because based on what Ryo saw, the other magicians supporting her through their attacks were obviously reaching their limits.

During his time in the Forest of Rondo, he had used his magic to the limit and exhausted his mana supply countless times. However, Ryo had never actually seen someone else fully expend their own magical energy. Even so, he understood the ones in front of him would soon run out of theirs. Just like he realized the swordsman and lancer were running out of stamina as they slipped and fell over and over again on the Ice Bahn under their feet.

And then, at long last...

“I’m ready! Fall back!” the woman finally shouted. The shield-bearer moved

to the side, opening a line of fire straight toward Ryo for her. She said the trigger words.

“Bullet Rain.”

“Ah ha! So you went with that tactic!”

Ryo couldn't contain his excitement. He too knew about the most advanced air-attributed spell. Lyn of the Crimson Sword has used it against the goblin king during the Great Tidal Bore. The magic had riddled the monster with holes galore, allowing them to defeat it. The required incantation was so long it made the spell impractical to use in real life. This meant only the strongest air magicians could even use it and its offensive power was unmatched.

“Laminated 10-layer Ice Wall.”

Walls of ice generated one after another in front of Ryo. He increased their thickness just before the invisible air bullets crashed into them. Particles of light erupted dazzlingly in the air from the impact of air and ice, creating an almost fantastical sight. It was inevitable then that the seven were captivated by the elemental explosion.

The woman and her comrades had accomplished what they set out to do, the latter buying the former enough time to successfully execute Bullet Rain, a spell that was considered practically impossible to deploy in battle, against an opponent who was so powerful it actually made them wonder if he really was a demon lord... And they had finally defeated him. So it was only proper that they enjoy the spectacle of wondrous light as their reward. Right? Yes, they should bask in the view.

If only they had truly defeated him...

“You're joking...”

“Impossible...”

“Demon lord...”

Once the dancing lights faded and the cloud of dust kicked up by the collision settled, they saw the man wearing the red mask standing there...

The magicians collapsed to the ground in despair. As for the swordsman and

lancer, though they just barely managed to stand upright with the support of their weapons, they were mentally and emotionally drained.

The masked man stood arrogantly.

The seven slumped defeatedly.

The very scene of a triumphant demon lord and those who had challenged him and failed.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha ha! I applaud your attempt. To think Bullet Rain would be such a tremendous rain of bullets. Truly the stuff of legends. It exceeded my expectations.”

Unsurprisingly, Ryo enthusiastically continued role-playing as a demon lord. It went without saying there was no dishonesty in his words. Bullet Rain, air magic’s most advanced spell, was definitely powerful when one considered how much of his Laminated 10-layer Ice Wall it had chipped away. However, compared to his inhuman opponents’ attacks—including Leonore the akuma and the Inferno Magician—Bullet Rain wasn’t even in the same league...

“As you have fought bravely, I shall spare your lives. Instead, I bid you gaze upon what happens next from your seats encased in ice. Ice Casket 7.”

He froze the Flame Emperor’s seven subordinates. Satisfied, he focused his attention toward the plaza entrance. Passive Sonar told him about a hundred people were running in this direction from the government building. Probably the city guards. They must have found out about the attack on the Elmeevna Trading Company.

“Heh heh heh. The fun is not yet over, eh?”

The frozen seven heard those words too. And the woman magician who had unleashed Bullet Rain thought to herself, That man in the red mask is...the Red Demon Lord.

Although Ryo was a water magician, he was nicknamed the Red Demon Lord because of his red mask and red cloak, earning him some infamy in the western part of the Federation and the eastern part of the Kingdom...

Meanwhile, on the other side of the plaza, the deadlock was about to come to an end.

The Flame Emperor, Flamm Deeproad, fired the first verbal shot.

“You said your name is Abel, didn’t you? Though your very presence vexes me, I’ll acknowledge your strength.”

“Oh, yeah? Thanks for that. Then I guess I can be generous too when I tell you I think you’re strong too, Flame Emperor, Flamm Deeproad,” Abel shot back. His response was deliberately provocative. After all, the man in front of him was the hidden hero of the Great War, so there was no real question of his power.

“Which is why you shall now die. Morarta, Flame Emperor Unleashed.”

The Flame Emperor’s magic blade glowed brilliantly as it turned crimson.

“Figured as much.”

This time around, Abel wasn’t surprised because he expected his opponent’s reaction. No, he wasn’t surprised. However, he did feel pure despair. Because in its current state, the magic sword Morarta somehow always slipped through his own sword. Yet when he attacked, it parried his weapon very solidly. This meant that he couldn’t use his sword to parry or deflect the Flame Emperor’s attacks. In other words...

“I have to dodge that sword at all costs.”

No average joe could wield that sword. Abel knew he had to evade a weapon of the same power, speed, and technique as his. Realistically speaking, that was impossible.

“I don’t have a choice though.”

The moment Abel muttered those words, the Flame Emperor rushed toward him and swung his blade down. Abel took a half step forward diagonally with his left foot and dodged. The Flame Emperor reversed course, swinging his blade up in a diagonal arc. Abel dove forward, throwing his body to the ground, spun around, and cleaved with his sword while still on one knee.

Klang.

The Flame Emperor had lowered his sword and blocked. Abel had imitated

the same attack back at him... Perhaps because it was his own combo, the Flame Emperor predicted Abel's final slash with his sword.

"That's *my* technique," he growled.

When he had executed the same move, he had slowly risen from his kneeling position. At the time, this had only been possible because they had been far apart. However, now they were so close that their swords were touching.

Neither of them could afford to make any careless movements.

Then Abel's left hand flashed. With a twist of his head, the Flame Emperor dodged the flying coin. Simultaneously, still on one knee, Abel spun to the left and struck from the man's left side, swinging his sword downward diagonally.

But his opponent easily fended off his blade. Abel was just fine with that. He definitely couldn't fight down on one knee, so his primary goal right now was standing up. However, they were too close for him to stand up safely, which was why he'd suddenly flicked the coin at Deeproad.

"Hmph. You're quite cheeky for someone who uses the orthodox Hume style, Abel."

"Well, a man learns lots of things when he's been an adventurer for a long time, Flame Emperor."

Even as they chatted casually, neither dropped his guard. A conversation wasn't enough for either to give his opponent an advantage.

The Flame Emperor acted first.

Thrust, thrust, slash.

Dodge, dodge, backstep, dodge...

Using his momentum, Abel returned the strike.

Klang.

Morarta, the magic blade, solidified and parried his sword. Abel kept up the offensive, but each of his blows was deflected.

The Flame Emperor countered occasionally. Each time he did, his sword passed right through Abel's...

By this point, a tentative theory began forming in Abel's mind.

I don't know how it works, but Morarta itself decides when to become incorporeal...

It was almost as if the magic blade had a mind of its own instead of being under the Flame Emperor's control... It would explain its impossibly quick and precise speed and adaptability.

What a serious pain in my ass.

A human's reaction speed wasn't that fast in the natural world. There were many living creatures—and even more nonliving beings—that reacted faster than humans.

I have no choice then, if I want to win.

Abel steeled himself. Though it didn't show in his face, the Flame Emperor, Flamm Deeproad, must have detected the subtle change in him. Of course, he didn't know what Abel was planning. He only sensed he had something up his sleeve. His hips were positioned lower than earlier. Despite his low center of gravity, he could react easily.

I should have realized the man who killed a thousand people wouldn't be so dense.

Abel was impressed. However, he had no intention of changing his plan. He charged forward in a single bound and attacked, unleashing a series of downward diagonal slashes from both the left and right. Naturally, each was parried. He had expected as much.

Then he switched to a horizontal slash...and slowed his speed just the tiniest bit. The Flame Emperor dodged without parrying then countered. Abel raised his left arm automatically to defend himself, but the magic sword Morarta phased through his limb to strike his body instead.

At that moment...

The Flame Emperor's severed right arm flew away with a spray of blood. His left arm dropped to the ground too as Abel's sword completed its swing.

“Ugggh...” The Flame Emperor’s voice sounded muffled.

“Haaa... Haaa... Haaa...” Abel panted heavily.

Clap, clap, clap. Applause echoed.

“Well done, Abel.”

Ryo had dispelled the Ice Wall dividing the square and walked toward his friend while clapping. He still wore the red mask and black-embroidered red cloak.

“Thanks.”

It was the only word Abel could manage as his breathing finally calmed.

“Honestly, that was incredible. You fainted a block with your left arm and just let his sword pass through... Anticipating this, he countered with a reverse upward slash with his right hand... Learning from the previous horizontal slash, you put your weight on your left foot and shifted the weight to your right, allowing you to compensate for the strength that wouldn’t have been possible with just your right arm. And you even cut off the Flame Emperor’s left arm with the same swing... Wow! What an impressive show you put on.”

Ryo happily recounted what he’d caught of the last part of their fight.

Abel frowned as he listened. “You saw...everything?”

“Basically. You used the Flame Emperor’s magic blade’s special trait to your advantage, right? Brilliant strategy.”

Vigorous nods accompanied Ryo’s frank praise.

Just then, they both saw an enraged man glaring at Abel.

“Finish me!” the Flame Emperor roared.

Abel only shook his head in response.

“You’re sure you don’t want to deal the finishing blow?” Ryo asked.

Abel shook his head again in response.

“Nah, no need.”

“Well, you are aware that if you don’t defeat someone like him here and now,

he'll just come back even stronger?" Ryo sounded worried.

The Flame Emperor heard him too.

Abel glanced at Ryo before turning to look at the man. "I'll take him on anytime."

Abel suddenly focused his attention on the other half of the square.

The place was, to put it mildly, hell. No, actually, it was the mere shadow of what hell used to be... Seven pillars of ice erupted from the ground, surrounded by hundreds of defeated soldiers. A few were on their hands and knees, but most had given up, either lying or sitting down. Each and everyone looked exhausted and hopeless...

"Are those...?"

"Yes, the Flame Emperor's subordinates."

At those words, the man in question looked at the frozen columns. He was probably making sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. His already furious expression grew even darker...

"Don't worry, they're alive. The ice will disappear and free them once we leave," Ryo explained.

Yet his words did nothing to calm the rage in the Flame Emperor's eyes.

"I bet he looks like that because you beat him black and blue, Abel."

"Black and blue, huh?"

"Anyway, the people slipping and sliding on my Ice Bahn are the city guards. Lucky them that they don't have to do their jobs, hm?"

"Well, yeah, that's your fault, Ryo."

You should never judge a book by its cover. Understanding how a situation came about is key to avoiding misunderstandings... It seems the world is actually quite complex.

"Right then. The country's borders are open again and we've finally solved all the mysteries now that we know the woman of the Dawn's Border who loves

milk and cubed steak more than anything is the grand duke's daughter."

"Jeez, you heard that too?"

"Of course. It's vital to catch every single word and phrase during the climax!"

"I-Is it...?"

"In any case, don't you think it's time we leave the city?"

"Yeah, but...can we even leave?"

Though Abel agreed with Ryo's suggestion, they faced a real problem—with all the commotion they'd caused, there was no way they could escape easily. In fact, the entire plaza was isolated behind an Ice Wall. More members of the garrison were standing outside, having arrived after the initial wave. The rest of their comrades had been stationed at the newly reopened city gates.

The two of them could escape by taking out a few guardsmen, but...there would undoubtedly be too many injuries if they managed to avoid outright killing some of them. It wasn't exactly an ideal solution.

Luckily, Ryo thought of another idea.

"Abel, leave it to me!"

He sounded extremely confident, which made Abel worry just a smidge. Except he didn't have a better idea, so...he had no choice but to nod in agreement.

Ryo took stock of the situation. Through Active Sonar, he already knew there were no soldiers on top of the ramparts.

The real issue was the angle of the cut. Still, it wasn't *that* difficult.

With the guardsmen removed from the ramparts because of the city's reopening, the timing actually couldn't be more perfect for him. Practically a godsend.

"Here I go! Abrasive Jet."

A moment after he cast the spell...

Bam.

Boom.

Ruuuummbbble...

A series of thunderous sounds began. The soldiers looked surprised. Of course, they did. Because the sounds came from all around the square.

After a while, the noise stopped. And then the city's residents exclaimed:
"The rampart's crumbling!"

The soldiers in the plaza sprinted to the city's outer perimeter. As soon as they arrived, they saw it:

An entire city wall—in ruins...

"Ryo," Abel said with a sigh. "That was overkill."

"But we made it out thanks to me, didn't we?!"

The two had used the ensuing chaos to escape successfully from the city of Zimarino. They were finally on the way back to Redpost.

Border Crossing

The morning after the country's border blockade was lifted, Gekko's merchant caravan ate breakfast in the inn.

"I must say," Gekko said to Ryo, who was sitting across the table, "I was shocked to learn that the Dawn's Border was in Zimarino. They were the topic on everyone's lips at the harbor, you know."

Ryo and Abel had updated the merchant on everything they had encountered in the city.

"Are they really that famous?" Ryo couldn't help but ask. He had heard nothing of the group until now. In fact, considering his penchant to hole himself up in the city of Lune, he barely knew anything about the Kingdom itself. And of course, he knew nothing whatsoever about the Kingdom's eastern region or the Federation.

"Indeed, they are. For the last few months, they've been particularly active in the western area of the Federation, with a majority of their operations focused in the Grand Duchy of Volturino. But now that I know who's leading them, it makes sense why they're there."

Ryo nodded. "I agree."

Smiling a little, the merchant commented on the absence of a certain B-rank swordsman: "Abel's going to face his own challenges moving forward."

"Huh? Ohhh, so you think that Flamm-something person is going to bug him too, huh..." Ryo replied with a small shake of his head.

He really should have finished the man off...

Though the idle thought flashed through his mind, he refrained from voicing it.

"Yes, now his fate is inevitably intertwined with the Flame Emperor's, hm..." Gekko said with a rueful smile.



Once they finished eating breakfast, Gekko's merchant caravan departed from the border city of Redpost. It was situated in the eastern part of the Kingdom of Knightley with the Principality of Inverey to its southeast border. The group crossed the border, heading toward their destination, Inverey's capital of Aberdeen.

A slight change was apparent in the caravan after leaving Redpost. Gekko led the caravan from the cabman's seat of the lead wagon while Max followed on foot. Ryo and Sherfi now flanked the vehicle. Basically, the latter's position had been reassigned in order for the merchant to extract information from him. This was to fulfill the promise they'd made in exchange for saving Sherfi's life. And as the man's watchdog, Ryo ended up reassigned too.

"Uh," Sherfi began, "I'm not sure how I feel about you...about you being my chaperone, Ryo..."

"I see you have a complaint, Sherfi," Ryo said, unbothered, as he continued to walk.

"Well, there's still a membrane of ice around my heart, right? Which means...you can crush it whenever the fancy strikes you, doesn't it?" Sherfi continued uneasily.

"Who knows? I've never tried it, so I have no idea. Would you like me to make an attempt?"

"No, thank you."

The negotiations didn't go well.

"Sherfi, did you know that the human body is over sixty percent water? And this water permeates into every nook and cranny. Ergo, for a water magician, there's no need to specifically crush the heart when I can easily stop your movements by freezing your tendons."

"Urk... I can't move my fingers..."

The second Ryo said it, Sherfi became unable to move his fingers.

"This means that even if you decide to return to your assassin ways, I can

keep you in check before you have the chance to hurt anyone.”

Satisfied, Ryo nodded over and over again.

In the meantime, Sherfi stared at him like he wasn’t human.

That was when Gekko, who’d been listening from his seat, came to the rescue.

“Sherfi, as long as you don’t do anything bad, Ryo won’t do anything at all. Isn’t that right, Ryo?”

“Of course.” Ryo nodded emphatically.

“There you have it, Sherfi. Wonderful news for you, isn’t it?”

“That’s right, Sherfi. You should be grateful to Master Gekko.”

Gekko smiled and so did Ryo.

To Sherfi, both smiles looked ominous.

The whole time they were on the move, Sher was being interrogated—er, rather, encouraged to supply information. It went without saying that he was more than happy to oblige as repayment for the tattoo removal that had saved his life. In that regard, he wasn’t a bad man, even if he *was* a former assassin.

From the start, his primary objective assigned by the Sect’s headquarters had been the destruction of Llandewi, the Kingdom’s second-largest city in the east. This was why his first attack on Gekko’s merchant caravan had been during their ambush on the city. It was also why he didn’t know about the prior attack on the caravan by a different unit.

“While I do think the attack on Llandewi and the collapse of the Lowe Bridge are connected, I’m having trouble understanding their ultimate goal. What do you think it is?” Gekko asked.

“I’m frankly not sure either...” Sherfi replied. “Wait, Ryo, I really have no idea. I swear it’s the truth. So, please, stop flexing your hand like that. It is literally not good for my heart... However, including those two incidents, my superiors did mention increasing subversive activities in the Kingdom’s eastern area.”

“Meaning your organization was contracted to perform these activities?”

“Correct. Based on the request itself, it was clear the client is a major player. My superiors also mentioned the enormous sum we’d be paid upon completion as well. In that light, few organizations are large and powerful enough to make such contracts, don’t you think?”

“Then, it’s either the Federation or the Empire, eh...”

“My money is on the Debuhi Empire!”

Gekko came up with those two possible candidates after hearing Sherfi’s explanation.

And as for Ryo, well, his reaction was over the top in a sense.

“The Sect has a base in Inverey too, doesn’t it?”

Sherfi grimaced in response to Gekko’s question. “Unfortunately...yes...”

He wasn’t quite selling out his comrades, since the merchant already suspected. Even so, it made him uncomfortable. Anyone would feel the same if they put the people who’d been their allies up until a few days ago in peril.

“Was that difficult to answer?”

“No! Not at all! No problem at all!”

Sherfi’s reaction seemed strangely dismissive in spite of Gekko’s gentle tone. Perhaps it was because he had accepted the fact that he was now a traitor in the eyes of his former comrades.

“The Sect has covert sites in every major city in the Principality. Each base usually consists of three people. However, due to the capital’s relatively large size, two platoons are stationed there, for a total of twenty individuals. I’ll reveal the exact location once we arrive in Aberdeen.”

Gekko nodded gravely. The biggest reason he’d made an ally of Sherfi was to discover the locations of the Sect’s secret hideouts in the Principality.

“By the by, where is the Sect’s headquarters?”

“In the Kingdom of Knightley,” Sherfi answered Gekko’s question matter-of-

factly.

But as a resident of the Kingdom, Ryo couldn't overlook this new piece of information.

"Where in the Kingdom?!" he asked.

"I'll tell you! I'll answer whatever questions you have, Ryo, so please, for the love of everything, stop squeezing your fist..."

Tears welled up in Sherfi's eyes at the combination of Ryo's aggressive question and accompanying action.

"It's in a small village in the east, about a day's walk north of Wingston, the largest city in the region. The name of the village is Aban and it's situated atop a mountain. Everyone who lives there belongs to the Sect."

"The eastern part of the Kingdom... I never would have thought it'd be so close..."

Sherfi's answer astounded Ryo. Because up until today, they had been passing through that very part of the country. He had battled the Sect of Assassins in Whitnash with the members of Room 10, Nils, Eto, and Amon. The organization had attacked their caravan multiple times. Given his current employment as an escort, shouldn't he crush them before they attacked again?

"If I weren't in the middle of a job, I'd go destroy their headquarters right now! Lucky for the Sect of Assassins, huh!" Ryo sounded frustrated.

"It scares me how easily I can imagine you doing just that," Sherfi muttered in response. Then he continued, as if suddenly remembering something. "Ryo, I fully acknowledge the insane nature of your water magic but the Sect's leader is extraordinary as well. Be careful if you ever find yourself in a direct confrontation."

"Sherfi, there's something I want to confirm. You said that the tattoo inscribed into your chest was done through alchemy, right?"

"I did say that, yes."

"By the Sect's leader then?"

"Yes. The leader excels in alchemy and earth magic."

“Both skills I’d love to have!”

Of course, Ryo couldn’t very well acquire either of those skills after defeating the head of the Sect. That wasn’t how things worked here on Phi. However, perhaps the individual kept documents and such on the subject of alchemy... At the very least, whatever technique used to create the tattoo wasn’t in any of the literature Ryo had read in the library. Nothing similar existed within the little bit of elvish alchemy Sera had taught him.

Speaking of the tattoo, Ryo kept it stored in an Ice Casket inside his usual shoulder bag. Gekko had kindly given it to him when Ryo had asked if he could have it as research material. The merchant told him to consider it special compensation for the “surgery.”

The ideas spinning through Ryo’s mind made a maniac grin unconsciously cross his face.

Sherfi looked at him sidelong. “Look, Ryo...you *are* aware you can’t just acquire magic and such just by defeating someone, right? Right, Ryo? You’re not special. You must know that, right? *Right?*”

A lone former assassin jumping at shadows...

Gekko’s merchant caravan finished the entry procedures for the Principality of Inverey without any issues. Mostly because Gekko himself was the most renowned merchant in the nation, one who just so happened to be the unofficial trade advisor to the prince himself. So, as members of his caravan, everyone basically had a free pass into the country.

“I can’t believe a former assassin can just waltz right through the border...” The words Ryo mumbled to himself were too loud to be considered a whisper.

“Emphasis on ‘former.’ Don’t forget that,” Sherfi protested fiercely.

Gekko smiled in amusement from his coachman’s seat while Max, the captain of the merchant’s guard on foot, shook his head with a frown.

“Oh, I just remembered something I want to ask you, Sherfi... Master Gekko, is it all right if I do so now?”

“Go on. I’ve already asked him all I want to know for the moment.”

Gekko’s questions always came first. Ryo understood that much. After all, it was vital to prioritize your employer’s wishes.

“I feel naught but terror at the thought of your question, Ryo...”

When he heard Sherfi’s remark, Ryo deliberately twisted his expression into exaggerated amazement.

“How could you say that when I’ve done so much for you until now, Sherfi... I’m so hurt. Perhaps I *should* crush your heart at least once...”

“See! That right there! That’s what I’m afraid of! Since we’re on the subject, why is there still an ice membrane around my heart even though the tattoo has been carved out?”

“So we can act immediately in the event you betray us.”

“Ah, yes, of course... I knew you didn’t trust me, but...now I’m painfully aware of exactly how much you don’t, Ryo.”

Sherfi hung his head despondently.

“Yes, well, may I ask my question now?”

“Right, right, feel free to blithely ignore my despair and ask away, good sir!”

Sherfi sounded half anguished at this point.

“Why did the Sect of Assassins stage that ambush in Whitnash?”

“Huh?” Sherfi looked genuinely dumbstruck by Ryo’s question. He wasn’t acting at all. Even Max and Gekko were surprised by the change in him.

“R-Ryo... How do you know the Sect was responsible for that incident?”

“Wait, is my question really that odd?”

“Aside from the members who actually carried out the assignment, only leaders like me should even know about it. So why do *you* know, Ryo?”

Sherfi’s expression had changed to a mixture of awe and anger. The former because Ryo knew something he ought not to. The latter because someone divulged information...so the anger must have been directed toward whoever it

was.

“Well, because I was there. Your target was the imperial princess, right? No thanks to you and your comrades, my roommates ended up caught up in the debacle... Though you’ll be pleased to know we *did* take the assassins down,” Ryo answered nonchalantly.

“So you even know we were targeting the princess? Unfortunately, I’m sorry to say that I don’t know the details. The leader’s close aide, Black, was the one who spearheaded the entire operation. The scale of it was actually fairly large, but our superiors didn’t see fit to tell us whether, or to what extent, it succeeded...”

Sherfi looked and sounded apologetic. As far as Ryo could tell, he didn’t *seem* to be lying...

The attack in Whitnash targeted each nation’s VIPs, including the Empire’s princess. On top of that, there’s the subversive activities in the Kingdom’s east... It’s all just so insane. That’s the only thing I can think at this point...

After ten days, the group arrived in Aberdeen, the capital of Inverey. Strangely enough, they hadn’t been attacked once since entering the principality. Almost as if the enemy had other priorities. Be that as it may, the twenty-two-day-long escort mission would soon end for Ryo and Rah and his party.

They stood in front of the main building of Gekko’s trading company in Aberdeen.

“We arrived safely. Ryo and to all of you in Switchback, thank you so very much.” Gekko bowed his head politely.

Ryo, Rah, and the others were a bit discomfited by seeing their employer like this.

“My staff and I will head directly to the castle to deliver the goods. For this reason, I’m afraid I can’t extend to you the hospitality I would like to. However, if you enter the building, you’ll find a small token of my gratitude waiting for

you. Please accept it.”

With that, Gekko led the group consisting of Max and his other subordinates, which now included Sherfi, to the prince’s castle.

Incidentally, it should be noted that the ice membrane surrounding Sherfi’s heart had been completely eliminated. It went without saying that the man’s joy knew no bounds when Ryo erased it.

After accepting Gekko’s token of gratitude, which turned out to be a small bonus, Ryo and the members of Switchback were grinning from ear to ear.

“Lucky for us, huh, Rah? Despite being our leader, you really tried to leave Lune for foreign lands without taking anything out of our guild account. Gosh, do you know how dire our straits would have been if you’d gotten your way? We’d have been forced to rely on this bonus just to get home to the Kingdom again and that would have been impossible.”

“Look, I’m sorry, all right? I always forget we can only take money out of our guild accounts inside the Kingdom and not outside it. Jeez, that really would have been a close call. Nothing to our name but the clothes on our back.”

Ryo’s ears picked up Sue and Rah’s conversation. When the content finally registered in his brain, he slowly turned his head to stare at them like a rusty contraption creaking to life again... His eyes were wide with horror.

“Ryo... No way... Don’t tell us you forgot to withdraw before we left?”

“O-Of course I did not. No. No, I did not.”

Ryo was expressionless...

“Ryo, how much money do you have on you?” Rah asked.

“One gold coin and two large copper coins...” Ryo answered.

“So 10,020 florins... You’re not going to be able to cross the border, are you?” Sue summed things up.

Rah remembered something then. “Wait. Ryo, didn’t you say Master Gekko gave you a special payment because you did well on the other job for him?”

Rah was referring to Ryo's earlier capture of the assassin using his Ice Casket, after which Max had carved the person's tattoo out.

"Yes... It was one large gold coin..." Ryo replied.

"Oooh! That's a hundred thousand florins right there! So...what happened to it...?" Sue asked, impressed.

"I...deposited it into my account straightaway when we stayed in the next city right after that incident..." Ryo's head drooped dispiritedly.

"Ahhh..." All the members of Switchback commiserated sadly in unison.

Carrying a hundred thousand florins during an escort mission was too scary! Any adventurer would agree with Ryo on that front... So none of them could criticize him.

"H-How about I lend you some...?"

"No!" Ryo said firmly. "Absolutely not! The lending and borrowing of money is a poison that destroys good relationships!"

"H-Heard..." Rah replied.

The scary expression on Ryo's face was enough for him to back off.

"Then the most realistic way to return without borrowing funds is to accept a job that takes you back to the Kingdom," Sue suggested.

"I see!"

This was exactly what Ryo wanted to hear.

"The Principality is on good terms with the Kingdom and commerce between the two is flourishing, so I think there should be plenty of escort jobs. Though the final destination may be an issue..."

"Ugh. Please don't say it's the Debuhi Empire."

"Of course not. Why is that the first thing that comes to your mind? I've suspected it for a while now, but you *really* despise the Empire, don't you, Ryo? Anyway, I think the most likely destination is Wingston, the Kingdom's largest city in the east. It's a little bit north of the East Highway we traveled down, which makes getting to Lune in the south a bit tricky..."

“As the saying goes, you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. As long as I can cross the border, I can handle anything!”

Although Sue looked a bit apologetic, Ryo wasn’t bothered at all by a little issue of geography. Because money wouldn’t be a problem so long as he was *in* the Kingdom!

“But there *is* a huge issue.”

“What is it?”

“Only D-ranks can accept jobs that cross international borders.”

Sue’s words stunned Ryo speechless.

“Those of us from Lune know how powerful you are, Ryo. Well...*technically* speaking, we don’t know exactly how powerful you are, but we know you’re at least higher than C-rank, so we can put in a good word for you just like we did for this job. But that doesn’t apply in foreign countries, including here in Inverey,” Sue said with a frown. She’d been reluctant to tell him this. Unfortunately, the truth is the truth.

“Thank you, Sue. I’ll start off by going to the guild to look for any jobs D-ranks and above can accept that will take me across the border.”

With that, Ryo started walking aimlessly away.

“Riiight...you don’t know where the guild is, huh? We don’t either,” Sue said sympathetically.

Indeed, no one here knew the location of Aberdeen’s adventurers’ guild.

A few moments later, after asking the staff at Gekko’s company where the guild was, Ryo and the members of Switch headed there...



The Crimson Sword, led by Abel, started walking west after their party and Gekko’s merchant caravan went their separate ways in Redpost, the Kingdom’s border city in the east. Their destination was Crystal Palace, the royal capital of the Kingdom of Knightley.

“Darn it, you guys really don’t think it’s weird that the letter reached us in

Redpost and not Lune? Now we're stuck going straight to the capital because of it," Lyn, the air magician, complained for the umpteenth time since their departure from Redpost. It was a generally accepted fact that she had the least stamina out of the four of them, which was a generally accepted fact.

"I'm not sure. But you can ask Master Hilarion yourself once we reach the capital," Rihya, the priestess, answered blithely. Her stamina wasn't much better than Lyn's.

"Oh, come on! There's a chance someone leaked internal information! I'm positive someone among us is a traitor..."

"Lyn, you're resembling Ryo more and more lately."

"How?! And rude!"

Abel played the straight man to Lyn's funny woman.

Just as the Crimson Sword had been about to depart Redpost, they'd received a letter via the adventurers' guild there. The missive had forced them to change their destination from Lune to the royal capital. As usual, the letter's author was Hilarion. Using his guild connections, the man had found out the four of them were in Redpost... However, they didn't know this because he had deliberately left them in the dark on that point.

"There's nothing new about Master Hilarion and his penchant for letters, but the contents of the latest one *are* unusual, to say the least," Rihya noted as she walked next to Abel.

"Yeah. He told me to go see Brother, huh..."

Abel's expression was clouded. It wasn't because of his relationship with his brother, but rather his suspicions about the letter's contents. Since reading it, he'd shaken his head countless times, trying to force himself to forget.

Intuiting Abel's emotions, Rihya changed the subject. "Ryo and the others must have already arrived in Aberdeen by now, hm?"

"I wonder."

"Well, I hope they made it there safely."

“Ryo did. I can at least say that for sure, knowing him. Although I gotta admit, I’m curious about whether he’ll annihilate the Sect of Assassins at some point soon, considering what a pain in the ass they’ve been...”

“Oh, yes, he froze the assassins charging toward us in the inn’s conference room,” Rihya said, thinking back to the villains who had attacked them during Sherfi’s operation.

“He did, before any of us could even blink,” Abel replied.

“Ah! That reminds me! I heard something a while back at the Institute for Magical Research,” Lyn interjected. “You can’t ice a living person using water magic. But Ryo actually did it. I suppose the question is *how*...”

“What? Are you sure about that? That’s really the norm for water magic?” Abel asked.

“Of course, I am. I know what I heard. Because if it *were* possible, people would specialize in that specific technique, which would make them practically invincible in combat,” Lyn answered without hesitation.

“Apparently, a property unique to humans means other people’s magic can’t penetrate past ten centimeters of the body’s surface. Magical Barrier seems to be an extension of that property,” Lyn explained.

“You know, we *did* learn that in the Temple too,” Rihya added. “That’s why they say that healing through light magic is most effective while touching the target’s body.”

“Does that ten-centimeter limit apply to people like me too who can’t use magic?” Abel couldn’t help but wonder as a swordsman unable to use magic.

“Yup, it does.” Lyn nodded vigorously.

“But Ryo is able to freeze them...while keeping them alive. That’s crazy,” Abel muttered, almost to himself.

“It *is* terrifying when you actually think about it...” Lyn said with a shake of her head.

“You know he tried to freeze the imperial princess before?” Abel murmured.

“I’m not surprised.” Lyn inclined her head gravely. “If a war ever breaks out

between the Kingdom and the Empire, there is zero doubt in my mind that Ryo will be the reason.”

“Ugh, please no. I don’t even wanna imagine that...”



About a thousand kilometers south of Markdorf, the capital of the Debuhi Empire, a party of seven was heading south on the highway.

“Roman, are we *really* going to the Kingdom of Knightley?”

“Yes. I find myself very curious about this water magician Oscar mentioned.”

“Sheesh, Gordon, how many days have you asked him the same thing... We’re literally almost at the border to the Kingdom, you know?”

Gordon, the fire magician of the Hero’s party, was itching to return home to the Western Provinces. However, Roman the Hero wanted to become even stronger, so here they were on another journey. Meanwhile, Morris, the scout, was fed up with Gordon’s grumbling.

“Well, I for one ain’t a fan of the cold, so I couldn’t agree more about heading south.”

“You’re right. I myself would *much* rather be warm than cold.”

Both Berlocke, the dwarven earth magician, and Alicia, the air magician, hated cold climates, so they were in agreement with Roman about going to the Kingdom of Knightley, which lay south of the Empire.

Then there were the enchanter Ashkhan—who had remained silent this whole time—and their negotiator Graham who was also the oldest of the group. The latter had been sighing internally for myriad reasons. The Hero’s party had stayed at the imperial magical training center for quite some time—to grow stronger through training, of course... Never mind the fact that it had been mostly Roman’s decision.

The original purpose of the Hero’s party was to “defeat the demon king.” For this reason, they received funds and other assistance primarily from the Western Provinces’ official channels to carry out their activities. Many reports of a demon king’s appearance had come from the eastern region of the

Western Provinces.

That was why they'd constructed an artificial altar and laid a trap before. The results? Not a demon king but an akuma named Leonore. Things went terribly awry from that point onward, leading to the Hero's party's current presence in the Central Provinces' Debuhi Empire.

"I guess I have to admit we got stronger thanks to all the training we did at that division..." Gordon admitted reluctantly.

"We certainly did!" Roman exclaimed. "It's only natural to improve when you train with strong people!"

The sole principle driving him at the moment was his single-minded determination to become stronger.

"But we don't even know the name of this mysterious water magician," Morris remarked.

"Yes..." Roman lowered his head. "In the end, Oscar refused to tell us..."

"I fervently hope we can acquire vital information in the royal capital..." Graham murmured. Frankly, the oldest member of their group was loath to waste any more time on this venture. But he did appreciate Roman's spirited motivation, so it made guiding the party difficult at times. At the very least, he didn't want to waste more time than necessary gathering information...

An Escort Mission

At the adventurers' guild in Aberdeen, Ryo approached an open counter.

"Welcome. How may I help you today?"

"Hello, I'm an adventurer from the Kingdom of Knightley."

He showed the receptionist his guild card.

"Ryo, a D-rank adventurer from Knightley. So how can I help you?"

"I'm wondering if you have any escort jobs headed toward the Kingdom."

"I see. Yes, we do have a few, in fact... However, I regret to inform you they're all for ranks C and above."

"I thought as much..."

Though apologetic, the woman was unable to fulfill his wish, which Ryo had expected anyway. Well, technically speaking, Sue had expected as much. Depression hit him then.

Is my only option to borrow money from Rah...? It's my fault for being so careless in the first place... I suppose I have no other choice...

Although asking a friend for money went against his beliefs, it was better than causing more trouble for other people. It would be fine as long as he endured it...or so he thought. Then someone called out from behind him.

"You must be pretty good if you're a D-rank at such a young age, right? So how about you tag along with me to Knightley on an escort job?"

When Ryo turned around in surprise, he saw a man in his mid-thirties who looked like the archetypal adventurer.

The receptionist looked questioningly at the man. "Cohn?"

"Yeah, I'm talking about *that* job. His build fits the requirements almost exactly. Honestly, I was on the verge of losing hope, so this must be God smiling down on us."

“Ummm...?” Ryo had absolutely no idea what was happening. Was the request strange? Was his potential employer suspicious? His face must have betrayed his thoughts because the receptionist soon spoke up to explain.

“Don’t worry, this commission is an official one through the adventurers’ guild. The guild master has also told us receptionists to do our best to see it fulfilled. And Cohn here is in charge of coordinating the adventurers for escort missions.”

Ryo stared at the man while listening to her. Cohn must have heard what she was saying because he nodded in agreement several times.

“However, while it *is* an escort request,” Cohn said once she had finished, “*you*’ll be the one being escorted.”

His words confused Ryo even more. “Come again?” he asked.

Cohn told him he would impart the details on the way, so he encouraged Ryo to board the waiting coach. The members of Switchback saw them off...

Cohn thought Ryo was perfect, but whatever the plan was, it wouldn’t work without the client’s approval. This was why he’d asked Ryo to go with him immediately. Since they were due to depart tomorrow morning, they only had today to determine whether he was the right fit for the job.

So Ryo sat in the coach with him as it sped along to their destination.

“In short, you want me to act as this aristocrat’s body double and travel with you to the royal capital.”

“That’s right. Meals are included and you won’t have to walk since we’ll be using the coach as transportation. Once we reach the royal capital, you’ll be rewarded five hundred thousand florins. What do you think? Good terms, right?”

Ryo couldn’t deny that... But it seemed a little *too* good to be true, which meant there had to be plenty of others who wanted the job as well...

“First, the body double has to be someone practically indistinguishable at a distance. And that rules out a lot of adventurers simply because of their burly builds...”

“Ah, yes, I am a slender adventurer, comparatively speaking.”

“Exactly. Oh, I’m not insulting you or anything. Based on what I can see, you’re a magician, right? Many magicians look like you, but that doesn’t mean there’s a correlation between looks and power.”

Cohn’s reassurances alone showed he wasn’t a bad person. During their conversation, the coach arrived in front of a conspicuously massive gate.

“Where are we?”

“This is the official residence of the Prince of Inverey. The client lives here. See, more proof of this request’s legitimacy.”

It definitely looked like a castle belonging to the sovereign of a principality, which meant the client was either part of the royal family or a high-ranking noble. No one looked inside their carriage as it passed through the gate and into the castle grounds.

After passing through several more gates, they disembarked from the carriage at a corner lined with official residences and guesthouses.

“Our destination is the second floor of that guesthouse.”

With that, Cohn led the way and Ryo followed.

Before he could even enter the building, however, he had a surprising encounter with a familiar face.

“Ryo, is that you?”

“Ah, hello, Master Gekko.”

It was Gekko, to whom he’d said goodbye earlier after completing his job for the merchant.

“Why are you here, Ryo?”

“I accepted a request heading to the Kingdom...”

“Oh, you’re returning already? You should enjoy what the Principality has to offer a bit more first.”

“I would love to, but unfortunately, I have my own reasons for going home.”

The main one being the dire financial straits I'm in...

Ryo talked to Gekko while crying on the inside.

After Gekko said his goodbyes and left, Ryo and Cohn entered the guesthouse.

“So you and Master Gekko are acquainted, Ryo?”

Curiosity had gotten the better of Cohn.

“Yes, we are. He contracted me and a few other adventurers in Lune to escort him and his caravan here to Aberdeen. We actually only arrived not long ago.”

Cohn nodded eagerly in understanding, as if pleased by his own good judgment... At least that was how it felt to Ryo. When they reached the second floor, they walked toward the room at the very end of the hallway.

“It’s me, Cohn.” He knocked on the door.

“Come in,” a voice within called out.

The two of them stepped into a parlor with two adjoining rooms. In modern Earth parlance, the whole space would be described as a suite in a luxury hotel.

A young man of around sixteen sat in one of the chairs while what could only be described as an elderly manservant past sixty stood diagonally behind him. The boy must be the aristocrat Cohn had mentioned. While he wasn’t reed thin, he did in fact have a slender frame. His aura resembled Ryo’s too. He had soft, gentle features, chestnut-brown hair, and deep gray eyes that were close to black in color.

If he’d been a young lady, he definitely would have aroused anyone’s protective instincts.

“Your Highness, Mr. Rodrigo, I’ve found the perfect person for the job. This is Master Ryo, a D-rank adventurer from the Kingdom of Knightley. He was in the guild looking for a job heading to the Kingdom when I chanced upon him. Moreover, by sheer coincidence, he also happens to be acquainted with Master Gekko, this country’s foremost merchant, for whom he just completed an escort mission. He’s trustworthy in that sense too. I already gave him a basic

outline of your request.”

“I’m Ryo,” he said with a bow.

“Hm.”

That was the only thing the old man, Mr. Rodrigo presumably, said before he looked Ryo up and down. Then he nodded firmly.

“The perfect person indeed. Truth be told, I’d all but given up since we’re due to depart tomorrow. But you found him in the nick of time, eh? Right then. Allow me to make the formal introductions. Master Ryo, this is Prince Willie of the Monarchy of Joux. We’re traveling to Knightley’s capital because he’ll be studying abroad in the Kingdom. As such, we would like to hire your services as his bodyguard on the journey. Will you accept?”

“Yes, I...”

“Stop right there, old man,” His Highness Willie interjected before Ryo could answer. “That explanation isn’t nearly enough. You need to be clear with him about the dangerous parts of the job.”

“But, Your Highness...” Frowning, Rodrigo looked at Cohn, who was also frowning. Apparently, there was some kind of problem.

“If you two won’t tell him, I will. Master Ryo, was it? Frankly, this job is an extremely dangerous one. You will not be the first to be employed as my body double. When I left my country, the guild there recommended an adventurer whose stature matched mine. However, we were attacked by villains en route and he was abducted... His corpse was discovered several days later...”

Frustration, deep and painful, oozed from every word Prince Willie said. He clearly blamed himself for the adventurer’s death because of the role he’d played as his double.

“His sacrifice allowed us to put some distance between me and my enemies so we could reach Aberdeen. However...I cannot guarantee we won’t be ambushed again. Ergo, this commission is an extremely dangerous one to undertake.”

Ryo nodded after hearing Willie’s explanation. “I see...”

Neither Cohn nor Rodrigo had lied during their own explanations; they had simply omitted the most difficult aspect of the job. They must have thought Ryo would turn them down if he knew and they hadn't wanted to risk it since they were desperate. Although what they'd done was terrible, it also unfortunately wasn't an uncommon tactic. It just proved the lengths they'd go to in order to acquire a believable doppelgänger for the prince in front of him.

"I *do* have a question, if you don't mind..." Ryo said, deciding to be forthright.

Prince Willie nodded. "Ask away."

"Your Highness, Mr. Rodrigo said you're on your way to the royal capital to study abroad, yes...? If the journey is such a perilous one, have you considered canceling your foreign exchange?"

For a moment, a sardonic expression flashed across Willie's face upon hearing Ryo's question. "That is not an option. Though academics are the official pretext for my going to Kingdom, the fact is, I'm essentially being sent as a hostage to Knightley. If I don't go, my country will suffer terribly... So, I simply can't call a halt to the journey just because my life is in danger."

A person being sent as a hostage who risked being kidnapped on the way.

Just like Tokugawa Ieyasu...

That was the first thing Ryo thought of after listening to Willie's words. Takechiyo (who would later be known as Tokugawa Ieyasu) was sent to the Imagawa household as a hostage but captured en route, then sent to the Oda family in Owari. So the story goes. Yet Takechiyo formed a deep bond there with the young Oda Nobunaga and the two would later change the whole country. History was a strange and wondrous thing.

At present, because Prince Willie didn't know his enemies' intentions toward him, it was only natural he would expect them to attack again. However...

"Thank you very much for the thorough explanation, Your Highness. But I am me and I must return to Knightley no matter what. As a D-rank adventurer, I don't really have any other jobs I can take which will allow me to cross the border. So the fact that this one practically fell into my lap is a stroke of luck for me. I understand the danger and even knowing it exists, I would like to accept

this commission.”

“Whoa!” Rodrigo and Cohn exclaimed in unison.

“Is that right? Then I thank you in advance, Master Ryo.”

Prince Willie shook his hand with a smile.

After that, Ryo went back to the guild to let Rah and his party know he’d found a job. However, he wouldn’t be able to return to Lune for a while yet because he was bound for the royal capital first, which was why he asked them to do two things for him: the first was to inform the staff at Lune’s adventurers’ guild of his delay; the second was to deliver a letter he’d written to Sera, who lived on the margrave’s estate.

In contrast to Rah’s surprise, Sue casually plucked the letter from Ryo’s hand and promised him she’d hand it over to Sera herself. Her firm nod left a strong impression on him. He didn’t know why she did any of that...but either way, he might have misunderstood something big.

Thus began his job to escort Prince Willie to Knightley’s capital.



Ryo had spent the night in the room next to Prince Willie’s in the guest house.

“Please wear these clothes,” Rodrigo said the morning after. “They’re tailored in a fashion similar to His Highness’s. Additionally, whenever you leave the carriage, please make sure to wear a hooded robe or something like it to cover your face.”

“Then why don’t I wear my usual robe to do that?”

Ryo showed Rodrigo the robe he always wore, the one the Dullahan had gifted to him.

“Perfect. Then please use that to hide your face. You should be inside the coach when we’re on the move. On those occasions we’ll have to camp outside, I’ll set up a tent for you and His Highness.”

“Understood.”

Their entire procession consisted of one box-shaped carriage, three cargo wagons, four escorts from the Monarchy of Joux, six adventurers from the Principality of Inverey, Prince Willie, Rodrigo, and Ryo.

I sort of feel like that's not enough to move a prince... Well, not like I know how these things work anyway.

"You think this isn't enough, don't you?"

Ryo flinched when he heard the voice behind him say exactly what was on his mind.

"N-Not at all..."

"It's fine. You happen to be correct, by the way. Our entourage is not nearly large enough for a member of a royal family. However, my country is by no means wealthy or powerful, not to mention I'm the eighth son," Willie said with a bitter smile.

"The eighth son..." Ryo meanwhile didn't know *what* to say in response.

"You're probably aware that it's best for royals to have as many children as possible to ensure the continuation of the bloodline. But...once the number of princes reaches eight, there are few prospects for him after he reaches adulthood. He's left to either enter the knighthood or the magical corps, or find some other way to earn a living. Sure, they may be granted property, but it's usually nothing more than a royal estate or some such to be cared for... With not many in the way of staff, to boot. In that situation, I'd be responsible for earning my own keep, both in terms of food and lodgings..." Prince Willie's bitter smile remained firmly in place.

"What a harsh world we live in," Ryo lamented. To be forced to earn his own money despite being a prince... Clearly, the young man had his own troubles to deal with.

"Oh, but Inverey has generously lent us the aid of two platoons of knights, for a total of twenty bodyguards, as far as the border."

The likelihood of an attack within the principality seemed extremely low.

Once they began traveling, Willie and Ryo talked about all sorts of things inside the coach. Rodrigo was the only one inside the vehicle besides them and the elderly manservant hardly spoke unless it was necessary. As such, Prince Willie had spent most of his travels until now bored out of his mind.

During their journey together, Willie dropped the “Master” and simply called him “Ryo.” They spent a very long time inside the carriage, just the two of them. It was no wonder then that they would open up to each other naturally.

His Highness was fifteen years old and would be attending the Kingdom of Knightley’s Royal Institute of Higher Learning as a foreign exchange student. The school was for royalty and nobility, meaning children of those houses from other countries were also enrolled in addition to him.

The fact that my build resembles a teenage prince’s is...proof that Mongoloids look young after all, hm? Ryo thought.

In reality, though he seemed slender, if you touched him, you’d realize he was actually pretty muscular. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to wield a sword, so this was really just stating the obvious.

As for Prince Willie, swordsmanship was apparently not one of his strong suits.

“I can use a bit of magic,” he explained, downcast, “but even so, one can’t really say I have an aptitude for it. I suppose it shouldn’t be surprising since Joux is considered an undeveloped country when it comes to magic...”

“But the important thing is you *can* use magic. If you train every day, you’ll increase your mana supply and improve your magical control too.”

Willie’s eyes sparkled excitedly at Ryo’s advice. “Truly?!”

“Yes. I was terrible at it in the beginning, but I practiced every day.”

A faraway look entered Ryo’s eyes as he reminisced on the time he’d spent in the Forest of Rondo. Never mind that not even six months had passed since his departure.

“Perhaps there’s hope for me yet then. You see, I’ve always been told I don’t

have a talent for it...”

“Your Highness...talent, or lack thereof, is irrelevant. What matters is effort. Effort is everything. A long time ago there was a *champion* who espoused this value. He persevered to the point that he won many title matches and found himself ranked at the top by the end of his illustrious career.”

“That sounds so awe-inspiring...”

While Prince Willie didn’t quite seem to understand the concept of title matches, he did understand that the individual in question achieved his goals through effort.

Except I personally think just the fact he can use magic means he has some talent... Right... Ryo thought.

“By the way, Your Highness, which element do you have an affinity for?”

“Water...” Willie replied, his gaze shifting to the floor. He’d been taught that his abilities were useless in war and not good enough in general to contribute to his country’s well-being. However, his words and attitude only roused the sympathy of the other water magician inside the vehicle.

“Wow! I’m a water magician too! You can do amazing things with water magic as long as you train yourself!”

Willie jerked his head up, a happy smile on his face now. “Truly?!”

That look made Rodrigo happy as well.

“To tell you the truth, I was a bit shocked too when I first learned I was a water magician. I worried it was inferior to the flashiness of fire magic, the advantage of air magic, and the practicality of earth magic, especially since with the last you can make houses and structures.”

Willie nodded emphatically as he listened to Ryo.

“Thankfully, I ended up being wrong. Water magic is in no way inferior to the others. While it *does* require a significant degree of training, honestly, I now think none of the other magics can even come close in usefulness. I can say that with complete confidence. Water magicians are incredible!”

“Ooohhh!!!”

Ryo, the demagogue, was in charge: “When we make camp for the night, I’ll show you all sorts of neat techniques.”

“I can’t wait!”

That night, in his tent situated in the center of the group’s camp, Prince Willie began his training. At present, the only spell he could use was Water Creation.

“O water, source of life, come forth. *Water Creation.*”

Water burst forth from his right hand and fell into the pail placed on the floor.

The incantation feels...different...

“Your Highness, may I ask about the incantation...?”

“Evidently, it’s unique to my country.”

“I see...”

It was *definitely* different from the incarnation Gekko’s young staff had used. Theirs was specific to the Principality.

“If you tell me what they chant in the Kingdom, I’ll do my very best to practice it!”

Determination filled the young prince’s face. Unfortunately for him...

“Your Highness, incantations are mere decorations. You don’t need them.”

“Huh...” His expression, so full of resolve, froze then.

Water.

When Ryo chanted the word in his mind, water sprung forth from his right hand and splashed into the pail.

“You said nothing, yet water still came out...”

“That’s right. Once upon a time, someone taught me the root of magic when I asked him how it works. He said, ‘The crux of magic relies on the user’s ability to produce an image in their mind. A clear image. After that, it’s just a matter of gaining experience.’”

“An image...”

“Exactly, an image. How clearly can you visualize the image in your mind? If you can do that, then you can make magic without ever saying a word,” Ryo replied, deliberately infusing his words with gravitas. He just felt like it would be cooler that way.

“I’ll try it!”

Prince Willie thrust his right hand out, closed his hands, and concentrated intently on whatever he saw in his mind. But nothing happened.

“Your Highness, please open your eyes and look at your hand. Imagine water falling from your palm.”

Willie did as Ryo instructed. This time, he thrust his right hand forward with his eyes open. A few moments later...water came out of his hand.

“I did it!”

“Yes, you did! Well done!”

It’s important to praise someone when they succeed. This is the tried-and-true method of teaching.

After that, Willie produced water from his hand over and over again...then he collapsed once his mana ran out.



On the eighth night after leaving Aberdeen, their group stayed at an inn in Rednall, one of the Principality's border cities. As part of his job being Willie's body double, Ryo stayed in the same room as the young prince. Fortunately, His Highness was busy practicing his magic tonight as well. Having said that, it had only been a mere eight days since he first started engaging in Ryo-style Magic Training, which meant there wasn't dramatic progress in his abilities. Incidentally, that was the provisional name Ryo had given to his methods.

Once Willie became proficient at generating water, Ryo taught him to create a barrier made of ice, i.e., an Ice Wall. Despite being the eighth son, Willie was still a prince, one who would be living in a foreign country indefinitely. Accordingly, Ryo had decided the boy needed to be able to protect himself through his own power.

What made things worse was his relative lack of experience with swordsmanship. To the contrary however, the prince could actually use a sword, more or less. Of course, he was no match for seasoned knights, but Willie was good enough with a sword to win against the likes of brigands and such. This was the conclusion Ryo had come to when he'd asked the boy to demonstrate his skill with a sword.

As his water magic disciple, Ryo was a strict teacher in all facets of Willie's education.

"Your Highness, I think it's about time for a break..."

"Just a little longer! I feel like I almost have it."

"You said the same thing last night before you exhausted your supply of magical energy and collapsed..."

"Just a little... Ah..."

Willie's legs gave out then.

"Your Highness, I hate to say this, but...I told you so."

His water magic disciple was so full of motivation that his teacher had to force him to stop... Meaning there was no need for said teacher to be so strict in the first place...

Ryo laid Willie down in his bed, then went to the living room next door. Cohn and Rodrigo were inside. The former had spread a map out on the table.

“Master Ryo, how fares His Highness?”

“He fell asleep after running out of mana.”

“I see,” Rodrigo replied with a smile before pouring tea for Ryo. The man never got angry at his lord’s body double for pushing him to the point of exhaustion.

The first time Prince Willie had collapsed, Ryo apologized. In response, Rodrigo had said, “I can’t even remember the last time His Highness dedicated himself to a task so arduously... This old man couldn’t be happier.”

Being the eighth son of his family meant the boy had led a somewhat gloomy life thus far back home. Moreover, his overly gentle personality and his anxiety of causing trouble for others had made him even quieter and more docile.

In light of such a past, studying abroad was perhaps a good opportunity for Prince Willie. It could even become a turning point in his life. Rodrigo had come to believe this over their journey thus far and divulged all this to Ryo as well.

Cohn turned his attention away from the map to the water magician. “Ryo, we’re crossing the border tomorrow afternoon. That’s as far as Inverey’s knights will accompany us.”

“In short, the real show starts tomorrow, hm?” Ryo nodded in understanding.

What Cohn left unsaid was that moving forward, they could no longer allow the prince to expend his magic to the point of exhaustion. He needed to save his magical energy in case of an attack. Misfortune often came at one’s weakest moment in time.

“We’re staying in another city tomorrow night, right?”

“Not just tomorrow night, but every night until this journey ends.”

“Huh? Really?”

The news surprised Ryo, who’d assumed most of the trip would be spent

camping outside. In fact, he felt like that was par for the course thinking back to his escort missions so far.

“Once we cross the border, the Kingdom’s Second Highway goes all the way to the royal capital and that’s what we’re taking. It’s the most popular trade route in the eastern part, surpassing even the East Highway. Naturally, cities and larger villages are scattered along the way. I hate to say this, but it isn’t like the Principality at all. The Kingdom’s road infrastructure is testament to its status as one of the three major powers in the region.”

After that, Cohn rattled off the list of the cities they’d be staying in, but Ryo didn’t know a single one of them. Of course he didn’t. Apart from the East Highway he’d traveled along with Gekko’s merchant caravan, the only place he knew along the Second Highway was the city of Redpost, a border settlement near both roads. And they would be passing by completely early tomorrow morning.

After thanking Rodrigo for the tea, Ryo thought out loud: “Staying in proper cities should reduce the possibility of an attack, right?”

“At the very least, it’ll be much lower than camping outside. Unfortunately, there’s also the chance of being attacked in broad daylight. Despite the highway being a major one, that doesn’t mean it’s always busy with travelers. In fact, it would be a real nuisance if they attacked us as we passed them by,” Cohn answered him while glaring at the map.

Just like how Sherfi and his men had attacked Gekko’s group by pretending to be a passing caravan themselves, other villains could use the same tactic to their advantage against Prince Willie and his entourage. Ryo had been able to detect the bad guys from a distance back then because of the transmitter he’d implanted into one of them, but that wasn’t going to work in normal circumstances. He didn’t even know who they were up against, so he had to be on high alert at all times. Even though it was his job, being an escort was hard work.



“I once told my father I wanted to be an adventurer,” Prince Willie said to Ryo after they’d safely crossed the border into the Kingdom of Knightley.

“Oh...wow.”

“They live on their own terms... In my mind, adventurers symbolized freedom to me. That’s what I told my father, but he looked so sad and apologetic when he replied. He said: ‘Those born to royalty must carry the responsibility thrust upon them simply because of the misfortune of birth. They can never shirk it either.’ So he couldn’t allow me to become an adventurer. Honestly, I didn’t really understand what he meant when he told me. However, I couldn’t bring myself to say anything more unreasonable in the face of his sadness...”

“Carrying a responsibility just because you were born into the role...”

In Ryo’s case in his old life, he had willingly taken on the responsibility. Still, he felt that he could relate to Willie, even just a little.

“With each and every action you take...you have a responsibility to many people, from those you command and their families, to all the people living in your country. It extends even to the people in other countries related to them...” Ryo murmured.

Prince Willie stared at him in surprise. “Th-That’s right! You’re an adventurer yourself, right, Ryo? I’m sorry, I’m just a little startled. When I mentioned this to another adventurer in the past, he said, ‘If you hate it that much, say to hell with it and just abandon your position.’ All I could do was chuckle awkwardly... But you’re different, Ryo.”

In his life in Japan, Ryo could not have simply thrown away his own responsibilities. So a small part of him—a very, very small part of him—understood what Willie was going through...



Three days after entering the Kingdom of Knightley, Prince Willie’s entourage left the city of Barsham and went back on the Second Highway leading to the royal capital.

“Our dinner last night...what did you call it again? Hamburg steak? It was absolutely exquisite. The juicy meat combined with that sublime sauce made for a superb first experience... Let’s just say I was impressed by the culinary offering of a great country.”

“I know, right?!”

Inside the box-shaped coach, His Highness waxed passionately about the dinner they’d eaten last night in the inn’s dining hall. And Ryo nodded along happily, as if he had been personally involved in the cooking.

“Thank you for recommending it, Ryo. If I hadn’t tried it myself, I know I would have regretted it for a very long time.”

“I expected nothing less of you, Your Highness. You know what they say: food is the privilege of royalty and deliciousness is justice. Please, enjoy all the delicious things here in the Kingdom.”

Ryo’s head bobbed enthusiastically as he found himself caught up in Willie’s deep delight.

But it wasn’t long before this peace was suddenly destroyed by the warning blip of Ryo’s Passive Sonar. He opened the carriage window and immediately informed Cohn, who was riding alongside them on a horse. This time, all the bodyguards and adventurers were on horseback. Just in case they needed the speed to make a quick escape.

As for their opponents on this occasion...

“Cohn, they’re going to attack us from all directions.”

The villains had tightened the net around them, cutting off their escape routes, almost as if they knew they were all on horseback.

“Shit,” Cohn swore. “Do you know how many?”

“Ten circling us in the vicinity. Five more advancing in our direction from farther in the forest, who are either ambush or reserve troops... In any case, they aren’t with the ten yet.”

“So fifteen in total... That’s a lot.”

Grimacing, Cohn fell into thought. Ryo was concerned about the five acting separately from the main group of ten. It felt to him like they were directing the others from their location... In situations like this one, it was common for commanders to be present.

“Ryo, I’m sorry to ask this of you, but can you draw the enemy away a bit from us? You don’t have to defeat them. If it looks like you can’t rendezvous with us again, you are free to leave, as we’ve already crossed into the Kingdom.”

“I’ll be fine. If they attack me, I’ll wait for the right moment to break away by pretending to be His Highness. When I do, I’ll lead them away from the group. As for the five in the forest... Please signal me if they get too close. Once the number of enemies decreases, please speed up and escape to Wingston.”

Cohn had been loath to suggest his own plan, but hearing Ryo’s revised version startled him even more.

“No, I can’t ask you to do that...”

“I told you, I’ll be fine. Don’t stop until you reach Wingston.”

“Understood.”

A short time later, someone shouted, “Enemy attack!” from the left side of their procession of vehicles and riders. Ryo wore his usual robe with the hood pulled up. At a glance, you couldn’t tell who he was.

Prince Willie and Rodrigo had been silent for a while now because they knew what would come next after listening to Ryo and Cohn’s conversation.

Ryo peeked outside through the window. The people charging toward them looked familiar...

“The Sect of Assassins?”

They did indeed look like the black-clad members of the deadly organization. However...not *every* potential attacker was part of a clandestine group of assassins... After all, there must be other folks whose livelihoods depended on raiding and such.

“Ryo...”

Tears pooled in Willie’s eyes as he called out to Ryo. Perhaps the prince was seeing his previous body double in Ryo, the one whose death he blamed on himself.

“Your Highness, I promise I’ll be fine. Please, just make sure you get to Wingston safely.”

Then they finally heard Cohn’s voice.

“Your Highness, flee.”

“Off I go! Good luck!”

With those words, Ryo opened the carriage door and jumped outside. Before he completely cleared the vehicle, he closed the door behind him so no one could look inside. Then he veered off the road and raced into the forest. He checked the number of people chasing him via Passive Sonar.

Seven, huh...

Of the ten that had initially assaulted them, he’d managed to draw away more than half. Prince Willie had four bodyguards and six C-rank adventurers. Ten of them against three assassins should put the odds of winning solidly in their favor. Besides, their main goal was ensuring the prince’s escape.

The only remaining problem was what the five in the forest would do... So Ryo made his decision...

By now, Ryo must have put roughly two kilometers between him and the coach. Twelve people now chased him, including the five that had been waiting in the forest. This *might* be because Ryo deliberately chose an escape route that took him very close to where he’d detected them from the carriage. So the five chased him, which confirmed his suspicion of them being a detached force...

We should be plenty far enough away now.

Ryo saw his opportunity to make his move and pretended to stumble in a small clearing in the forest. He went down dramatically. His twelve pursuers came to a halt there too.

A man among the forest five who seemed to be the commander stood in front of Ryo. He must have been the most capable one because his aura was a little different from the rest. They surrounded him loosely at a distance, then gradually shifted into a tighter circle and began to move in until they had him

completely surrounded. If they were going to kidnap him, it was only natural they cut off any means of escape.

Ice Armor.

He covered himself in an ultrathin armor made of ice while observing the attackers closely.

Okay, I'm almost positive they're part of the Sect of Assassins...

The attackers were dressed in all black in the same manner as members of Sherfi's former organization.

They took down the Lowe Bridge, destroyed a city, attacked Master Gekko, and now they're trying to abduct a prince... Gosh, the Sect sure has its dirty little fingers in pies all over the world, huh?

Ryo's relaxed thoughts were completely unsuited for the situation at hand. In the meantime, the villains completed their encirclement.

Excellent timing. Ice Wall.

He chanted the spell in his mind. A transparent wall of ice formed around the circle of attackers.

"Now none of you can run away."

The twelve villains were trapped. All of his efforts in luring them here would have gone to waste if he'd let them escape at this point.

Ryo unsheathed Murasame and generated the ice blade.

"Here I go."

Ryo lunged at the commander standing in front of him. Realizing it was dangerous to parry the ice blade with his knife, the man evaded using his whole body. Ryo swung his sword down, then suddenly changed it into an upward, diagonal slash with a flick of his left hand.

"Gah!"

Unable to defend himself in time, the man found himself hit in his left side by the back of Murasame's blade. He promptly fainted in agony. A quickly reversed cut, so to speak, albeit an unpolished one.

“I’m too slow... I can’t believe Sasaki Kojiro did that with a clothesline rod. Amazing.”

At first, Ryo had been planning to kill them all, but he wanted to confirm something, so he decided not to. Since they *were* assassins, he wouldn’t have had many misgivings even if he did kill them.

“Jeez, I think I felt a lot more when I took down that one-eyed assassin hawk...”

While Ryo mumbled to himself, the remaining eleven attackers became unable to move. They were completely intimidated by the unexpectedly terrifying sword.

A useless blade and magic that could only produce a stream of water—that was the extent of the information they’d received about Prince Willie. Yet here he was taking down their comrade without the man ever landing a single blow. It was more than enough to intimidate them.

Ryo charged to the next attacker and thrust thrice, to the neck, chest, and neck again. On the third one, he maneuvered the blade sideways, and slashed horizontally in the direction the attacker dodged. Of course, since it was another hit with the flat of the blade, the attacker didn’t die... Something must have gone wrong with his breathing because he lay there facedown, coughing violently.

“This isn’t working at all... Did the Shinsengumi really manage these techniques...”

It was a sword technique based on Ryo’s random knowledge. The Tennen Rishin-ryu style known for its use by the Shinsengumi is famous for its three-step thrust. But in reality, it consists of several successive techniques, such as the fourth and fifth steps. However, there was no way Ryo could know that...

“My knowledge really is too superficial.”

After muttering to himself, he cast a spell.

“I’m taking all of you captive for now. *Ice Casket 12.*”

All twelve froze instantly.

“Now then...”

He exposed the left side of the nine men’s chests inside the ice.

“Yes...they all have a crest with a double-headed eagle with a sword thrusting through it.”

Ryo had just wanted to confirm what he’d already suspected. There was no deeper meaning for his action. From now on, if he could check their chests to identify if a person was a member of the Sect of Assassin. He had managed to obtain proof. Small details like these could prove useful at some point.

“All right, I think it’s time to head back. You’re all still alive...and you’ll thaw as long as I don’t forget... I would say in two weeks or so.”

He and the rest of Prince Willie’s entourage would likely be in the capital by then.

After defeating or freezing the attackers, Ryo decided to return to where the carriage had been. Everyone had probably escaped successfully, so he doubted anyone was still there, but he needed to check just in case. However, when he got close enough, he noticed something strange.

Ryo’s Passive Sonar couldn’t detect things immobile entities. The reason was because it sensed the change in objects in motion. According to the spell, there was *almost* no movement... Emphasis on “almost.”

The attackers were the kind of people who even incinerated corpses to leave nothing behind, so it was unlikely that any of them were the survivors. What about Willie and his group?

No one would be there if they’d fled safely. There was a very slim chance they could have let the prince’s carriage escape first, leaving the injured on the road... Of course, an act like this didn’t fit with the boy’s character, but some things were unavoidable in an emergency.

Besides, they had been traveling down the Second Highway, said to be the best in the eastern part of the Kingdom. So it was natural for Ryo to assume other merchant caravans would be passing by too... In reality though, no one wanted to involve themselves in a dispute, so they might have turned a blind

eye, especially if they were merchants who put profits first...

When Ryo caught up to the group, he discovered bodyguards and adventurers collapsed on the ground. He searched for a fallen elderly man and rushed to him when he found him.

“Mr. Rodrigo!”

“Master Ryo... His Highness... His Highness...”

Rodrigo kept muttering the same thing incoherently again and again.

“Wait. Just wait, please.”

Ryo climbed into the carriage and came back out carrying his usual shoulder bag. Inside were a number of items, including highly efficient potions he’d made as part of his alchemy practice and store-bought standard potions he’d bought in his spare time. He made Rodrigo drink a vial of one of his most effective potions. Even as the old man struggled to swallow the liquid, Ryo poured more potion on the gash in his abdomen. Rodrigo just barely managed to survive.

He would be able to move a little bit more now. However, he didn’t want to waste time waiting to recover, so he begged Ryo.

“Master Ryo... His Highness has been taken... Master Ryo... Even though you drew so many of them away...” he said, “more reinforcements...came after...”

“What?!”

Ryo had been careless. The five in the forest hadn’t been the only group in the detached force. The others must have been positioned far enough away that even his Passive Sonar had been unable to detect them...

Frankly, he should have just killed all the villains attacking the couch with Cohn and the others while protecting Prince Willie. Ryo should have been able to handle that easily enough. Or, in the most extreme case, they could have entered the forest with an Ice Wall surrounding the carriage to lure the enemy away. If they’d done that, then at the very least, His Highness wouldn’t have been kidnapped...

Instead, he’d become obsessed with the five in the forest and separated

himself from the group to take them down... And this was the result. He was filled with regret. The feeling overwhelmed him and he felt like it still wasn't enough punishment.

Enraged by his own stupidity, Ryo bit down on his lip. This was an *escort* mission... The dumbest thing he could have done was leave his client unprotected. And he'd done exactly that...

However, he had more important things to deal with right now. He could wallow in regret later! First thing was first—save Prince Willie.

“Master Ryo... Please, summon help and rescue His Highness...”

Then Rodrigo fell unconscious. He was breathing. He had a pulse too. He would be fine.

Ryo surveyed his surroundings. The four bodyguards and six adventures were all moving. Had the villains prioritized kidnapping Prince Willie instead of dealing the final blow to the rest of their group? According to Willie's recounting of the incident with the previous body double, it hadn't been a massacre then either...

He rushed over to Cohn, made the man drink a super potion, and then poured more of the potion on the wounds in his chest and neck.

Cohn groaned softly in pain. “Ngh...”

“Cohn, can you hear me? It's me, Ryo.”

He was able to just barely open his eyes into the narrowest of slits. He stared at Ryo. “Ryo... I'm sorry... His Highness...”

“Yes, I heard from Mr. Rodrigo. As far as I can tell, everyone else is still alive. I'm going to leave potions behind, so please make sure all of them drink. I'm going to rescue the prince.”

“G-Got it...” Cohn nodded weakly, overwhelmed by Ryo's menacing attitude. He didn't bother asking the questions crowding in his mind.

“If I follow this road, it will lead to Wingston, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll see you later then.”

Ryo took off at a sprint, heading west. Neither Rodrigo nor Cohn knew where the prince would be taken. But Ryo had an idea—the Sect of Assassins’ headquarters. As a leader of the Sect, Sherfi had told him its location.

“It’s in a small village in the east,” he’d said, “about a day’s walk north of Wingston, the largest city in the region. The name of the village is Aban and it’s situated atop a mountain.”

Even if Willie wasn’t there, all Ryo had to do was ask someone. He had charted his course clearly.

To begin with, His Highness was the eighth son and prince of a small country. Honestly, he didn’t seem like he held much value as a hostage. But he had already been attacked twice, including this time...and by the Sect, no less. Was it possible that, like Tokugawa Ieyasu, some other country had hired the organization to snatch him? Or was Prince Willie’s body itself somehow valuable, which meant he needed to be captured alive...?

Whatever the reason, it was obviously a specific one. In that case, it would be best to assume that Willie would be sent to a fairly high-ranking member of the Sect. And the only place nearby Ryo could think of where the top brass would gather was...the headquarters.

The Sect of Assassins' Headquarters

At the village of Aban, in the Sect of Assassins' headquarters, two of the organization's leaders conversed.

"Siccar, what did the leader say?"

"Hello to you too, Natalia. No word yet..."

These two had led the units responsible for Prince Willie's abduction.

"We ended up kidnapping an imposter last time and got a blistering tongue-lashing for it, eh?"

"Don't remind me," Natalia snapped at Siccar.

"That's why this time around we had Bagabis's squad ambush them and chase anybody who split from the prince's entourage. Since we were able to stay behind to observe, we saw that the real prince had been left behind, just as we'd expected."

"You only managed to succeed because of me. Otherwise, you and your people would never have defeated those bodyguards," Natalia pointed out aggressively.

"I didn't doubt you'd rendezvous with us." Even as Siccar scowled sullenly on the inside, he infused gratitude into his words.

They had ultimately mobilized over thirty of the Sect's members in this raid, which was proof of how vital it was that they secure the prince.

However, one thing niggled at Siccar. Bagabis and his eleven subordinates still hadn't returned from their pursuit of the body double who had raced out of the carriage. Due to the nature of their work, members of the Sect were only dispatched when absolutely necessary; as soon as they complete one mission, they'd proceed directly to the next one. Compared to Siccar and Natalia, Bagabis still ranked low in the leadership, which meant he was usually deployed wherever he was needed without having to report back to headquarters. And

yet...

*Did a monster take them out in the forest? All twelve, including Bagabis?
Impossible...*

They were strong enough to be recognized by the organization's leadership. No way would they have been done in by monsters. Naturally, it never even occurred to Siccar that they had lost to the body double.

While he was lost in thought, one of their leader's attendants approached him and Natalia.

"Master Siccar, Mistress Natalia, the leader requests your presence at once."



"My lord, we are here to answer your summons."

Both Siccar and Natalia bent the knee in front of their leader. His Highness Willie lay on the stone pedestal behind the man.

"Indeed. This time, you captured the real prince. Well done, both of you."

The man stood tall at one hundred and ninety centimeters. In contrast to his long, white hair and beard, his fiercely blazing black eyes showed no signs of his advancing years. He was said to be over ninety years old, but his appearance would allow him to pass for a man in his fifties.

Then there's the simple fact he's a monster whom none of us can yet defeat...

Natalia thought idly to herself. She had been a child when she first joined the Sect and their leader had been an elderly man for as long as she could remember. He had remained an old man even after she became an adult, then later, one of the leaders of the group. Despite being an eternal elder, if every single member of the top brass joined forces and attacked him...they still wouldn't be able to take him down. That was the leader who stood before them.

Though she pledged fealty to him on the surface, Natalia was already part of a faction determined to overthrow him.

It's well past time for him to retire.

As the founder of the Sect of Assassins, he was an extremely powerful man. While this was an undeniable truth, reigning over the organization as its boss for over half a century inevitably meant a few of its people would grow tired of him.

And this powerful man was obsessed with Prince Willie, though he'd never explained why to any of them.

Siccar, who stood next to Natalia, was second after the leader concerning knowledge of alchemy. Some time ago, he'd mentioned the prince's blood was necessary in an alchemical experiment...

"I will now begin preparations for the ritual. From this moment on, no one is allowed to enter this hall of elders. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord," Siccar and Natalia answered in unison, bowed their heads, then withdrew.

Once the two exited the room, they heard the door being locked from the inside.

He's taking this very seriously.

Natalia cursed him in her mind.

I didn't even know this door had a lock until now.

She stared intently at it again.

"His dearest wish will finally be granted after all these years..." Siccar murmured, his voice trembling with emotion.

"Tell me, Siccar. What is this ritual he's about to conduct?"

"Um..." Siccar froze, his expression suddenly uneasy and sheepish. *I've done it now*, he seemed to be thinking. He'd only just registered what he'd accidentally said while his emotions were overwhelming him.

"Don't fret. I won't tell anyone. Besides, it will be over soon regardless, right?" Natalia coaxed him to further loosen his lips.

"Th-That's true... He developed an alchemical formula for immortality, which he's executing now."

“Immortality? You mean eternal life? That sort of immortality?”

For a moment, Natalia couldn't grasp what Siccar was saying. But when his words finally registered in her mind, her complexion went deathly pale. However, Siccar wasn't looking at her, so he didn't notice her expression.

“Yes, that immortality. Our leader will, at long last, rule over us for eternity!”

If this is a jest, it's certainly in poor taste!

After she and Siccar had gone their separate ways, Natalia had screamed internally over and over again with a bitter look on her face.

Who in their right minds would actually willingly endure that?! Not me, that's for certain! What to do... It's not a decision I can make alone. In which case...I have no other choice. I was told to limit my use, but if I don't request instructions now, what will happen next can't be undone.

Natalia hurried back to her chambers and activated a special alchemy stone. Now, no one could eavesdrop in her room. Then she unlocked a specific drawer and took out a slate the size of a hand mirror. She placed her right hand on it. The gesture unlocked the slate, allowing the user to communicate with a specific recipient.

Both the alchemy stone and this slate were originally alchemical devices invented by the leader. The person on the other end of this slate had given her this modified version because it enabled the two of them to correspond at long distances.

“This is Black.”

“Lord Black, this is Natalia. I have urgent news.”

Her correspondence partner was a man known as Black, the Sect's number two. He was also the one who had led the raid in Whitnash, a fact the highest leaders of their organization had already been informed of.

“Speak.”

“I know why the leader is fixated on the prince from the Monarchy of Joux. He plans on using the boy's body to make himself immortal.”

Black's aura went from impassive to agitated as he listened. The change in him was obvious even through the transmission device.

"He's holed himself up in the hall of elders to make ready for the ritual. Please advise," Natalia finished with a request for instructions.

This situation was a nightmare for the members of the antileader faction. No one even knew the true extent of the concept of "immortality." Was it simply eternal life? Did it allow him to return to life even after being killed? With so many unknowns involved, it was no wonder Natalia struggled to make a decision.

However...

"Natalia, do everything in your power to stop that ritual. It's the sort where even the preparations are by no means simple. You have twelve hours before he starts the actual ritual. But the moment the ritual ends, so too does our future. I give you leave to use every ounce of power at your disposal. Do you hear me? *Stop him at any cost.*"

"Yes, Sir. I understand."

With that, the transmission ended and the slate returned to its normal state.

Lord Black knew about the ritual for immortality... And he told me to stop it no matter what... Within twelve hours, hm?

Within moments, Natalia fell into deep thought as she tried to come up with a strategy...

A few hours later.

I'm as ready as I'll ever be. But I still might be one move short of succeeding...

Natalia rubbed her temples as she paced in her room.

I just need one more person, someone in the top brass who possesses powerful fighting skills... I can kill the leader while that person fights him... Argh! Damn it! Why is Sherfi not here when I need him the most?! I could have used him as a sacrificial pawn.

Natalia was the kind of person who could consider such a horrific option with

total calmness.

My subordinates aren't even strong enough to buy me time...

Of course, her people were sacrificial pawns too. While she continued thinking and pacing, someone pounded violently on her door and shouted, "Mistress Natalia!"

It was one of her subordinates in the corridor outside.

"What do you want? Enter."

He practically stumbled into the room at her command.

"It's bad! The village is under attack!"

"What?" she gasped.

She didn't understand. She knew the meaning of the word *attack*, but it should have been an easy matter for their village to ward off any assault. After all, every last one of its one hundred residents was an assassin.

Even if they faced a force of knights ten times greater, so long as the battle took place within this village, they could repel the invaders easily. It would have been a different story if the region were a barren desert or plain, but the surrounding terrain and structural layout of the village had been carefully designed with defensive warfare in mind. It was impossible to know when, by whom, or from where they would be attacked, so it was only natural that they be ready for every possibility. Never mind the fact that it was impossible from the outset for knights and any other outsiders to approach the village with ease. After all, this *was* a settlement of assassins.

Yet here was her subordinate telling her they were under attack. As in, it was happening right now as they spoke. How was this possible when it was nearly *impossible* to even get near their location?

"Who's attacking us? How many are there?"

Her subordinate hesitated for a moment at her question, then mustered up his resolve and answered.

"One individual."

“One...individual?” Natalia repeated, dumbfounded.

“One water magician. He charged in from the front.”

“That’s absurd! Are you saying we didn’t intercept him?!”

“He froze everyone. It’s him. The water magician that was part of Gekko’s merchant caravan. The same one who turned Gey to ice. He’s the attacker!”

“Why...is someone like *him* here...?”



Ryo had found the sprawling village on the mountain road. He’d known he was being watched during his ascent, but nothing in particular had happened on his walk. Regardless of what was inside the village, normal travelers sometimes visited it as well. Adventurers on jobs stopped by too, whether to collect information or to ask for directions after getting lost.

If knights or armed groups of people approached, the villagers would probably be wary. They might even intercept them on the mountain road, but the assassins who’d been monitoring Ryo’s uphill climb never even considered the possibility that he was a one-man raid.

When the village came into view, he conjured up an image in his mind: a world entirely encased in ice. Then he chanted.

“Permafrost.”

It was a freezing spell that affected a wide area. The magic was simple: it decreased the molecular vibrations of water molecules within the visible range and caused them to freeze. That was all. That said, there was nothing ordinary about its range and effects...

If Abel saw the ensuing sight, he would probably say, “Wait, Ryo. Didn’t you come here to *rescue* someone? What if you ended up freezing him too?”

Prince Willie was definitely somewhere deep inside the village. Ryo’s Permafrost spell probably hadn’t hit him... Or so Ryo believed without any basis in fact. Regardless, plenty of people survived frostbite, so...

Everyone who was outside in the village was frozen.

“Sherfi said all the villagers were assassins, so it’s not like this is a civilian massacre.”

As for whether the assassins were combatants or not...Ryo didn’t know the details. Besides, just because they were frozen didn’t mean they were dead—so, again, not a massacre...

“Ice Armor. 10-Layer Ice Wall Package.”

The second he finished reciting the spell, five arrows flew at him. They were, of course, repelled by his Ice Wall.

“Icicle Lance 5.”

He sent five Icicle Lances on a reverse trajectory matching the arrows’.

“Gaaahhh!!!”

“Ngh...”

He heard screams from those he’d struck. Attack magic came flying at him on the heels of the arrows and he countered immediately with more Icicle Lances. The collisions created violent explosions.

“Active Sonar.”

Ryo struggled to organize the sheer amount of information Passive Sonar was transmitting into his head, which is why he activated Active Sonar, a spell he didn’t use much normally. Unlike Passive Sonar, Ryo could send out a Pulse from himself. When that Pulse hit an object and the feedback returned to him, he could analyze the data, which allowed him to grasp his surroundings. It was a powerful spell, excelling in its ability to detect even immobile objects.

Receiving a more manageable stream of information from Active Sonar, Ryo boldly stepped through the village entrance and kept walking. By the time he arrived at the conspicuously large building in the center of the village, all the long-range attacks aimed at him had completely stopped. Instead, the remaining forces waited to ambush him in front of the building.

“The last stage is hand-to-hand combat, hm?”

The corner of his mouth curled up just a bit. The thought of a proper battle clearly delighted Ryo. When he drew near, the hidden assassins threw

something at him at the same time. Once the objects hit the ground, many columns of white smoke rose.

“Again with those?!”

He’d been expecting them to be a little more original. Needless to say, he was disappointed. Of course, he wasn’t going to drop his guard because the smoke might not have been regular smoke. They could have infused it with poison, for example.

“Squall.”

A thunderous downpour instantly covered the area, slamming the rising smoke straight back to the ground. At this point, Ryo would normally dash forward to close the distance between him and the enemy. Then he would incapacitate them while they were still in shock. This time, however, was different... After Squall cleared out the smoke, he continued walking forward.

Step by step, he drew closer to the large building.

Ideally, the defenders should scatter and then try another strategy. But the fact the assassins aren’t doing that means this building is their most important stronghold...

He couldn’t detect Prince Willie’s signature even with Active Sonar. Although Ryo didn’t know where exactly he was, he’d thought the prince might be held inside the village’s key base. Even if he wasn’t there, someone important would be, and all he had to do was ask them. That was his backup plan. And the assassins’ actions had only confirmed his suspicions about the vital importance of the building in front of him.

“All right. I’m freezing all of you. *Ice Casket 13.*”

Ultimately, there was no hand-to-hand combat...

Natalia had gone outside the village to observe the attacker. She was astonished.

What in the world is that monster?!

An invisible wall of ice blocked all the villagers’ attacks. Seconds after, spears

of ice shot back at them from the other side of the wall.

Those two things are enough to make him invincible!

Moreover, he had instantly dispersed the smoke screen the others had used to challenge him to melee combat... What a nightmare—an awful, hellish nightmare.

“So that’s the water magician who was with Gekko?” Natalia questioned her subordinate standing next to her. Half of her unit had been sent on the failed attack against Gekko back then.

“Yes. I only saw him at a distance, but that robed man is definitely him.” He nodded affirmatively.

Which means Prince Willie and Gekko are connected? Or...Inverey requested the prince’s rescue and Gekko sent that man to do the job...?

The prince’s entourage had been heading to the Kingdom of Knightley by way of the Principality of Inverey. She knew the lad had had an audience with the prince of Inverey during his time there.

“No, this isn’t the time to dwell on that,” Natalie said aloud to remind herself of the situation at hand. “That water magician intends to take Prince Willie back. So, his destination will be the hall of elders. We’ll take him down with the traps there!”

“But I thought only our great leader could activate those?”

“I can as well. Half the work is already done. Once I finish the rest of the prep, you lot had better keep your eyes on him.”

And the leader too, hm?

Natalia decided then and there to finish off the water magician and the leader in one fell swoop. Both entities would only be nuisances if left alive. The timing of the opportunity couldn’t be more perfect!



It was deathly quiet inside the building. The structure had seemed enormous when Ryo saw it from the outside and his impression didn’t change at all when he entered. The corridors were wide and its ceiling incredibly high, making it

feel less like a village hall and more like a monastery, if Ryo were to describe it in Earth terms.

“Usually, the space farthest back is the most important in places like these.”

It looked like the building’s fundamental design principle was based on religious concepts. An order of *assassins* lived here after all, so it wasn’t all that strange.

He walked down the corridor for a bit longer before reaching a massive set of double doors.

“I’ll definitely find something inside that room,” Ryo speculated baselessly. Still, considering the design and construction of the imposing doors, it did seem more unlikely that he’d find nothing on the other side.

“Icicle Lance.”

He created a spear of ice more than a meter in diameter. This particular Icicle Lance was so thick that it no longer even resembled an icicle. He used it to batter down the doors.

As soon as he slipped inside, he surveyed the interior. A stone slab occupied the space at the back of the room with a person lying on top of it.

His Highness! Ice Wall.

Ryo generated an Ice Wall to protect Prince Willie...or at least he tried to, but found he couldn’t. His magic was active, which meant magical nullification wasn’t affecting him. His spells weren’t being nullified after he cast them either, so he wasn’t being stripped of his magical control like he had been when fighting the sea monsters.

The magic worked, but as soon as his Ice Wall was created, it disappeared.

“To think an intruder would appear at this point in time. Intriguing. Very intriguing. I know you are here to rescue the young lordling, but as you can see, your magic cannot protect him.”

A man with long, white hair and a long, white beard spoke to Ryo. He seemed to be working on something a short distance away from the stone slab.

“Would you be so kind as to tell me why I can’t?” Ryo asked politely.

“No,” the man replied bluntly.

“I see. *Ice Wall Package.*”

Ryo created a barrier of ice around the man to restrict his movements.

“*Jamming,*” the man said, mixing sand into the forming Ice Wall. It failed to take shape and vanished just like that.

“Obstructing your opponent’s magical creation by mixing your own magic into it... The idea never would have even occurred to me.”

Ryo was genuinely impressed. At the same time, fear shivered down his spine as he realized the only way to execute such a technique successfully was by generating magic at a frighteningly fast speed.

It took Ryo less than a tenth of a second to chant his spell and generate his Ice Wall, yet his opponent had evaluated Ryo’s magic and, on top of that, mixed in his own... There was nothing ordinary about his speed.

“It is not as if I hold the patent to the concept, so feel free to utilize it as well.”

The man spread his arms wide in invitation.

Ryo found himself stuck on the word *patent*. Of *course* such a thing existed on Phi. Previously, Ryo had simply assumed the concept didn’t exist in this world. Now, he was forced to confront his assumption. Clearly he had much more to learn about this world.

“Patent...” Ryo muttered unthinkingly.

“Ah, forgive me. There is no need for you to know what that means as you will meet your death soon. *Stone Lance.*”

Instantly, six stone spears erupted around the man and launched themselves toward Ryo.

“*10-Layer Ice Wall.*”

This time, there was no interference with his spell, so a barrier of ice formed around him and repelled the six stone spears.

“Oh ho. Quite a solid wall of ice, that is.”

The moment after the man said those words, a humongous cuboid stone

rushed toward Ryo from above. A bystander might have thought the ceiling itself was crashing down.

The ensuing thunderous roar was followed by an explosive cloud of dust.

10-Layer Ice Wall.

Before the cloud dissipated, this time Ryo created a wall of ice parallel to the ground above the man and let it free-fall. Another thunderous roar. Another explosive cloud of dust.

...and then the sound of ice shattering into tiny pieces.

When the haze covering the room cleared, the two men stood there like nothing had happened.

One of them had used Abrasive Jet to slice the falling slab of stone and stood now looking completely unfazed. The other had created a super hard cone made of stone around him, which had through the falling wall of ice, shattering it.

“I have to say, I’m shocked your stone broke my ice.”

“This is the first time water has been able to cut through my stone.”

They smirked at one another.

“I’d just like to make sure that you *are* the head of the Sect of Assassins, yes?”

“Indeed.” The man nodded. “They call me the leader.”

And then their fight entered the next stage.

“I shall start by crushing you face-to-face. *Stone Spear Fang Blitz.*”

“Laminated 10-layer Ice Wall.”

Stone spears fired in rapid succession from both of the leader’s palms—but they were not the only attacks. Numerous magic circles appeared around the man, which shot more stone spears at Ryo. It looked just like a magic battle you would see in an anime or video game.

Even as Ryo blocked the racing stone spears with a stream of continuous Ice Walls through his “lamination” technique, he was somewhat impressed by the leader’s magical fighting style.

Neither the Inferno Magician nor Leonore the akuma created these magic circles... Not that I'm complaining, because this is super, duper cool!



In all things, coolness was incredibly important.

“I commend your ability to generate those successive ice walls so quickly. Not many can do that. Even my Jamming is not fast enough to hinder you. I trust you are not running out of mana?”

“Not at all. More importantly, attacking me with those flying magic circles is so cool!”

From the casualness of their conversations, you’d hardly know at all that they were trying to take each other’s lives.

“Oh ho! So you understand the marvel of this magic, mm? Excellent! None of my disciples do. Lamentable... I have struck upon a fantastic idea. What say you to being my disciple? I have a feeling you will be able to carry on my techniques, including this one.”

“Um, I’m not too keen on joining an order of assassins...”

For whatever reason, the Sect’s leader was trying to recruit Ryo, who wasn’t willing to become an assassin just to chase after the cool factor.

“Well... That is unfortunate...”

The leader looked truly disappointed...

“All right, my turn next. *Water Jet 256.*”

Two hundred and fifty-six Water Jets formed, their points of origin orbiting the man, each jet capable of cutting up everything in its path.

“*Floating Stone Wall, activate.*”

Countless palm-sized stones appeared around the leader, moving around with frightening speed and crashing into Ryo’s Water Jets. The collision of water and stone sparked the process of annihilation, and both disappeared with brilliant flashes of light. Within a few seconds, all two hundred and fifty-six Water Jets were destroyed by the stones’ suicide bomb attacks. Unhurt, the leader remained standing.

“That’s definitely a defensive measure I never would have thought of...”

Ryo was kind of impressed. Two hundred and fifty-six Water Jets swirling in

random trajectories. Honestly, even *he* hadn't come up with a way to block his own attack. Nevertheless, the leather had been able to. Just as Ryo had intercepted the Fire Javelins with Icicle Lances to make them disappear, the old man had negated his Water Jets with small stone walls. It may well have been the most effective way of dealing with such an attack.

"Heh heh heh. Magnificent, is it not? I must say, it was quite difficult to ensure the stones did not crash into each other. With this countermeasure, I can even defend against saturation attacks, as you just saw. Once you master a technique, you will never lose it. Time may wear down your body, but it cannot take your experience," the leader explained proudly.

"A wise saying. I suspect you're leaving out the fact that such precise magical control required a great deal of training..."

"I did indeed devote myself single-mindedly to my training once upon a time. However, it is not so difficult now, as I employ alchemy to aid me, you see. A combination of earth magic and alchemy, to be more exact. Is that not the case for your water?"

"That's alchemy...? Mine is genuinely just water magic. Gosh, alchemy really is fascinating, huh?"

"Such control over magic alone..." the leader murmured, half awed by Ryo's response. "I find *you* infinitely more curious. I must ask you once more. Will you reconsider becoming my disciple? If your acceptance means I must return that prince unharmed, I shall. Though I needed him to extend my life, I suddenly find mortality much more appealing if it means I can have you under my tutelage in the end. What say you?"

"Unfortunately, I don't want to be an assassin."

A very small part of Ryo wanted this man's alchemical techniques. However, that thought flashed through Ryo's mind for only a moment. He had no intention of becoming an assassin.

"I see. Regrettable. Then I will engage you in earnest now."

The leader closed his eyes for a second and chanted.

"Meteor."

But nothing happened.

Did he fail? No, wait, what did he say? "Meteor"...? Meteor is a famous spell in games that causes meteorites to rain down... No way!

Ryo looked up and cast his spell.

"Abrasive Jet 128."

He tore through the building's ceiling.

"Active Sonar."

Ryo detected four objects heading straight for him. Four *meteorites*.

"A pure, mass attack *now*?!" Ryo shouted.

"I am not surprised you realized."

The second he heard the voice from behind him, Ryo reflexively jumped forward, rolled safely, then immediately sprung upright again. Simultaneously, he unsheathed Murasame from his waist and generated its ice blade as he whipped around.

He'd been stabbed the moment he heard the leader's voice, but his Ice Armor and the Fairy King's robe saved him from sustaining a fatal wound. Even so, he felt the pain of a bruise forming on his back, which he ignored for now.

The leader stood now where Ryo had been. His head tilted thoughtfully, he held a thin, curved, single-edged sword.

"So you defended yourself, eh... My sword is infused with the ability to use an elemental attack, but your robe blocked it... Perhaps I should have used a normal sword... Fascinating."

"Then the meteorite mass attack was just a diversion from your true aim, which was melee combat..."

"Yes, indeed. Naturally, I have no qualms using Meteor on armies and to destroy cities as it is quite effective. However, dropping it here risks harming the prince, which will simply not do. Thus, I sought to engage you in physical combat. Alas, you are too clever for your own good. I should have known better than to assume a magician like you was not versed in physical combat as well."

The leader cackled merrily.

“I guess that applies to you too given you’re the leader of a group of assassins?” Ryo said, pointing Murasame at his opponent. He never once dropped his guard.

“Of course. I am the one who trained them, after all. Now, shall we commence round two?”

The leader brandished his sword dramatically and struck at Ryo, who parried the blow firmly with Murasame. But then...

“Ngh!”

A sharp pain shot down his back. He immediately pushed away the leader’s sword, jumped to the side, and did a somersault like a volleyball player executing a spinning receive before standing up again. He’d spotted the source of his pain during this maneuver...

“A floating magic circle...”

It looked just like the ones the leader had used during his Stone Spear Fang Blitz. Ryo didn’t even know when the man had put it there, but a stone spear had probably emerged from it to attack him from behind...

“And here I thought I had you skewered... It is not just the robe, eh? Your armor of ice is also quite hard...” the leader commented, intrigued.

Yup, the back part of Ryo’s Ice Armor. Although Ice Armor wasn’t as durable as Ice Wall, it was the unsung hero that had nevertheless saved his life on numerous occasions. While it could be easily torn apart by master swordsmen, it held its own very well against magic.

But Ryo had something else entirely on his mind...

“Are you telling me,” he said, “that you can manipulate those magic circles however you want...?”

“Yes,” the leader replied, demonstratively moving the floating magic circle left and right before making it somersault before his eyes.

“No way...” Ryo was stunned. Wasn’t this just like in some anime where a character used brainwaves to control a guidance weapon? If he fought with a

few, or a dozen, of those in the air...

“That’s insanely out of this world cool...” he said, his eyes flashing.

The leader understood the greed in his gaze and chuckled ruefully. “I agree, but need I remind you I am trying to end your life with this technique?”

“Well, I definitely can’t let that happen. Clearly, I haven’t trained enough given how close you were to succeeding. Alas, it’s my own fault rather than those fantastic weapons’!”

“I-I see...” The leader seemed a bit overwhelmed by Ryo’s passionate insistence.

Regardless of his zeal, Ryo understood that he faced a real problem that needed to be solved.

The leader’s swings are strong. And his blade is shockingly heavy... Since Murasame is the one parrying, its ice blade probably won’t break, but...if possible, I want to block his swings early, before he can gather too much power. Except his attacks are so quick, so that’s going to be difficult. In other words, it’s impossible to create an advantage in a sword fight. Then there’s the magic circle attacking from behind... Yes, that’s definitely cheating.

Ryo sighed inwardly, shaking his head. He had to create a situation where he didn’t need to be aware of the attacks from the magic circle.

Neither defensive body movements nor my sword will help me achieve that... Which means, I’ll have to figure something out with magic. It’s my only option at this point.

Ice Wall was essentially based on Ice Shield, a spell that created a tennis racket-sized ice shield to intercept enemy attacks. Lately, he’d been using Ice Wall a lot, so Ice Shield hadn’t come into play much... But who knew what it was capable of and where.

I’ll be fine... I think. Let me try it out and take it from there. Before that, I need to reconstruct the things he broke. Ice Armor.

He repaired the part of Ice Armor covering his back by chanting the spell in his mind.

“Hm... I could not use Jamming because...I cannot see your back,” the leader admitted, grinning.

“I suspected as much.” Ryo grinned back smugly, his smile saying, ‘Ha! Tricked you!’

At this level of combat, strategizing starts right from the spell-casting phase. And once more, from a position of almost no advantage, the leader swung his sword down. Once again, Ryo parried it solidly, just like last time...

“Gah!”

A stone spear shot out again from a magic circle behind him and shattered the back of his Ice Armor. The Revamped Ice Shield, his magical countermeasure, had failed. However, compared to the previous surprise attack, his back suffered significantly less damage.

Was it too weak? Then I just have to increase the output and number! There’s no need for it to be ice at all, so I can leave it in a vapor state in the air... Okay, Revamped Ice Shield No. 2 is complete!

“Something the matter?” the leader asked, tilting his head in theatrical confusion. He was clearly enjoying himself. “The back of your armor is broken again, is it not?”

“No, I just miscalculated. It won’t happen again. Because I won’t even need the back of my armor!”

“Oh ho, such confidence.”

Ice Armor.

He cast the spell in his mind and reconstructed the back of his Ice Armor.

“You *just* said you do not need it, yes? Or did my ears deceive me?”

“Of course, I lied! A great man of old once said, ‘All warfare is based on deception.’”

“I-I see...”

The leader shook his head a little and regained his composure. And for the third time, from a position of almost no advantage, the leader swung his sword,

his strongest swing yet. Ryo parried for a third time.

Ryo knew the light of annihilation was emitting behind him. When two magic spells of roughly equal power collided, the spells annihilated one another. This was called annihilation, just like in physics... Although Ryo didn't know who'd coined the term here on Phi. Annihilation emitted light, which meant...

"Mwa ha ha. Revamped Ice Shield No. 2 is a success."

"Well done. Though I cannot say the same about your coinage... Tell me, what exactly did you do? I could not see behind you, so... Ah, then let us attempt this from the front."

The leader took a huge leap backward and chanted.

"Seal."

A magic circle appeared on his right side and launched a stone spear, which flew right at Ryo. It disappeared after the light of annihilation appeared fifty centimeters in front of him.

"Invisible? No...you are using water vapor?" the leader asked, looking genuinely surprised.

"Correct! You figured it out in a flash, huh!" Ryo answered proudly.

For a few moments, the old man seemed utterly dumbfounded, then he started laughing.

"Heh heh heh heh heh. Aha ha ha ha ha!"

Ryo stared at him suspiciously because he didn't know why the man was laughing.

After his laughter finally subsided, the leader spoke again. "You truly are an interesting one. Your adaptability and learning rate indeed intrigue me. It is clear to me you have a talent for magic. Hm, let us see how you fare with the *sword*—"

In an instant, he closed the distance between them and struck. Ryo parried cleanly. There was no longer any need to worry about the attacking magic circle. As long as his Revamped Ice Shield No. 2 was functioning, he could concentrate on the sword fight in front of him.

And the leader's strikes forced him to focus. He struck rapidly, again and again. Each swing was so ferocious!

His style was fast and heavy, making it perfect for rapid-fire attacks. If you thought about it, it was normally difficult for a swordsman to combine these qualities, especially when swords leveraged the wielder's entire body. But the leader's sword managed to combine the two.

It's his stance that's giving him both speed and strength. His knees are bent and his hips are lowered, allowing him to smoothly shift his center of his gravity. That means he doesn't just have to rely on the strength of his arms or the weight of his sword.

Yes, the most fundamental of the fundamentals: keep your center of gravity low. The leader's knees, bent at ninety-degree angles, did just that! It was similar to how defenders on a basketball team would stay low to guard other players. While it didn't make you any faster, it did allow you to change direction much more quickly. It also allowed you to shift your center of gravity to the left and right so you could reach up to fifty centimeters farther without moving a single step. Shifting your center of gravity was one of the most important aspects of swordplay. In a fight where just one more step could bring you within striking distance, footwork was paramount. In such close quarters, you couldn't execute wide, attacking swings... Instead, you had to compact your arms and hips and shift your center of gravity into your strike... This was how you fought with swords at such a distance.

Thus, it was the leader's ability to swiftly change the center of his gravity that gave his sword both speed and heft. It wasn't just the weight of the sword and the swing of the arm that made each strike heavy, but the weight of his body too.

Sera's sword style is fast and heavy too, but that's because she has incredible control over her air magic. But the leader's sword combines both speed and weight through the principles of swordsmanship. Amazing...

Ryo was deeply astonished. He realized that the leader's understanding of "swinging a sword" completely eclipsed his own. But...

But that's exactly why I can't lose...

He continued parrying the man's sword. One blow at a time.

Defense was the essence of Ryo's style. In the Forest of Rondo, the Dullahan defeated him every night... In the city of Lune, every day he lost mock battles to Sera... It was something he had acquired because he was constantly forced into a disadvantageous position. There were things in this world to be learned from losing so often. Ryo was so strong at defense that even the Dullahan and Sera couldn't break through his guard easily. Yes, his defense was surprisingly tough.

"You...are a monster," the leader muttered.

"Sheesh, where'd that come from?" Ryo protested. He thought anyone would if someone suddenly called them a "monster."

"It is, of course, a compliment."

"A-Are you sure about that...?"

Although he didn't feel quite convinced by the leader's words, he was still happy to be praised. Especially when it came from a man who wielded such a powerful sword...

Their sword fight continued even as they chatted. It followed a basic pattern: the leader attacked and Ryo defended. Of course, Ryo wasn't *always* on the defensive. He sometimes matched the old man's attacks with counters of his own. That said...

My attacks aren't landing at all...

The gulf between them felt insurmountable—even larger than the gap he felt between he and the Dullahan or he and Sera. It was so bad he knew his attacks wouldn't hit before he even started them. While the leader described his defense as monstrous, from Ryo's perspective, the man was no less monstrous himself...

But there *was* a chink in the leader's proverbial armor: stamina. If the sword fight dragged on like this, Ryo could outlast the old man. If all that mattered to him was winning, that was all well and good—but...

That's not what I want.

Despite the fact that his life was on the line, Ryo couldn't help the thought flashing through his mind. It was proof of how badly he wanted to surpass this man through his power or his skill. It was an unnecessary thought. One he shouldn't have. However, at some point, Ryo had started enjoying himself, which led to him wanting to be better than the man in front of him.

He didn't just want to win. He wanted to beat him. The two feelings were similar but different, but such differences had no place in life-and-death situations.

Ryo knew all this in his head. He understood what was at stake. And yet...he couldn't lie to himself.

These were pure, unadulterated instincts. In the end, he couldn't think of anything else... Everything that was Ryo converged into one need—to beat the man in front of him.

“Hm...”

He no longer heard the leader's murmurs. All he took in was the information necessary to beat him and processed it unconsciously. Ryo just swung his sword. Faster. More powerfully. More accurately.

“A mist...?”

At first, it looked like Ryo's sword, his arms...his entire body were beginning to emit a fine mist. But the leader soon realized that this was not the case. No, it was Ryo's sword that was emitting the mist after each swing.



“The jets of water are making his sword faster... Unbelievable...”

The moment Ryo himself realized, he noted that the heaviness of his sword had increased too.

If anyone had been watching the swordplay from a distance, they might have found it beautiful: light poured in from the broken ceiling, reflecting off the tiny water particles.

Sera utilized her Wind Robe technique to exert precise magical control of air magic in her swordsmanship... And what Ryo was trying to achieve could be considered the water magic equivalent.

However, the vectors were opposite. Her Wind Robe accelerated her attacks by *pushing* her sword with air magic while Ryo’s Water Robe *propelled* the sword with water magic.

If Wind Robe was like using the wind to push a yacht with sails forward, Water Robe moved the yacht by using the thrust generated by jets or propellers... Was that really the difference?

Of course, Ryo had achieved this unconsciously. He’d simply wanted to surpass the man in front of him... This was the result of mobilizing everything he had.

With each flash of his sword, he eliminated any superfluous motions. Stripped away any unnecessary movements in his body. He accelerated each strike, each movement with water magic.

Then, finally, everything came together.

Swoosh.

Ryo’s horizontal slash sliced a gash into the leader’s left side.

“Ngh...!” the leader grunted, then jumped far back, putting some distance between them.

Of course, there was no opening to exploit. Ryo had intended to close the gap immediately, but lost his timing simply because the leader’s speed didn’t allow for any openings to be created. And from where Ryo stood, he could see the boss gritted his teeth as he leaped back.

When he landed, the wound in his side, which should have been gaping, was already beginning to heal. It was as if he had drunk a high-grade potion.

“Did you put a potion capsule into your molars?”

The leader smirked at Ryo’s surprise. “Correct. To think I would actually have the chance to use it... Heh heh heh. Life is fun, eh? Even in my old age, it never fails to excite. That said, it was wholly unexpected that you would begin to surpass me in such a short period of time. You are a monster on all fronts, not just defense.”

“I suppose I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Despite Ryo’s acceptance of the leader’s praise, he didn’t drop his guard. He kept Murasame pointed steadily at the old man in the *seigan* stance, which was his most basic but most familiar stance.

“You know, there is one thing I have been most curious about... Your stance and...that black hair remind me of the people of my native land... Not to mention that ice blade. It is curved, yes?”

“We’re finally discussing the elephant in the room, hm? Yes, just like you, I too came from another world. It seems like you’re Japanese as well... I wasn’t sure about that last part until now though.”

The leader’s eyes widened in genuine shock at Ryo’s words.

Neither of them said a word for several long minutes. The leader broke the silence first.

“I wish to know something first. Is your objective to kill me?” he asked.

“No, it’s to take the prince back,” Ryo answered.

“Do you desire to continue fighting me? I must admit, even I am reaching my physical limits.”

Ryo considered. “No, securing Prince Willie comes first.”

Keeping your priorities straight was essential in every situation. If you got careless, whatever happened after couldn’t be undone.

Of course, sometimes a water wizard came along who cast all of these notions aside, putting the pursuit of victory on the back burner to instead strive to beat the man in front of him...

The leader nodded and sheathed his sword.

“Then we shall not fight. You may take the prince with you.”

“Huh?”

Ryo was surprised by this turn of events. He’d thought some degree of negotiation would be necessary after gaining the upper hand. However, he hadn’t expected the battle to end so quickly...

“I was told another reincarnate, a man, preceded me into this world before my own rebirth here.”

While Ryo tried to decide whether to head over to Prince Willie, the leader began telling him his tale.

“The one who told me was named Fake Michael, an angel.”

“Michael! How’s he doing? Well, I hope!”

“I highly doubt a being like him is prone to illness.” The leader laughed. “Yes, he is well. He said he introduced himself as Fake Michael to me because that is what the man before me called him... I take it that was you?”

“Uhhh... I meeean... I *did* call him that but...not out loud. Only in my head. So, yes, I guess it’s my fault since that is technically how I referred to him. Privately though.”

Although Ryo was still somewhat confused, he was a little happy to learn that Michael himself had liked the nickname.

“I was reincarnated on the western edge of this continent... And before I knew it, I set down roots in the Central Provinces. In my life before this one, I realized I was a reincarnation of Hasan-i Sabbah...the one who created the Order of Assassins.”

“The Old Man of the Mountain...”

The leader smiled when Ryo used Hasan-i Sabbah’s alias.

“Yes. A certain irony in that considering I am an earth magician in this life. I trained myself in the magic and after having the good fortune to meet a respected alchemist, I trained in alchemy too. Oh, which reminds me...were you reincarnated as an elf or some other race?”

Ryo was confused by the sudden change in topic.

“No, I should be human...”

“I see. Yet you look quite young. It has been seventy-five years since my rebirth here. Considering you arrived before me, you must have aged a great deal more.”

“What?”

What was this man talking about? Only twenty years or so should have passed since Ryo’s reincarnation... At least that was the amount of time he *thought* he spent in the Forest of Rondo... Probably... Maybe... He had never actually recorded the days, so he didn’t know for sure... Even so, there was no way over *seventy-five* years had passed... After all, his appearance had hardly changed, so how...?

Then again, he *had* wondered why he wasn’t aging here. Who *wouldn’t* notice that, right? He’d thought it didn’t seem normal and that was expected too, right? But over seventy-five years? Didn’t that seem like a *lot* of time?

“Ah, yes, I just remembered. Michael said that the timeline changes.”

“Timeline...?”

The leader’s words dragged Ryo back from his confused thoughts.

“Some people who go to that white world later end up reincarnated in an earlier time in this world.”

“What do you mean?”

“I arrived in Michael’s world later than you did, but I was likely reincarnated in an earlier time than you were.”

Then that means I haven’t been here for over seventy-five years, right...? Thank goodness. But I wouldn’t mind being a hundred or two hundred at all. After all, Sera is two hundred years old...

Even as those idle thoughts flashed through Ryo's mind, the leader continued talking.

"In other words, people from our time period could have been reincarnated hundreds of years ago in this world."

The first thing that popped into Ryo's head then was the coffee set in Café de Chocolat. The next thing he thought of was the culture of bowing here on Phi. Perhaps it was spread by someone reincarnated in an even earlier era... A world where many people bowed as if it were modern-day Japan. He could sense the influence of a reincarnate! Was this the spark of a light novel-like mindset?

"Mayhap that is the meaning of timelines changing. Who can say?" The leader arrived at his own conclusion before continuing. "I was twenty-five years old when I was reborn from Earth, which makes me one hundred. And let me tell you, I most certainly cannot move my body like I was once able to. Nobody can win against advancing age, eh? And...I understood that every day I grew closer to death. That is why I needed the prince's blood."

Ryo shook in fear then. At his current level, considering his sword skill, he considered himself weak... He ended up asking a different question instead.

"What in the world does Prince Willie's blood have to do with *your* lifespan?"

To Ryo, that was the most important question needing an answer.

"Right, well, to be precise, it does not need to be him. Any direct descendant of Joux's royal family will do. Using that house's royal blood as one of the ingredients, you can create an elixir that will grant you immortality."

"Immortality? You mean you won't die?"

"Indeed. Moreover, even should you suffer grievous wounds, so long as you rest, you will heal without dying. An extraordinary effect, yes?"

"I mean, yes, it *is* extraordinary, but...you would kill for that reason?"

"I would." The leader chuckled a bit then.

Something suddenly felt off to Ryo. Not with the leader but—the wall behind him?! Ryo cast a spell before knowing what it was.

"Water Jet 1024."

The propulsive force of water spurted from the entire back of his body, from the top of his head to his heels. He'd never pulled off the high-speed maneuver successfully—until now. Ryo reached Prince Willie in an instant.

The strange feeling Ryo had sensed spread throughout the room in an instant, and at the same time arrows, fire spears, stone spears, and invisible air spears fired from every wall. Hundreds of attack magic spells cut through the entire room.

Normally, with abilities like his and the leader's, they wouldn't suffer a modicum of damage even in the face of hundreds or thousands of projectiles. But then Ryo realized what exactly that initial sense of wrongness had been...

Magical nullification...

He'd first experienced it with the one-eyed assassin hawk then again with BeheBehe the behemoth while escorting Abel. It was the same strange feeling.

And sure enough, Ryo couldn't use magic. He cut down all the arrows and attack spells that came his way with Murasame. Luckily, nothing came flying from the wall directly in front of the room, which was the wall behind the platform where Prince Willie lay. Even Ryo wasn't confident that he could handle that many of them attacking from all sides. Moreover, it would have been impossible to protect the sleeping prince's body at the same time.

However, he could manage a three-sided assault. The fact that he'd destroyed the ceiling with Abrasive Jet might have been a big factor. If the attack spells had rained down from the ceiling too, the situation would have been hopeless. Nevertheless, it was still tricky.

This...would be a challenge even for him...

But the leader withstood it. Since he couldn't use magic, he staved off the shower of projectiles with only his body and sword.

"Amazing..." Ryo exclaimed unthinkingly.

The human body, when mastered, could display such incredible abilities. Ryo was truly impressed. But surviving was the same as being nailed to the spot. After all, the leader was a hundred years old, and had just finished a fierce battle with Ryo... He must be on the verge of exhaustion.

The attack magic grew even more concentrated, at a fast clip too. The moment Ryo turned to block an attack on himself and Prince Willie, a thin, incredibly thin stone spear, different from any of the others, pierced the leader's chest.

"Ngah!"

This created an opening in the leader's defense, allowing an invisible air offensive spell to pierce him. Once the high-density attack ended, the ensuing silence felt unreal. Ryo noticed the strange feeling was gone too.

"10-Layer Ice Wall Package. 10-Layer Ice Wall Package."

After confirming he could use magic again, Ryo surrounded His Highness Willie with an Ice Wall, then encircled the entire room with another Ice Wall. They were completely safe now. After this, he rushed over to the man.

"Hey, get a hold of yourself."

A thin stone spear pierced through his heart, but it disappeared as soon as Ryo arrived, leaving behind a wound from which blood spurted profusely. Ryo pressed a hand to the man's chest and created a film of water over the hole in his heart. Similarly, he sealed the other wounds and damaged blood vessels.

Even if it stopped the bleeding by plugging the holes, it wasn't healing magic. Not to mention he wasn't carrying any potions. He'd left all his things in Cohn's safekeeping. Plus, the leader had already used the potion he'd hidden in his tooth...

Even if he *did* have a potion, the damage inflicted in the leader's heart by the stone spear was too complex to heal without Extra Heal... The fact that he'd already lost so much blood only made things worse.

"What a blunder on my part... To be killed by my own subordinate... It seems I too have grown old."

"The bleeding stopped, but..."

"Haaa. I know my own body well and I have no doubt this injury is fatal. No potion can heal it."

His flesh was turning purple where the stone spear had penetrated. Ryo

didn't know why. Poison on the spear? Some kind of alchemy? But the leader seemed certain that this wound wouldn't heal.

"It is fine. I have killed so many people until now, so this...is hardly enough punishment. But to have my subordinate use my own trap against me... Truly pathetic of me." The leader laughed derisively at himself.

"Trap?"

"Yes. Over twenty years ago, I set it in this hall to round up all enemies in one fell swoop. I maintained it all this time, so it worked beautifully, as you can see." The old man laughed raspily.

"But the stone spear that hit you seemed...different from all the others?"

"Ah, yes, that is Natalia's magic. She must have been seduced and used by Black."

To Ryo, the leader's scorn seemed directed at himself rather than Natalia.

"Let me ask one boon of you before the end." The leader looked straight into his eyes. "Will you carry on my alchemy?"

"What? How?" Ryo cocked his head in confusion.

"Well, to be clear, you cannot inherit it like a skill in the manner you might see in anime and manga back on Earth. I wish to entrust all the documents and techniques I developed on alchemy to you. Will you not accept my dying request?"

"Why me though?"

"Is it not obvious? Did you yourself not remark on how 'cool' my attacking magic circles were? So it is only natural I would want someone who shares my sensibilities to continue my legacy."

"And that's...alchemy?"

"Indeed. Which you can use as well... Of course, it is no easy task to learn it. While it may be stained in blood because of my deeds, the art itself is innocent."

The leader struggled to catch his breath. In light of his fatal injury, no wonder

he was in pain.

Ryo might soon be able to use that cool magic!

Sure, it's an assassin's alchemy. As he said, though, the art itself is sinless.

That convenient justification was enough to rouse his excitement.

"By the way, how adept are you currently at alchemy?"

"Oh, um... I'm good enough to make advanced potions and magic potions..."

"What? You have only reached that level? Still a novice, eh... Which means the path you will tread is a long, *long* one."

"Awww... Please tell me you're joking."

He was disappointed to hear his fantasies of cool magical battles wouldn't be happening anytime soon. As a self-taught alchemist who'd learned in the city, he thought he should have been well above average. However, the leader's much more advanced perspective showed him he was apparently still a beginner.

"Eh, it is what it is. You will find out how far you can go while you are alive... Speaking of, how long did it take you before you were able to make an advanced potion?"

"Uhhh..." Ryo considered. "I'd say a little over six months."

"Six months! A true novice, yet, at that pace, I expect you will improve by leaps and bounds. Do not shirk your education and you will be successful."

The leader tried to sit up then.

"No," Ryo exclaimed, rushing to support him. "You shouldn't move with that wound."

"It matters not, for I am already at death's door. I must hand over the materials to you. Now, help me to the wall in front of the platform where the prince is lying."

With Ryo supporting him, the leader walked to the designated wall, the only one where no traps had appeared. He chanted something in front of it, and a gaping hole measuring two meters square appeared. From there, they

descended twenty steps to a room that looked like a study-cum-library. The leader sat in a chair in front of his desk and took out three black notebooks from a desk drawer.

“Your notes?”

“These two hold the fundamentals. And this one with the gilt edges holds the secret techniques.”

The first two he mentioned were as thick as three college textbooks on Earth. The last one was roughly three times thicker than the first two.

“However, with your current abilities, I would wager the first two are still beyond you... Just try your best and take your time.”

Accepting those words, Ryo opened one of the books on the basics to the first page. Most of the content was incomprehensible to him in the same way the Millennium Prize Problems would be to a liberal arts student... Clearly, the content would take a very long time to understand.

“Here, put them all in that bag over there. It was a gift from His Majesty...”

By now, the leader’s face was deathly pale. Moreover, his eyes were barely open...

“Back then, he said, ‘Well done, Hasan.’ Ah, to be praised by my lord...”

The old man smiled faintly. He was speaking to himself as if he were Hasan-i Sabbah now, so perhaps his mind had started growing cloudy. He may have despised the dynasty itself so much that he wanted to stab the entire lineage with a sword...but ultimately, he also may have admired Alp Arslan, whom he had served in that life.

After a while, however, his expression twisted, and bitter words spilled from his lips.

“He...he is the only one I will never forgive. I will not die until I kill him with my own hands!”

The leader’s body shook with rage and his eyes widened. But he seemed to be looking at something that wasn’t here.

“I cannot die yet... Not until...I kill...him...”

Ryo knew the man's final hour was at hand. He leaned down and spoke into his ear.

"Hasan, don't you remember? You successfully assassinated Nizam al-Mulk."

His words struck the leader like a lightning bolt. Then his expression transformed suddenly to a calm one.

"Ah, yes... I succeeded..."

The man's voice trailed off...and with a look of satisfaction on his face, he breathed his last.



When Ryo and Prince Willie arrived at the site of the attack, almost nothing remained. It seemed someone had collected the people and things. The two decided to head to Wingston, which was both the largest city in the eastern part of the Kingdom and closest to them.

Hopefully, they would be able to rendezvous with Rodrigo, Cohn, and the others. If not, at worst, they could hire a carriage to take the two of them to the royal capital, where they could contact the others.

"No," His Highness promptly said, shaking his head. "We have to find them no matter what. I don't mind if my arrival in the capital is delayed."

"Understood. Let's do that, then." An employer's wishes always come first. Besides, it impressed Ryo to see how much Willie cared for his staff.

The first place they went after arriving in Wingston was the adventurers' guild. Cohn, who had led the adventurers escorting Willie's entourage, was a C-rank adventurer from the Principality of Inverey. He knew that Ryo was an adventurer from the Kingdom, so Cohn might have used the guild as a way to contact him. Unless they intended to hide their identity, adventurers made good use of the guilds.

"Yes, we have a letter addressed to D-rank adventurer Ryo from C-rank adventurer Cohn of the Principality of Inverey," the receptionist informed Ryo after confirming his identity with his guild card. Then she went to a back room and returned with a letter. In it was the name and location of the inn the group

was staying in. And that was how, for the first time in days, Ryo and Willie finally reunited with Cohn, Rodrigo, the other bodyguards, and adventurers.

A few days later, Willie and his entourage left Wingston.

While everything *appeared* the same, a few changes had taken place...

All letters of credit issued by the Monarchy of Joux had been lost during the attack, meaning Prince Willie and Master Rodrigo could no longer freely withdraw money. The state-issued documents would have enabled them to procure local currency from the merchants' guilds in each country...

Therefore, Ryo was currently advancing the necessary expenses for the two men.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, Master Ryo," Prince Willie said for the umpteenth time.

"Please, Your Highness," Ryo said with an air of magnanimity. "Don't worry about it. Once we reach the capital, you'll be able to withdraw funds from Joux's embassy there, right? So we'll be fine. Because as of now, money isn't an issue for me."

Indeed, now that he was in the Kingdom, where he had access to the account holding the funds from selling the magic stones, the world was his oyster! In Aberdeen, the capital of Inverey, he'd been a prisoner of despair due to his lack of funds. But that man was nowhere to be found. In his stead stood a Ryo who brimmed with confidence...



Markdorf, the capital of the Debuhi Empire. That afternoon, Count Hans Kirchhoff, premier of the country, made his report to His Imperial Majesty, Rupert VI.

"Your Majesty, as reported yesterday, it has been confirmed that members of the Sect of Assassins were responsible for the incident in Whitnash."

"I thought as much." Rupert nodded. "But you paid them to carry out the plan we discussed, didn't you?"

“Regarding the eastern part of the Kingdom? Yes, I did. It seems they accepted the Whitnash job for another client. Well, they’re the kind of people who will do anything so long as you pay them... They’ve taken money from the Federation as well. In short...they’re working for both us and them.”

“Busy bastarding bees, aren’t they? In that case, I can’t rightly rake them over the coals like they deserve, eh? I’m angry about the Whitnash incident, but I still need them to continue their work in the eastern part of the Kingdom for us.” Rupert took a sip of his black tea.

“It is as you say. That is why, as I suggested yesterday, I sent someone to their base in the village of Aban to confer directly with the Old Man of the Mountain.”

“Yes, you did. One way or another, we shall drag the truth out of him. They must have been surprised we knew their headquarters’s location, eh?”

Hans hesitated for some reason, which was extremely unusual.

“What is it?” the emperor prompted him.

“Well,” Hans answered, looking determined. “It’s about the village. It was completely frozen.”

“What?!”

“All of Aban was frozen.”

Rupert said nothing for five very long seconds. Then, after finishing the rest of his tea, he spoke in a slow, measured tone:

“It must have been a natural disaster or the work of some unknown monster... If neither of those, then it’s possible a magician who may as well be a monster is responsible... Ah. Didn’t Oscar suffer defeat at the hands of one such magician?”

Hans flinched in shock. “Surely you don’t mean to say this magician is capable of freezing an *entire village*...?”

“Hmph. Were he to fly into a rage, even Oscar is capable of razing a town or two to the ground with his hellfire. What happened in Aban is merely the ice version. Even so...I’m surprised this magician is so powerful. I should have

listened more seriously to Oscar's report. I suppose that's my mistake," Rupert said, trailing off into a mutter so quiet Hans barely caught his words.

"Hans, investigate that water magician at once. Inform the Imperial Magic Division of what you've learned thus far and ask Oscar everything he knows about the man. You have your orders, now carry them out."

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty."

Epilogue

Today in the white realm, Fake Michael was in charge of managing several worlds. He held the usual stone tablet in his hands.

“Goodness gracious... So many entanglements with such unmanageable people. Though you’ve survived until now, will you be all right, Dominus Ryo Mihara? As for your friend, Abel...the threads of fate that bind him...can’t be untangled... Fascinating. Then there’s the whole ‘Red Demon Lord’ appellation... You’re a water magician, but instead of blue, people have given you the color red, like water stained by blood. For your sake though, I hope neither of those things come to pass.”

Fake Michael uttered such disturbing words with a cheerful smile... Perhaps because his existence was so far removed from most humans?

“Oh, right, you’re on your way to the royal capital, hm? Your close friend Abel is there too. And what do we have here? The Hero of the West...makes his way there as well. All these forces in the royal capital... Ah...! I sense trouble on the horizon. Haaa, through no fault of your own, your path will always lead you to such situations, Dominus Ryo Mihara... I encounter such individuals occasionally, but I didn’t expect you to be one of them. Good luck. You’ll need it...”

The Fire Magician III: Marchioness Kulkova

A year had passed since Oscar and the party Shooting Spree defeated the emperor tiger. Though the Kingdom emerged triumphant in the Great War, it, along with the Federation, didn't come out unscathed. The conflict had left both sides deeply scarred. Conversely, the Empire experienced a wave of prosperity because it had supplied goods to both nations.

In that time, Oscar turned fifteen years old and moved his base of operations from the dukedom of Moorgrund in the Empire's southeast to the imperial capital of Markdorf.

"A mission to escort a marchioness..." Oscar murmured.

The guild master of the Markdorf adventurers' guild sat across from him in his office. Over seventy years old, the man was a former healer.

Worship of the Goddess of Light represented the only remaining religion in the Central Provinces, and the main religious organization dedicated to her, the Temple of the Goddess of Light, held a great deal of power everywhere. Except the Empire, where, unusually enough, it didn't have much power due to the existence of the healer profession.

Whether adventurer or civilian, clerics from branches of the Temple outside the Empire healed injuries and illnesses. This inevitably meant the organization garnered a great deal of respect and held tremendous power behind the scenes. However, the Empire cultivated people known as healers, who mended wounds and cured illnesses. As a result, the Temple's hold on this part of the Central Provinces was weak.

Of course, priests and priestesses existed in the Empire and among adventuring parties, but they weren't ubiquitous, so healers like Moritz were in charge of healing during adventuring activities.

"You remember that hunt a while back in the marquessate of Kulkova? The one where you took down that herd of greater boars? Apparently, she took a

liking to you then.”

“Ah...”

The marchioness herself had fired arrows on horseback during the hunt. An incredibly active woman, she had sung Oscar’s praises concerning his physical and magical skills. Even he knew how favorably she thought of him.

The marquessate of Kulkova was known as one of the wealthiest territories in the Empire, with many industries under development there. It was also home to the only scholarly city in the Empire. Rumors abounded of a great deal of highly classified research officially approved by the imperial family being conducted there.

Marchioness Kulkova was a well-educated, beautiful woman whose husband, the marquess, had passed away. They’d had no children. In many ways, she was considered a well-known member of the imperial elite.

“The marchioness herself requested you by name, so you can expect that both the reward and evaluation will be top-tier. Most importantly, you’ll be in a position that will make it easy for you to gather the *information* you seek.”

“A salon, huh?”

Generally speaking, a salon was a gathering hosted by a woman of high social status where erudite individuals could discuss all sorts of topics. On Earth, salons began in France in the early 1600s, a so-called “world of high society separate from the royal court.” The social exchange—who was invited to whose salon, who was no longer receiving invitations, and so on—became such a powerful mainstay of aristocratic life that it became a position of great social status to preside over an influential salon.

However, salons still weren’t common in the Central Provinces. Marchioness Kulkova invited not only the aristocrats to her salons, but also scholars, artists, wealthy merchants, and folks from all sorts of professional and personal backgrounds. In short, myriad people came together and mingled at her gatherings.

On the other hand, her events weren’t well received by some of the great houses, who valued prestige above all else. In fact, none of them were ever

invited to her salons.

“You’re trying to find a lead, aren’t you? On that scarred man—Boskona, yes?”

After Moritz, curious about the boy who’d become a C-rank adventurer by fifteen, had asked him what drove him, Oscar revealed everything. He told him about his pursuit of Boskona, who had killed his mother and father as well as the elder he’d come to love as a parent. He hadn’t said these things to gain sympathy, but to make it easier to acquire information. Yet both sadness and compassion had filled Moritz’s expression at the time.

Because to the guild master, the fifteen-year-old boy was like a grandson to him. To see someone so young who had a future be so utterly consumed by revenge was disheartening from the perspective of an old man who had experienced life. Even worse, Moritz was helpless to do anything about it.

“Give up on revenge,” he might have said. Or, “You’ll gain nothing, even if you succeed, by exacting revenge.” Or even, “Do you think your family would be proud knowing you’re on this vengeful path?” Moritz knew, however, that any of these thoughts were pointless to someone so hellbent on revenge. Such words wouldn’t free hearts so embroiled in emotion. Only an experience that made them forget all thoughts of vengeance or the moment they successfully fulfilled their obsession could truly liberate them. Moritz knew this truth well.

Nonetheless, ever since settling in the imperial capital, Oscar had grown more expressive. The full range of human emotion had returned to his face. At least to a larger extent than before. Compared to other boys and girls his age, his facial expressions were still limited. Still, there were times when it seemed like he’d recovered his spirit, such as when he interacted with the members of Shooting Spree.

“The marchioness has most definitely distanced herself from national politics. She doesn’t have any children nor does she intend to adopt any, by her own assertion. She’s even declared that after her death, the imperial family will be entrusted with the future of the marquess’s family line. However...her determination to stay away from politics is precisely why so much information winds up on her proverbial doorstep.”

Moritz paused meaningfully then before continuing.

“The marchioness likes to spend half the year in the capital and the other half in the marquessate. You helped her with the greater boar hunt when she was in residence at her estate in the latter. She arrived in the capital a few days ago and would like *you* to be her escort for the duration of her stay here. In other words, yes, she will be hosting a salon or two. What do you say?”

Oscar considered his proposal for a moment. “Understood. I accept the job.”

With all sorts of thoughts running through his mind, Oscar agreed.



“Ah, Oscar, you’re here.”

“My lady, thank you for your patronage on this...”

“No, no formalities. It isn’t as if we’re strangers. Right then, our first order of business for the day is the dining hall.”

“As you wish...?”

She hadn’t even given him the chance to finish greeting her before inviting him straightaway to the dining room.

The fifteen-year-old boy was now one hundred and seventy centimeters tall, an acceptable height for someone his age. As far as his build—well, you could say it was average. Though he seemed thin on the surface, touching him would reveal a solid, muscular frame.

Yet the marchioness was taller than him. Not by much, but tall enough for her to be considered tall for a woman. She was in her late twenties with a, shall we say, *particularly* attractive figure sure to draw men’s eyes, her trim waist set off by the *exceptionally* voluptuous proportions of the rest of her body.

Having said that, Oscar had yet to show an interest in such matters, so he wasn’t the least bit tempted by her. As for the marchioness herself, she didn’t see him as a man either. Depending on the circumstances, she either thought of him as a much younger brother or a son. After all, they’d had many opportunities to get to know each other during his time on the marquessate.

Both of them sat down when they arrived in the dining hall. Without a

moment's delay, the staff served them cake and coffee.

"My lady, this is..."

He was just an adventurer, one who had accepted her employment request to act as her escort. For a commoner like him to sit at the same table as his employer and take part in a light repast to boot was... Well, Oscar couldn't help but voice his concerns out loud.

"It's fine. I'll allow it."

Well, when someone of the marchioness's station said so, he couldn't refuse, could he?

Resigned, he decided to enjoy the cake and coffee. She did too, of course. While she ate, she observed his mannerism closely. Then, with a nod, she spoke.

"You do indeed carry yourself with such polish, Oscar. I'd thought as much back on the estate, but your table manners in particular are perfect. The fact that your style of etiquette is old-fashioned makes it even better, in my opinion. Without getting caught up in modern trends, your mastery of the fundamentals shines through in your refined carriage."

"You honor me with your praise."

Oscar bowed his head in both thanks and embarrassment at the marchioness's raving compliments. It was, of course, all thanks to the education the elder had drilled in him from the age of six to ten. He didn't know if the man had ever considered the possibility of Oscar dining with nobility, but he *had* said, "Should you find yourself sharing a table with the emperor, you must always behave in such a way that others can't find fault with you."

The elder had never reprimanded them harshly. Nevertheless, he had been exacting in his instruction of both Oscar and his childhood friend, Cohn. The baron had been determined to instill in them the proper way to act without embarrassing themselves, whether they were in front of aristocrats or if they managed to achieve the status of nobility themselves. He had understood the importance of educating others starting at a young age.

It was a given that people could learn later in their life, and that included

things like table manners. But the effort required was vastly different. A child could learn something new in twenty seconds while the same topic could take an adult two years to grasp... Sometimes, the gulf could be this wide. Regardless of whether it was due to the flexibility of the human brain or the rigidity that sets in as we accumulate knowledge—or even if something else entirely, such as an overabundance of experience—one thing was certain: learning new things was much easier when you were young. Everyone knew this.

The marchioness nodded. “Your comportment is one of the reasons I specifically wanted you for the escort job, Oscar. My knights are well-versed in the ways of war, wisdom, and culture because I refuse to accept it any other way. And yet...no one can call a single one of those men handsome.”

It went without saying that all of her knights were ruggedly built men.

“That means I can’t have them in attendance during my salons, never mind having them escort me when I visit other nobles in their homes. It’s all well and good for them to escort me in my coach, but good grief do they stand out like a sore thumb in any other setting.”

The marchioness sighed softly then. Clearly, such an experience had posed quite the challenge for her until now.

“If only I had women among my knights... Alas, you know what they say about wishes and coin.”

Yes, that existed only in fairy tales.

“But if I take *you* along, Oscar, you wouldn’t stand out, at least not in a bad way. Norbert actually suggested this idea.”

“Your knight commander did?”

This was unexpected news for Oscar. Certainly, the late marquess’s knights were all fine people, as one would expect from such a group employed by the aristocracy. But a knight was still a knight and, as such, he must believe that his supreme role is to protect his master with his own life...which is exactly why he’d never let another usurp it from him. Or so Oscar had assumed.

So to learn that a knight commander himself had recommended Oscar was

surprising to say the least...

“Norbert comes from a long line of knights who’ve served the marquess’s family for generations. This means he’s quite strict when it comes to deportment...and he highly commended *yours*, Oscar.”

“I... I’m grateful for his consideration.”

“He’s always coming up with new ways to correct his subordinates’ impoliteness, which is why he suggested hiring you while we’re in the imperial capital. By showing them how you carry yourself, Oscar, he’s hoping to train them even more in the art of etiquette.” The marchioness smiled faintly.

Meanwhile, Oscar exhaled quietly. Of all the things in the world, he definitely hadn’t imagined he would ever end up as an example of manners for knights to model themselves after... But...

“Wherever he is, I’m sure the elder who taught you all of that would be delighted to see his teachings carried on like this.”

It made Oscar genuinely happy to hear her say that.

Oscar moved into the marchioness’s capital residence immediately. She also had new clothes tailored for him since his duties involved accompanying her whenever she left the grounds. He always ate his meals with her and attended on her during her salons.

Whenever she was on the grounds, he could do as he pleased. However, since he didn’t know if she would suddenly leave on business, he spent his time within her home itself. This became Oscar’s life for the time being.

The marchioness promised to prioritize gathering information on the “scarred man” he sought in exchange for forcing these various inconveniences on him. She also gave him free rein over the on-site smithy.

“The smithy...?” he asked.

“Indeed. We had a blacksmith on staff until two years ago, one who had served the marquess’s household for a long time. Sadly, old age took him... No one has used it since.”

It sounded familiar to him...just like at the elder's estate...

I wonder if it's normal for nobles to hire blacksmiths?

Despite the question lingering in his mind, Oscar had been smithing occasionally over the past few years, refreshing the skills he learned long ago under the supervision of local blacksmiths in the present. He had started up again in Hemleben and continued after moving to the imperial capital.

Naturally, the reason the marchioness even brought up the subject was because she knew about his past, including his skill at the forge. Oscar now had time to be alone and face only the hammer and iron. And he certainly didn't hate those hours.

Only the most cultured were invited to the marchioness's salons. Since attendance was by invitation only, there were no hostiles. At each occasion, around twenty people in total gathered and conversed like they were enjoying a tea party, including a few nobles (both men and women), two merchants, three artists and three alchemists. She never set a specific theme or anything of the sort. The rotation of various artists and alchemists meant conversations often revolved around their specialties. Put in other words, the nobles and merchants invited to her salons were well-educated enough to join discussions on such a wide array of topics.

Oscar didn't know much about the arts or alchemy. Though he had been under the elder's tutelage, his curriculum was strictly the practical kind related to the aristocracy. While his carriage was extremely refined even among nobles, his level of education was not on par with theirs.

He usually sat there quietly and listened during her salons. Simply nodding in response could make others uncomfortable. They may wonder if you're actually listening. Using certain remarks—such as “Fascinating, fascinating,” “Ah, I see,” and “Then, might I presume to draw the following conclusion”?—can ease the other person's worries and keep them happily talking. Remember, the important thing is to nod and comment appropriately throughout a conversation.

By doing this, Oscar made a positive impression on the salon's attendees and

found his own intellectual horizons expanded through his contact with a variety of knowledge in a variety of fields. After all, the marchioness's salons were, without a doubt, a gathering of the Empire's first-rate minds.



There were nobles in the Empire who loathed Marchioness Kulkova. No matter how wonderful a person she was, or how many people admired her, none of it made a difference to them. The extent of her wealth roused both jealousy and envy...and the desire to take it away from her. Human nature was a terrifying thing.

"Then you think it likely they'll grant permission to open a new mine? Truly?"

"Yes. The information came directly from a bureaucrat in the Department of Development, Father."

They spoke in the capital residence of Count Latimore.

"That's not good. Do they have any idea how much money I spent ensuring that iron mine was recognized as our property...?! It will all go to waste now!"

"According to the bureaucrat, if things continue as they are, the applications submitted by Marchioness Kulkova for the ownership certificate and development permit will definitely be approved within the next month."

"Hrrrm..."

Count Latimore found himself panicking at this information. His son had just told him of the discovery of a new iron deposit in the marquessate of Kulkova, which bordered his own dominion... Although most of the ore was situated within Kulkova's marquessate, it was certainly possible that the deposits extended into Latimore's county. Therefore, he should be the rightful owner—or so the count thought.

Iron ore, a vital part of the iron supply chain, was in high demand throughout the Empire and the rest of the Central Provinces. Of course, gold and silver mines were valuable as well, but those production volumes were low to begin with. Moreover, when those resources were discovered within the Empire, they automatically became the property of the imperial family...

In contrast, iron was plentiful, so deposits almost always became the property of the noble whose territory they were found in. Unforeseen circumstances notwithstanding, this was especially true if the noble in question was a marquess or count... However, resources in territorial borders presented a problem, as it did in this case. All things considered, it wasn't completely unreasonable for the count to claim mining rights...

"Evidently, the approval this time depends on the emperor himself."

"Hm... Again with this farce..."

His Imperial Majesty, Rupert VI, had crushed many noble houses since his accession to the throne. While the discord between aristocrats and previous emperors had always run deep, the loss of status and confiscation of property under Rupert's reign was exponentially harsher. Of course, nobles had notions of rebellion—but those remained mere notions. None could take action. Why? Because of the emperor's overwhelming military might.

Ultimately, whether or not one's demands are met depended on whether or not one had the thing called "power." It could be military power, economic power, or even diplomatic strategy. The negotiating table was nothing more than a flat surface on which to sign the final agreement; nothing was ever truly decided through "discussion." True negotiations, where both sides vehemently argue for their own, were extremely rare and occurred only when "power" was equal.

And the emperor had enormous military power. On top of that, he had access to economic power in the form of enormous wealth. He even had an organization called the Shadow Regiment to carry out various schemes on his behalf...

So who would dare to defy such an entity...?

"The marchioness has distanced herself from politics and shown her clear support for the emperor. From his standpoint, if the matter of ownership is between us and the Kulkova line, then..."

"Indeed, he'll award jurisdiction to her." Count Latimore acknowledged this possibility with a bitter look on his face.

“However, the marchioness is a widow with no children.”

“Hm?”

The count found himself unable to follow his son’s sudden train of thought. After all, everyone knew the marquess had passed away without any heirs.

“According to imperial law, if the head of a family dies without a designated successor, he or she is to relinquish rights to any property of disputed ownership.”

“In other words...if the marchioness dies... Ahem, if something were to happen to her, the property rights to the mine in question wouldn’t go to the marquessate of Kulkova.”

“Correct. Needless to say, ownership would then come to us, the house of Latimore.”

The count smirked then. “It’s only natural for a marchioness to bedeck herself in jewels and such... Ergo, it’s only natural that bandits might target her. Wouldn’t you agree, my boy?”

“Of course, my lord. Even in the imperial capital, you never know what will happen at night, regardless of what might happen during the day.”

Father and son cackled derisively.

In any era and in any world, there were people beyond salvation. Whatever happened to them, they got what they deserved. But it was a terrible thing for those caught in the middle.

And Oscar wound up being one of those unfortunate bystanders.



“It’s grown so late,” the marchioness grumbled inside the carriage.

She had gone to visit an ailing friend of hers, a viscountess, and they were now on the way home. She and Oscar were inside the vehicle while four of her knights escorted it from outside on horseback. The usual formation for any trips she took within the imperial capital.

“I’m surprised by how well the viscountess looked, considering what we heard of her condition before your visit.”

“Agreed. I suppose her illness mustn’t have been all that serious given her quick recovery.”

The marchioness had been told the viscountess had less than a month to live. Prepared for the worst, she’d been shocked by the woman’s relatively healthy complexion. It was almost anticlimactic. Otherwise, the marchioness would never have left her estate in the evening.

“Not many people around this time of night even in the capital, hm?”

It must have been pure coincidence that her words preceded what happened next...

Whoosh. Neeigh. Arrows suddenly flew out of nowhere and hit the knights’ horses. The knights tumbled to the ground. The marchioness and Oscar heard the sounds even from inside the coach.

“What in bloody hell?!” she shouted.

Oscar looked out the window and spotted a man standing on a roof holding a bow.

“Piercing Fire.”

The flame arrow, burning white and thinner than ever, pierced the man’s forehead. It drilled through his skull without any resistance, flew out the back of his head, and disappeared. The man slipped from the roof and crashed to the ground.

“There’s one more. Piercing Fire.”

A second man stood on another roof and he met the same fate as the first.

“Shit! Take them down!”

The leader of the villains obviously hadn’t anticipated his archers being defeated so easily because there was a hint of panic in his voice as he ordered a direct assault on the carriage. Five bandits rushed out from the side of the road and began attacking the vehicle. There were more of them than the marchioness’s knights...but...

“Norbert, don’t kill them all. Leave two alive as captives.”

Her calm, quiet voice pierced through the night. The four elite knights were led by Norbert himself, the commander of her order. She gave the order knowing that they wouldn’t be outmaneuvered by the five outlaws.

As for Oscar, he had already pulled back. With his full attention focused on detecting other archers or long-range magical attacks, he kept himself ready to protect the marchioness inside the carriage.

The fight was a short but violent one. After it ended, the bandit leader who had given the signal earlier and one other were rendered unconscious and captured.

“Hm...the best way I can describe what I’m feeling now is...*unfulfilled*,” the marchioness muttered, her expression dissatisfied.

Oscar said nothing. Privately, he agreed with her, but he was just glad they’d managed to foil the ambush.

“Oh, right, Oscar.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“That. That right there, the ‘my lady’ business.”

“I’m sorry?”

She pointed her right index finger up and continued.

“You may call me Maria.”

“I’m...sorry?”

“Well, well, congratulations, Oscar,” said Knight Commander Norbert.

“Um... I don’t...understand...”

Oscar was completely baffled.

“My knights, my household staff, even my vassals all call me Maria, since that is my given name. But I was sorely remiss in telling you to do the same, Oscar, which is why you always address me so formally as ‘my lady’ and such, yes?”

“That’s correct.”

“Henceforth, then, I’d like for you to call me Maria. It may be difficult for you in official settings, but feel free to use my name in all others, including the salons.”

“U-Understood... Lady Maria.”

Marchioness Kulkova nodded in satisfaction at his response. Norbert, who’d been watching the byplay, also nodded, happily at that, because now Oscar was one of them now both in name and substance.

“Norbert, take the two prisoners back and interrogate them.”

“Will do.”

That was how the two bandits ended up being interrogated in one of the annexes in her capital estate.

The next morning.

“Lady Maria, I’m here to report regarding last night’s incident with the outlaws.”

“Very good. Speak,” the marchioness replied to Knight Commander Norbert while sipping on her after-breakfast coffee.

“It didn’t take them long to spill their guts. Count Latimore was apparently the one who paid them.”

“I suspected as much... What bothers me is how easily they revealed their employer’s identity. *Too* easily,” Maria said with a small shake of her head.

It was normal for a request for an attack on a noble to go through a number of intermediaries, so that not only third parties but also those who accepted the job didn’t know who made the request. Yet their attackers knew who had hired them...

“Perhaps they secretly followed the trail back to the original employer...?”

“Hmmm... I suppose that *is* one way to discover the truth...”

Then Maria started kneading her temples. She might have been suffering

from a headache induced by the knowledge of the ill-planned raid and its equally ill-prepared client.

“If I recall, any commotions in the imperial capital are to be reported somewhere, right?”

“Yes, to the city garrison.” Norbert answered her question.

Any sort of dispute or disturbance was to be reported to any of the garrison’s stations located throughout the city. This was the law for *everyone*, noble and commoner alike. Afterward, depending on the nobles involved in the incident, the House of Peers, the Privy Council, or the imperial court itself might come into play.

“Norbert, can I ask you to report to them by noon as my proxy? Take the two you captured with you.”

“Understood.”



Somewhere in the imperial capital.

“Well, that went poorly.”

“Is that all Count Latimore is capable of? What a disappointment...”

“Bloody hell, he should have been able to do more. He’s not normally so...incompetent.” The duke’s words went beyond anger and bitterness, leaving behind only a sense of deep dismay. “He could have had her injured or locked up somewhere... There were so many methods at his disposal. For example, hire the Sect to poison her... Useless fool.”

The duke’s aide smiled ruefully at his master’s complaints before remarking, “There’s nothing more we can do about this since Count Latimore was unaware of our designs on her, Your Grace.”

“Bloody right he wasn’t. The most frightening thing is an incompetent ally. If we’d aligned ourselves with that imbecile, all our plans, no matter how perfect, would have failed.”

The duke sighed heavily and continued.

“We have no choice now except to execute that plan, eh...”

His mutter was so quiet not even his aide, standing right next to him, heard it.

The Fire Magician III: Ambush

“A celebration to unveil Marquess Meusel’s newly constructed villa?”

Marchioness Maria Kulkova tilted her head thoughtfully after reading through the letter sent to her. Her steward and head of staff, Eckhart, nodded politely in response. “Indeed.”

Lord Meusel was one of the five most powerful people in the Empire and descended from a great noble house. He was neither a supporter nor an opponent of the emperor. His high rank and neutral stance allowed him to maintain the perfect distance from politics and build relationships with many other aristocrats. Frankly speaking though, his connection to the Kulkova line was weak at best.

Due to her own desire to avoid deep connections with imperial aristocrats, particularly the great houses, Maria wasn’t particularly close to Meusel. Of course, she greeted him perfunctorily at official functions held by the imperial family. However...put in other words, that was all her relationship with the marquess amounted to.

So in light of all this, why would the man invite her to his party?

“Everyone knows about the grand villa Marquess Meusel has been building in the capital’s suburbs.”

“Hm, including me.”

“Rumor has it that he’ll be dedicating the structure to the imperial family and I heard His Imperial Majesty himself will be in attendance at the unveiling.”

“Interesting... I begin to see why he invited one like me whom he wouldn’t interact with under normal circumstances. He wants to show off the emperor to as many nobles as possible.”

Maria chuckled in amusement. It wasn’t as if she hated the lord in question. She simply didn’t wish to deal with the powerful nobles at the center of the

Empire's politics, and that included the marquess of Meusel. Never mind that the bloodline of Kulkova was also one of the most eminent in the Empire in terms of wealth and rank...

That afternoon, she hosted a smaller-than-usual salon at her manse in the capital. Normally, there were at least fifteen people in attendance, give or take a few. But today, only two noblewomen had been invited. It was less a salon and more an intimate get-together.

After the three of them chatted for some time, Maria broached the topic on her mind.

"I heard His Majesty will be gracing Lord Meusel's party for the unveiling of his villa?"

"Always the first to hear what's going through the grapevine. Why am I not surprised, Maria?" answered Lady Berta Ilkner, wife of the Viscount Schondra. Though young and lively, she was nevertheless quite educated and Maria counted the affable woman as one of her close friends.

"Yes, the rumor that Meusel is presenting the villa as a gift to the imperial family seems to be true. The emperor's visit for that purpose has also been finalized. Since this information leaked, many aristocrats have been vying for entry into the party through their various connections."

"We've received many such requests ourselves," Ella Kettler, wife of Baron Reuter, remarked in her soft voice even as she sighed.

"That's because your husband is an imperial secretary, Ella. I'm sure people are reaching out to you since Lord Meusel used to be the chief secretary," Berta mused with a firm nod.

"I suppose you're right... But contrary to expectations, we *don't* have that kind of power." Ella sighed quietly again.

"Aha ha ha..." Berta let out a strained chuckle.

Maria watched their exchange with a smile. She got on well with both of them and considered both women her dear friends. That was why she sometimes held tea parties with them like this just to chat or invited them over to ask their

advice on various topics.



Oscar's impression of the villa was more luxurious than imposing. Perhaps that had something to do with the three-story stone structure's exquisite design and many, many windows. It was undeniably beautiful. He was also stunned by its sheer size.

"It's...so big."

"Indeed. I, too, had heard as much, but I never imagined it would be this large..."

Oscar wasn't the only one though. The enormity of the building surprised Maria as well. Evidently, it was massive even from a noble's frame of reference.

"Lady Maria, why is Lord Meusel gifting this to the imperial family? He should just use it himself."

Maria smiled, charmed by his artless question.

"That would be the normal thing to do, wouldn't it, Oscar? But, how shall I say this... He wishes to flaunt his own power and influence. Or...wants to show the imperial family not to underestimate him... Truth be told, I can understand his reasoning."

"Is that how it is..."

Oscar felt like he would never understand even if he spent his whole life trying to...

"Right then, shall we head inside? Oscar, be a dear and escort me."

"Yes, Lady Maria."

An unveiling event... Essentially, a party where men escorted the woman upon arrival because it was good manners. Of course, it went without saying who held the power, considering the women "allowed" the men to escort them. Men were nothing more than women's servants.

Well aware of this, Oscar escorted the marchioness like he was the picture

frame displaying the beauty of a flower. His attitude showed in his deportment. As a result, Maria looked exceptionally lovely to those around her.

“Thank you for coming, Lady Kulkova.”

“Thank you so very much for having me, Lord Meusel.”

The marquess himself stood at the entrance to the villa, welcoming his arriving guests. It was unusual for a man of his rank to be part of the reception line. But Meusel was a nobleman who enjoyed socializing with others instead of being tucked away inside in some bombastic fashion.

Of course, that didn't necessarily mean he was a good person...because aristocrats of great houses who were good people couldn't survive in the Empire. He was more cunning than most and didn't balk at utilizing any number of tricks to achieve his goals. Even so...if someone was to describe him, they'd remark, “I daresay he's the friendly type.”

Maria spent a few minutes complimenting his beautiful villa when she saw the next guest enter.

“Oh, His Grace is here. I shall excuse myself now.”

Taking her words as his cue, Oscar escorted her inside the building.

After seeing her off, Marquess Meusel greeted the newcomer—Duke Moorgrund, a member of one of the most prestigious noble houses in the Empire.

The hall Maria and Oscar entered was so spacious it could be called a dance hall. It was an open space that reached all the way up to the second floor, with several glittering chandeliers hanging from the high, vaulted ceiling.

“Oscar, look. A gryphon and a behemoth are having at it,” Maria murmured to Oscar. She was describing Marquess Meusel and Duke Moorgrund's seemingly pleasant conversation by comparing it to a confrontation between legendary creatures.

“They're not on good terms?”

“Got it in one,” Maria answered him with a slight smile before continuing.

“Both are powerful men of great houses, each leading his own burgeoning faction of aristos. Either will take any opportunity to poach a notable noble from the other’s camp.”

“If one is a gryphon and the other a behemoth, then that makes the emperor...”

“Mmm...a dragon, I would say.”

“I see...”

Evidently, the emperor was in a class of his own, higher than them both... Of course, since these were all legendary beings, their strength couldn’t be compared. But in Oscar’s mind, a dragon was the most powerful.

“Well, well, His Majesty himself graces us with his presence.”

The arrival of a conspicuously large carriage and a group of imperial guards prompted her remark.

Oscar felt an overwhelming sense of presence emanating from the emperor the first time he saw him. No one could look away from the man, but his imperious aura also made it difficult to approach him. Oscar had never before experienced something with both of these sensations. Like a moth drawn to a fire at night...it’s attracted to the flames, but when it gets too close, it burns itself.

Since this was only an unveiling of the villa and the emperor was traveling incognito, there was naturally no formal announcement or audience. However, there was none here who didn’t know Rupert VI’s face, so everyone took the initiative to greet him. The emperor himself returned their greetings with a faint smile.

It wasn’t long before the man spotted Maria. When he did, his eyes widened just a bit and he walked quickly over to her.

“Maria, what a surprise. It’s been much too long.”

“Your Majesty, you’re looking well.”

Curtsying, Maria greeted him elegantly. From her right, Oscar bowed formally.

“When was the last time we met... I think once, after her death?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Her Majesty treated me well during her lifetime.”

“I remember how happily she spoke of you growing up. That does bring back memories, eh? Speaking of, the development of the marquessate seems rather remarkable. I hear it’s transformed into an academic powerhouse where anyone can learn, and talented people from all over the Empire gather there.”

“All thanks to the aid of the imperial family.”

“We did what we could for the development of a certain ship. Think nothing of it.”

Rupert smiled at Maria then fixed his attention on Oscar, who stood stiffly behind her.

“Interesting... Impeccable manners for a bodyguard. Where did you find him? At one of those salons?” Rupert asked as he surveyed Oscar, who waited quietly, his posture graceful and dignified.

A master was judged by those at his side... That would never change, no matter the era or world.

“No, he’s an adventurer and his name is Oscar. He helped me with a problem at the marquessate in the past. Contrary to appearances, he’s actually a skilled C-rank adventurer.”

“Even though he’s so young? How old are you, lad?”

“I turned fifteen this year, Your Majesty.”

“C-rank at the age of fifteen?! Incredible! Not to mention your conduct... I expected no less of Maria’s discerning eye.”

“Thank you for your praise...”

At that point, Rupert pressed a hand to his jaw and lapsed into a thoughtful silence. A few moments later, he spoke again.

“Maria, it doesn’t have to be right away, but could you let Fiona experience one of your salons in the near future?”

“Princess Fiona?”

The princess was nine years old. Rupert's youngest daughter and the eleventh imperial princess. She was also the last child Frederica, his consort, had birthed before passing away shortly after.

Even in this world with spells like Heal and Cure, which were considered miraculous healing magics, some people still died young... And one of them was his first empress.

"Fiona knows nothing of Frederica's temperament. You, Maria, are her last disciple...at least that's how I would describe you. Ergo, I think Fiona may gain something by meeting you. At any rate, the girl has given her undivided attention to the way of the sword and acts nothing like, well, a *girl*. Of course, that isn't a problem in itself. Since...I decided I'd let her do whatever she wants and *only* what she wants."

Rupert's expression wasn't that of an emperor but of a father. Princess Fiona was already famous for her love of the sword.

Maria nodded. "I understand, as I too was a hoyden in my younger days... So perhaps Her Highness and I may have more in common than you think. However, are you certain about allowing her to attend my salons? Things might become complicated for you *and* her..."

"Yes, I am. I'll crush anyone who even thinks of harming her. Including those who dare to complain. As I said though, she won't be participating right away. She can start after her tenth birthday, so consider the idea until then, would you?"

"Understood, Your Majesty."

Then it happened. The ground shook violently. A moment later, a creaking sound came from above. When Oscar looked up...he saw the villa collapsing.

When people are forced into a situation where they have to prepare for death, their thinking accelerates. It's like they enter a sort of "zone." Of course, this phenomenon isn't unique to Phi, as it's common to humans on Earth too.

Apparently, top athletes can enter this "zone" consciously... But so can ordinary folks faced with death-defying situations. Although your thoughts

accelerate and time feels like it's passing more slowly, your own body's movements aren't actually speeding up. The body moves like it always does; only the mind is thinking faster.

To put it more concretely, you instantly understand the situation you're in. You understand why you're about to die and can thus figure out how to escape from such circumstances.

Some people arrive at the answer right away. Others think about it while asking themselves questions like, "This won't work. That won't work either. Maybe this...?" It's different for each person. But for them all, their thinking accelerates.

Oscar's mind was also moving at a rapid clip. No matter how he looked at it, he'd be crushed to death by the falling roof. Either he ran outside immediately or... No, he wouldn't make it in time. What if he deployed a Physical Barrier...? That might work, but if the third floor and the ceiling caved in too, the weight would be too heavy to bear and it would crush him anyway.

Should he incinerate the rubble with his fire magic...? That would take a long time and the building was much too large to burn before it fell completely. What he needed was a way to melt it instantly...a spell that would make it evaporate the second it came into contact with the villa...

"Piercing Fire, scatter, serial."

Piercing Fire was an extremely hot, plasma-like state, reaching just under one hundred million degrees Celsius...enough to vaporize most things in an instant. Normally, he used it like an extremely thin needle. This time, however, he fired it over as wide an area as possible. If its power decreased as it spread, then he would just fire in rapid succession!

Each time a flame arrow made impact, it created eye-scorching light. This happened again and again as he burned away the third-story section of the villa falling down. It was as if the sun itself had manifested on the ground...and the scene could likely be witnessed from a distance.

Time-wise, only five seconds had passed.

“Ngh.”

Oscar unconsciously dropped to one knee after it all ended.

“Oscar!” Maria shouted and rushed to his side.

“I’m fine. Just used too much of my mana. Are you hurt, Lady Maria?”

“No. I’m all right. His Majesty is too. No one near the center of the hall was injured.”

While she spoke, Maria surveyed the edge of the hall and the area outside the building. Things were in a dire state. This main part of the hall may well have looked the same if not for Oscar and the thought chilled her blood.

Oscar’s gaze followed hers as he took stock of the situation.

“My power was only enough to protect this section...”

“Stop right there. You did well, Oscar. Thank you for saving our lives,” Emperor Rupert said gratefully.

Unfortunately, the chaos continued unabated.

“Gaaahhh!!!”

“You bastards, what... Ngh!”

They heard these voices coming from outside the villa.

“Looks like it isn’t over yet,” Rupert murmured.

Then the doors burst open and windows shattered as the bandits stormed inside.

“This is revenge for our homeland!”

With that shout, the outlaws attacked the nobles in the villa. Though the guests in the middle of the hall were unharmed, the same couldn’t be said of those by the doors. Many of them were injured, so it was inevitable that they were unable to fight off the intruders in their weakened state.

“Homeland?” Rupert muttered quietly.

“Your Majesty, the crest on their cloaks is that of the Principality of Monti.”

“Ah, it all makes sense now.”

Rupert nodded in understanding after Maria’s comment.

“What’s that?”

Oscar was the only one out of the three who didn’t understand.

“A country our empire annexed three years ago. You’d be surprised how common it is for the citizens of former states to come seeking vengeance.”

“Oh...”

“Only natural when your homeland has been destroyed. I just wish they would expend those passions for the benefit of the Empire... Alas, it isn’t so easy. A pesky thing called emotions always complicates human affairs, you see. Sometimes, we’re lucky enough to gain new allies for the Empire from those we conquer, but more often than not, we’re saddled with avengers like these. It can’t be helped.”

A hint of sadness lurked in Rupert’s expression. Even since his ascension to the throne, the Empire had occupied over a dozen countries, both large and small, by military force. It had also annexed an equal number of countries without military force.

Of course, the newly occupied territories were treated in the same manner as those already part of the Empire. There was no discrimination in law, taxation, or anything else. But that wasn’t the problem for those who served their former sovereign nations.

It wasn’t about logic. Whether to pay tribute to those who’d fought and fallen, overcome their regrets, or out of sheer desperation. Some were compelled to fight for a variety of reasons...because that was what happened when a country was destroyed.

Rupert understood all this. He knew it was unavoidable that such people existed. And that it was a kind of rite of passage.

“Still, none of that means we take this lying down.”

With those blunt words, he unsheathed the sword hanging from his waist. Then he cut down the closest insurgent from Monti, confiscated the man’s

blade, and tossed it to Maria.

“Maria, use that.”

“Yes, my liege!”

She hadn’t come to the party armed because of her fine dress, so he had procured a blade for her.

In functions like this one, men were allowed to wear their swords. Many nobles outfitted themselves with decorative swords, but Rupert always carried his beloved weapon—the heirloom sword, Raven. The pride of the Empire, this was one of two legendary swords wielded by successive emperors. Its blade was jet black, just as its name suggested.

Rupert wielded Raven and cut down rebels from the Principality of Monti one after another. The way he moved caught even Oscar’s eye as he did the same while protecting Maria.

“What an amazing swordsman...” Oscar sounded awed.

“Moreover, His Majesty can use fire magic too,” Maria added.

Unfortunately, Rupert’s incredible sword skill caught the villains’ attention as well.

“There he is! The emperor!”

“That’s what they call me. Come at me, if you dare!”

Rupert sounded positively refreshed as he grinned and swung his sword even faster. While his terrifying display of skill kept the resistance’s eyes on him, it also attracted the gazes of his allies searching for him.

“Your Majesty, allow us to assist!”

“Ah, Hartmut. Fancy meeting you here. I presume you’re attending in your father’s stead?”

“Indeed I am.”

The pair’s swords flashed continuously even as they conversed. Joining him as reinforcement, the young man named Hartmut was just as skilled and fearsome with the blade as the emperor.

“He’s amazing too...” Oscar noted.

“Did His Majesty say ‘Hartmut’?” Maria said. “It must be Hartmut Barthel then...Count Barthel’s oldest son. There are currently two vacant seats in the Twelve Knights of the Emperor and he’s said to be the swordsman closest to filling one of them. This is the first time I’m witnessing his skill with a blade, which is impressive indeed.”

If the word “hard” described Rupert’s bladework, then “soft” described Hartmut’s. The young man didn’t block his opponent’s sword—instead letting it slide off his, thereby throwing them off-balance, and then he would slice his enemy without stopping the movement of his own sword. Rupert’s and Hartmut’s styles were polar opposites, yet they formed a striking contrast. Perhaps that too was why the beauty stood out so much more.

The situation quickly came to a head after Hartmut joined Rupert and his remaining imperial guards began fighting around him. You could call the insurgents’ actions momentum set into motion by madness... Once Rupert and his allies regained control of the scene, both the momentum and madness disappeared from the enemy’s swordsmanship. All that remained was despair.

But none of them made any moves to surrender. Of course, they didn’t. It had taken them three years to formulate and execute this plan. There was no way that such individuals would think of prolonging their lives at this point in time. Not long after, the remaining members of Monti’s resistance were cut down.

“I would’ve liked to ask them for the truth, but I suppose it is what it is.”

“Then you believe someone was pulling their strings behind the scenes, Your Majesty?”

“Do you even need to ask? It’s inconceivable that the remnants of a fallen nation could change the design of a villa, one belonging to a *marquess*, no less, to make it more susceptible to collapse.”

“I take it you don’t think Lord Meusel is the key culprit?”

“No. They wouldn’t do something so obvious. Though I can’t leave him

unpunished as the organizer of this event given all of the deaths, the true perpetrator is the one who ought to be punished.”

Rupert and Maria held their conversation in such low tones that even Oscar and Hartmut couldn’t hear them despite being right next to them.

“Suspect those who profit from the crime, Maria. Considering almost everyone in the building would have died without Oscar’s quick thinking, I doubt the culprit is among us...”

“I see.”

Many powerful nobles had gathered here because of the emperor’s visit. Of those of the great houses who were absent, only a handful sought his death.

“In any case, we can’t draw any conclusions here. I’ll leave that to Hans. He’s good at this sort of thing.”

“Count Hans Kirchhoff? Yes, I hear he excels at much and more.”

“Especially in information warfare. I can’t hold a candle to him on that front.”

Rupert laughed heartily then. Maria knew he was only being modest with those words. Although broad-minded and bold, Rupert nevertheless had a talent for scheming. However, he didn’t seem pleased to have such a talent and often chose to crush his opponents head-on with force... Or so the late Empress Frederica used to say.



“Your Majesty, I discovered the mastermind behind the ambush on the villa.”

“Well, that was fast. It hasn’t even been three days.”

They were in the emperor’s office. His right-hand man, Count Hans Kirchhoff, made his report with supporting documents.

“To cut straight to the point, it was Duke Wilhelmsthal.”

“Ahhh... Easy enough to imagine that.”

Rupert shook his head with a derisive smile. The ducal line of Wilhelmsthal was a prestigious one connected to the imperial family with the current first duchess being Rupert’s cousin. And Rupert knew the current duke, thirty-six

years old, as a man with a powerful ambition to rise in the world. Having said that, the only position higher than a duke's he could aim for was...the imperial throne itself.

The duke's family possessed a vast wealth and military force, making them a difficult opponent to manage even for the emperor. They were well aware of this too, which might explain this latest incident.

"It goes without saying that their goal was to assassinate you, Your Majesty. But at some point, it seems they added another one...and *that* is how I was able to trace the path back to the mastermind."

"I'm assuming this secondary goal is nothing good, eh?"

"Correct. The duke's secondary goal was to annex the lands of the Kulkova marquessate and Latimore's county."

"Both? Greedy bastard..."

The Wilhelmsthal dukedom stretched over a huge domain. A part of it bordered Latimore's county. By absorbing the count's lands, the dukedom would then share a border with the Kulkova marquessate.

"That reminds me. I heard Maria was attacked a few days ago?"

"Indeed, by someone Latimore himself hired. However, he did so only *after* he was incited..."

"By Wilhelmsthal, right? I see. No wonder Maria was invited to the unveiling. With the two of us assassinated here and the blame for her attack pinned on Latimore, the duke would acquire both the marquessate *and* the county... What an interesting fellow."

Rupert smiled faintly.

"How much proof do you have, Hans?"

"None at all."

"Tell me you jest, man."

Rupert couldn't help his exasperated retort at Hans's blunt answer. Without hard evidence, even the emperor's hands were tied. Not to mention his

opponent was Duke Wilhelmsthal, a member of one of the Empire's most eminent great houses.

"If we had proof, it would be possible to bring the matter to trial. Unfortunately...the duke left not a shred of material evidence behind. I expected as much from him. All we have is circumstantial evidence..."

"Which isn't enough to take to the imperial court."

Simply put, the imperial court presided over trials involving the aristocracy. The council held sessions when cases involved nobles or the imperial family, but not commoners. Even holding a hearing required a considerable amount of evidence—and material evidence was paramount.

"Therefore, we can't investigate him through the official channels for this incident."

"I see. Then...what say you to using *other, unofficial* channels?"

Rupert had already surmised that Hans had a plan of his own. In the first place, there were no incompetent people in the current imperial government who would approach their superiors without a plan of action.

"Well, the outcome we desire is for the current Duke of Wilhelmsthal, in other words, Lord Stefan, to retire. His son, Sieghardt, will succeed him as the new duke, and Stefan's wife, Lady Christine, will be made the boy's guardian. What do you think?"

"Oh ho..."

An extremely reasonable...or rather, a rather lenient punishment for someone who had plotted to assassinate the emperor. Then again, the man he was dealing with *was* one of the most powerful nobles in the Empire. If he were to use his military might to rebel against the imperial family, it could lead to a civil war that would split the Empire in two.

Rupert gazed intently at Hans's face, as if trying to pry something out of him.

"Fine. I leave it to you."

"Thank you very much. As such, I would like to borrow a few things from you, Your Majesty."

“Take what you want, including the Twelve Knights.”

Rupert could already see how things would play out, so it was only natural that he would leave everything to Hans, who would execute the plan perfectly.

“Your will be done, my liege.” Hans bowed his reverently.



In the drawing room of Duke Wilhelmsthal’s capital home.

“Thank you for taking the time to see me, Your Grace.”

“Bah, it’s nothing, not when I can enjoy the fine company of His Imperial Majesty’s right-hand man himself. Of course, I’d make time for you, Count Kirchhoff. I see you’ve brought two of the Twelve Knights with you as well.”

Two men stood behind Hans. One was Arnaud Erzberger, third seat of the Emperor’s Twelve Knights. He stood there utterly silent and utterly expressionless. The other was Felix Preu Liszt, sixth seat of the Twelve. He beamed in response to the duke’s words.

“Yes, well, even the capital has seen its share of unrest lately.” Smiling, Hans reached for his cup of coffee.

“No matter how dangerous it may be, I see no reason my mansion would be surrounded by the 1st Imperial Regiment.”

“Yes, well, even the rest of the Empire has seen its share of unrest lately.” Once more, Hans spoke with a smile.

“Right. Why don’t you tell me what business brings you here?”

“Your Grace,” Hans answered, his smile unwavering. “Please don’t make me say it out loud. I’m here only three days after a certain incident. I trust that’s more than enough for you to understand the reason for my visit?”

“Why, I have no notion what you mean.” Lord Stefan’s expression remained placid.

This actually surprised Hans. Because as far as he could see, Stefan had replied without a single twitch of his facial muscles. His estate was surrounded by a large army, including two of the Twelve Knights of the Emperor, the

champions of their nation. Yet he remained stoic. As expected of the head of one of the most prestigious noble families in the Empire.

“Then allow me to enlighten you,” Hans continued, still smiling. “His Majesty believes Your Grace is responsible for orchestrating the events that took place at the Marquess Meusel’s unveiling of the new villa.”

“Does he now...” Stefan replied indifferently.

“As such, he would like you to take responsibility, which is why he sent me here.”

“Take responsibility, eh? For something I don’t even remember doing?”

“Well, that does indeed pose a problem, doesn’t it?”

There was no change in Hans’s attitude or smile.

The silence between them stretched for quite a while before Stefan finally broke it.

“As the duke of Wilhelmsthal, I simply can’t accept this groundless charge, even if it is His Imperial Majesty himself lobbing it against me.”

“Is that right?”

“Do you even have any proof of me ‘orchestrating’ the incident, as you put it?”

“No, not a shred,” Hans declared.

This surprised Stefan because at long last the lines on his face shifted.

“So you dare accuse me without evidence...?”

“It would seem so, yes? Though we lack proof...we know without a doubt that Your Grace is the one pulling the strings behind the scenes, so to speak. Perhaps you feel inclined to give up?”

“Bloody hell...do you even know what you’re saying?”

“Of course.”

Anger mottled Stefan’s expression now.

Naturally, Hans continued smiling.

“You insolent cur, you’re accusing the Empire’s greatest duke of attempted murder of the emperor without any proof.”

“Duke Wilhelmsthal tried to have His Majesty assassinated... Why, yes, I believe, I *am* saying that.”

“Then you must also know that my house won’t keep silent about this.”

“His Majesty has given me full authority over this incident.”

Stefan was completely enraged now. Hans simply kept smiling.

“As it stands, I’ll have no choice but to fight with all the means at my disposal to prove my innocence.”

“Is that right?”

“Are you so willing to take responsibility for a civil war?”

“Of course.”

Hans’s expression didn’t waver at all. The one who was surprised was Felix, the sixth seat of the Twelve Knights, who stood behind him. No one commented on that though. Incidentally, third seat Arnaud remained expressionless next to him.

“Having said that, His Majesty would like to make a proposal, Lord Stefan. If you step down as duke and pass the title to Lord Sieghardt and appoint Lady Christine as his guardian, His Majesty will consider this all water under the bridge.”

“What did you...” Stefan had not expected this at all. “That’s it?”

“That is it. You won’t have to cede any of your territory, pay more in taxes, or perform forced labor. You simply have to move into a residence somewhere in the dukedom and live out the remainder of your life quietly. Then all will be forgiven.”

Stefan mulled it over. Sieghardt was only ten years old, which explained why his wife Christine would become the boy’s legal guardian. Be that as it may...Stefan would still essentially be in charge of his dominion. A cloistered

rule, so to speak...

He could move to someplace secluded in the dukedom and make it the new center of governance. In fact, it might be possible to have Sieghardt learn to rule, even though it was a bit early at this point. After all, he'd always intended to have his son succeed him as duke someday anyway... And then Stefan himself could aim for the throne in earnest... Not a bad plan at all.

"It's true that I'm not averse to civil war. However, considering our people, both noble and commoner alike, it would be foolish to bring chaos to the nation. If I can make our citizens happy by stepping aside, then perhaps that's a good thing."

So Stefan said, even if he didn't actually mean a single word...

"I expected no less from a wise and renowned duke such as yourself. I am deeply impressed by your concern for our people and country."

So Hans said, even if he didn't actually mean a single word...

Thus, the turmoil of the unveiling celebration was quietly put to rest.



A month had passed since Lord Stefan of Wilhelmsthal suddenly went into seclusion and his son Sieghardt took over the dukedom. Christine, Sieghardt's mother and Stefan's wife, had been appointed guardian of the ten-year-old boy, and she assisted the too-young new duke. Stefan had moved to a villa in the quiet lakeside town of Schun, within the duke's domain, where he ostensibly lived in peace and quiet.

That night, someone slipped into Stefan's bedroom.

"Who's there?!" he exclaimed angrily. He kept his voice low because he really didn't know who it was or why they were there. Though he would have shouted if he'd really thought it was someone trying to assassinate him...

"Still sharp as a tack, I see, Your Grace... No, excuse me, that title no longer applies to you."

The one who appeared out of the darkness was...

“Hans...you son of a...”

Count Hans Kirchhoff, the man known as Rupert VI's right hand.

“What the bloody hell are you doing here?”

“Now that things are in place, we're ready to proceed to the next stage.”

“What...?”

“Simply put, Lady Christine has consented to your elimination.”

“No... That can't be...”

Stefan was at a loss for words. Christine was his wife and their son Sieghardt's guardian. Their relationship had never been particularly bad... In fact, compared to other noble families, theirs could be described as one of the best. And yet...

“Evidently, in order for Lord Sieghardt to become a proper duke, your cloistered rule must be removed as it would be a hindrance.”

“You bastard... You deceived me!”

He believed that Hans, or perhaps the emperor, had persuaded her into believing that Stefan should be eliminated for Sieghardt's sake. No matter how good of a marriage, a mother loves her child the most. Sadly, in this case, more than her husband... It was a dynamic that had existed in every family since ancient times, and the ducal line of Wilhelmsthal was no different. It was nothing more, nothing less.

“Worry not. Lady Christine and I have signed a document that guarantees Lord Sieghardt's status as Duke Wilhelmsthal even if you die.”

“Preposterous...”

What in the world was Stefan referring to with that remark...? The woman who had thrown him aside without hesitation...? Or the folly of putting such a promise in writing? Leaving behind such a document practically guaranteed its use to threaten and blackmail without restriction...

“You see, little by little, we'll be chipping away at the assets of the Wilhelmsthal dukedom. Lady Christine will likely agree to our terms, as she wouldn't want to see Lord Sieghardt removed from the ducal line of

succession.”

“Damn you...”

Stefan was so enraged that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call him a demon.

“As things stand now, the power of the Wilhelmsthal line is too great. We need to whittle it down bit by bit, and when your house is no longer able to rival His Majesty, we can eliminate the rest of the bloodline... Well, if we reach that point, we can do whatever we want. On the other hand, if that happens, we may not even have a need to eliminate the rest of you,” Hans bragged.

“I won't let it happen... I'll *never* let that happen.”

Furious, Stefan took the sword propped up beside him and confronted Hans...

Slash.

“Ngh!”

One stroke. Stefan didn't see the blade flash, much less Hans's body moving. Hans flicked the blood off the sword and slid it back into its sheath.

“You have only yourself to blame. You started all this with your stupidity,” Hans murmured quietly.

A figure approached him from behind.

“Everything is ready.”

“Good. Burn the building down to the ground. Leave nothing behind.”

The next day, the death of former Duke Stefan of Wilhelmsthal was announced by Christine, the guardian of the current duke of Wilhelmsthal.

“It's done, Your Majesty.”

“Excellent work.”

That was the only conversation that took place between Hans and Rupert on this matter.

Afterword

Hello, nice to see you again. I'm Tadashi Kubou. Thank you very much for picking up volume 3 of *The Water Magician's* first arc.

Looking at the overall concept of the story, *The Water Magician* is quite a long one. As the author, I feel like the pace has finally started picking up with this volume.

Throughout the story, Ryo's world expands little by little, and in this third volume, he finally travels abroad. When the story is completed, millions of characters in the future, just how far will his world have expanded...? As it extends geographically and also through his connections with people, Ryo changes bit by bit... But there are also parts of him that don't change...

Since the release of the first volume in March, I've received many comments. Among them, there were several that said, "I want my children to read this story too." As the author, this is the kind of feedback that makes me the happiest. In fact, it's an honor to be told this.

A work that parents want their child to read... That's the highest level of praise, isn't it? They truly believe the story is good and want their children to read it because they think it will be beneficial for them. I'm so grateful.

One thing that all these parents' feedback seems to have in common is that "reading the story makes [them] want to work hard." Of course, this series doesn't contain any explicit expressions such as, "Effort, effort, effort is everything!" or anything similar. Because my goal is to create a fun, authentic fantasy. But Ryo doesn't mind working hard. The other characters are also working hard in their own ways, and they're all achieving something.

This story is an enjoyable, interesting read, one that makes you want to work hard. For sure... I know I'm just tooting my own horn now, but maybe the story *is* pretty amazing after all...

From the data I've seen and the feedback I've received, this work has been

read by people of all ages. There doesn't seem to be much of a difference in the ratio of male to female readers either. I'm grateful for this, as I'd hoped that many readers would enjoy reading my work.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of my readers for their support, which made it possible to publish this third volume. I hope you'll continue to support me moving forward as well.

Bonus Short Story

A Day in the Life of a Guild Master

As the master of Lune's adventurers' guild, Hugh McGlass started his day early. His distinguished service during the Great War between the Kingdom and Federation had earned him the title of baronet. The title of baronet, valid for only one generation, wasn't technically among the peerage—which included titles such as duke, marquess, earl, discount, and baron—so Hugh did not actually preside over any land. However, he owned a home in the nobles' quarter of the city, which made him closer to nobility than most common folk.

Hugh saw his home as simply a place to sleep after a day's work. That said, its spacious garden was a huge point in its favor. Practicing his swordsmanship in it every morning had become a routine for him. After this bout of daily exercise, he would buy breakfast at one of the food stalls that opened early in the morning, then enter the guild around six thirty. The guild officially opened for business at seven a.m., so most of the guild's staff, including the receptionists, would arrive around then. As the guild master, Hugh was the single exception. He liked to come in a tad earlier.

If he arrived *too* early, his employees would feel obligated to do the same out of consideration for him. He'd calculated this timing to avoid that. It went without saying that he was never late.

The guild operated from seven to eleven with a three-hour recess for lunch before resuming work from two to six, amounting to eight hours of actual work. The lunch breaks were long because mornings and evenings were crowded since adventurers were most active during those times. In the past, they had tried a shift system, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, but it wasn't easy.

While guild staff kept such working hours, they didn't apply to guild masters, who had to participate in meetings and conferences with organizations and

persons outside the guild, some of them over lunch. Sometimes, Hugh's subordinates remarked, "A fancy lunch? I'm so jealous..."

Hugh always replied, "Food's got no taste when I'm eatin' with the betters."

But they could never fully understand. That's just how things worked. You had to experience such things yourself to fully understand them.

Being treated to a meal by the bigwigs was completely different from being treated by one's friends...

Once upon a time, Hugh had friends too. They had been a party of four adventurers who ultimately reached A rank. With them, everything had been so easy. Eating with VIPs was a completely different experience...

That said, as the current master of Lune's adventurer's guild, Hugh McGlass considered all its adventurers friends even though he didn't have anyone to form a party with. As one of the Kingdom's leading guilds, Lune's boasted hundreds of adventurer parties, from elite B-ranks to novice F-ranks... And he ran it.

Once you became a leader, you had to start dealing with outsiders. This was true of any organization. For a guild master, that meant you began dealing with people beyond adventurers and your own staff...

Yesterday, Hugh sold two air magic stones to a famous foreign merchant for 2.6 billion florins. When the guild acted as intermediary in situations like these, its cut of a sale was a mere five percent. Even so, the guild made over a hundred million florins from just this one transaction.

"I still can't wrap my head 'round it..."

Was it the astronomical cost of the magic stones that drove him to say this? Or the identities of the two adventurers who had brought the stones to him? Who's to say...

Today, one of the two had visited him this morning and accepted a commission to escort the same merchant who'd bought the stones. Priority for international jobs normally went to C-rank adventurers first, but in terms of combat prowess, that water magician likely exceeded C rank. The aforementioned merchant was himself experienced and the other party joining

his caravan were also skilled. In this case, Hugh thought this would be a good opportunity for Ryo to gain experience in areas other than fighting.

Producing results while allowing the younger generation to gain experience... This is a problem that troubled many organizational leaders, both past and present. And it was something that Hugh McGlass, guild master, dealt with on a daily basis.



Hugh had come to the guild canteen hoping to eat lunch. The food was cheap, delicious, and served in large portions. It was always crowded in the mornings and evenings because it was open to not just adventurers and guild staff but the city's residents too. However, it wasn't crowded on weekday afternoons since adventurers were either out on jobs or down in the dungeon. That was true today as well.

As he perused the menu, trying to decide what to eat, Hugh heard a voice. It belonged to the water magician who had accepted the escort mission for the merchant caravan.

"I'm happy to know you two are studying diligently, Eto, Amon, unlike *some* meathead swordsman who happens to be in your party."

"Hey, Ryo, if you got something to say, say it to my face."

"I see you're well aware of your meathead status, Nils. That's good. But I wasn't referring to you."

"Liar! I dunno any other swordsmen in their party!"

"Gah, I've done it now. I didn't think you'd figure it out..."

Eto and Amon were laughing at Nils and Ryo's conversation.

Another peaceful day in Lune's adventurers' guild.

With a small, rueful shake of his head, Hugh walked to the counter and placed his order.

"The daily special, thanks."



Ten days after the merchant and water magician left Lune, Hugh was once more in the guild canteen for lunch.

“The daily special, thanks,” he said. He had no problem at all ordering it again since the menu changed every day... That was the beauty of a daily special. According to one theory, the guild cafeteria’s daily specials were created expressly for Hugh... Whether that was true or not, only the head chef knew.

While Hugh dug into the daily special, one of the receptionists, Nina, approached.

“Master, there’s a letter from the knight commander.”

“Neville?”

Neville Black, the commander heading Margrave Lune’s order of knights, was said to be one of the most outstanding in the Kingdom. In his mid-forties, the man was around ten years older than Hugh. Needless to say, he was an exceptional swordsman. He was also well-known for his strong leadership skills. As for Hugh, he thought Neville was “a brilliant knight commander who liked to drink.”

This knight commander and Lune’s guild master liaised once a week to exchange information. They were supposed to meet this afternoon, in fact...

“He wants me to show up in comfortable clothes? The hell’s he on about?”

Hugh was baffled by the contents of the letter Nina had brought him. So long as unexpected nuisances, such as academic research teams from the royal capital, didn’t interfere, their weekly conferences went smoothly. Depending on the occasion, Neville even treated him to a drink or two.

However, this was the first time Hugh had received a request to “wear comfortable clothes.” Then again, Neville was a very capable knight commander, so, naturally, he must have had a good reason to ask.

“I s’pose I’ll understand once I’m there.”

While Hugh was a large, intimidating man who didn’t seem suited to the more erudite pursuits of life, he was actually extremely intelligent. As the one in charge of the largest guild on the country’s frontier, he had to be. Still, he was

an adventurer at heart, so sometimes he leaped before he thought. Usually, he did so when operating independently. When other adventurers were involved, safety always came first...

That afternoon, Hugh headed to the knight commander's office, where he and Neville held their usual weekly meeting. They talked without incident and the meeting ended without incident too. Neville didn't mention attire the whole time. By the end, Hugh couldn't help but broach the topic himself.

"So, Neville, 'bout the business with the clothes..."

"Yeah, we're leaving now."

"Leavin'? Where we goin'?" Hugh asked.

"Just follow me and you'll see," Neville answered. Then he stood and started walking out of his office. Puzzled, Hugh followed. It wasn't like he had any other choice...

They walked until they arrived at...

"The knights' training center?"

Either he didn't hear Hugh's mutter or deliberately ignored it. In any case, Neville silently entered the center. Hugh followed, head tilted curiously.

Hell had unfolded inside. More accurately, knights who'd been defeated by their instructor lay scattered all over the training center... Such was the scene before them.

"Bleedin' hell..." Hugh's whisper trailed off.

Of course, he knew exactly who the instructor responsible for all this was. And her training of Lune's knights made them one of the most powerful orders in the Kingdom. That was the truth and nothing but the truth. Said instructor was an elf who also happened to be a B-rank adventurer...

"Oh? Master McGlass? You're a rare sight around these parts."

She moved so quickly toward Hugh and Neville that her speed could have been mistaken for teleportation.

Sera. She had been directly appointed by Margrave Lune himself as the knights' sole instructor.

As a race, elves were peerless in the use of bow and arrow. Their mastery over the art of combat was unmatched, even by humans, to the extent that it could be considered unique to their race.

Though Sera was renowned for her swordsmanship, she could still use a bow just as well. In fact, no one could deny her first-class skill with that weapon too. However, she was even more famous for her way with the blade.

Her swordsmanship was the pinnacle of transcendent technique. She used a technique called Wind Robe, an original magic of her own creation, that used air magic to increase the speed of all of her movements during a sword fight... The explanation sounded simple enough using words, but in reality, it was impossible.

There was no incantation involved. How did one activate a spell without an incarnation? You didn't. *That* was the answer.

To put it bluntly, Sera was literally doing the impossible.

Hugh shook his head mentally. There was no point in thinking about it any longer. Instead, it would be better to understand the current situation.

"So why'd ya bring me here in the first place, Neville?"

Neville smirked. "I'm surprised you haven't figured it out by now."

Hugh realized then. The answer was...painfully clear. "I plumb don't know what ya mean," he said, resisting the truth until the very end—even though he knew that resistance was futile.

"Ah, I see. So Master McGlass is joining us for today's training session, yes?"

Sera too had arrived at the same conclusion—a conclusion that meant a great deal of despair for Hugh.

Still, he resisted. "Uh-uh, no way. I ain't got any plans to scrap with ya."

"Oh, really? Despite wearing comfortable clothes that are different from your usual attire?"

“Neville, ya schemin’ mongrel!” Hugh spat. The man had attempted to create a *fait accompli* through his letter and he’d succeeded.

“The fact that you came here wearing clothes that are easy to move in suggests you *wanted* to get some exercise, Hugh,” Neville said, feigning an air of innocence.

“Bleedin’ bastard...” Hugh, in turn, sounded vexed.

Sera had already walked away to the training center’s armor to choose weapons. Probably a new one for herself and one for him.

“Sorry, Hugh, but I need your help. Miss Sera hasn’t been in a good mood lately.”

“‘n’ I care b’cause? The hell’s that gotta do with me anyway?” Hugh replied with a confused shake of his head.

“Everything. After all, *you’re* the one who sent Ryo off on that job to Inverey.”

“Well, sure, but...”

“With him off in the Principality, she’s lost her sparring partner. And *that* explains Miss Sera’s terrible mood. Under these circumstances, Hugh, you should take responsibility and do something about it. Right?”

“That’s bollocks ‘n’ ya know it...”

Hugh exhaled deeply then. While he wouldn’t deny being the one to convince Ryo to take the escort mission to Inverey, he had never expected *this* outcome...

Sera returned and handed him a sword with a dulled blade. A practice sword.

“I chose the sword with a balance most similar to your own, Master McGlass,” she said.

Hugh swung it a few times, testing the weapon. “Huh. It feels almost exactly like mine... The length too. But...why the hell do ya know so much ‘bout my sword, Sera?”

“Tee hee hee. That’s a secret.”

Chuckling, she refused to answer his artless question. Hugh’s sword was,

without question, famous. Famous, yes, but not something anyone could wield... In a way, that made it unique. So how did Sera know what it felt like to use...?



“All right, folks, we’ll now commence the practice bout between Miss Sera and Master McGlass. Can I assume you’re both ready?” Neville, acting as the referee, asked them.

“Aye.”

“Of course.”

Hugh and Sera both answered him.

“Excellent. Then, begin!”

Hugh attacked first. He slashed vertically, then followed with a horizontal slash, then a diagonal downward swing from the shoulder, after which he performed a reverse version of the last stroke... He chained the attacks together so quickly he might as well have been a blur.

“Woow...” the knights sitting in the spectator stands exclaimed in astonishment.

Aside from their commander, Neville, Hugh and Sera were the only two in the arena of the training center. Everyone else was part of the audience. The number of knights watching had increased at some point, likely because the ones who’d been training in other parts of the center had heard about the fight through their comrades. And every single one of them was astounded by Hugh’s offense.

Naturally, they all knew of Champion McGlass, one of the kingdom’s most famed adventurers. He was renowned for his great achievements during the Great War a decade ago against the Federation. Despite being currently retired from the front lines, each and every stroke of his sword was so extraordinarily precise that it defied what they knew of him. For knights who lived by the sword, it wasn’t at all difficult to understand the heights at which Hugh stood.

Yet the elven swordswoman defended herself perfectly against that extraordinary blade. Parry, deflect, evade... She used her body and footwork to dodge, even feints...

Sera employed every conceivable method of defense to ward off Hugh's sword. Not only was she *not* in any danger whatsoever, she was actually casually muttering to herself during Hugh's attack.

"Was it like this?" she said. "Maybe the angle was more slanted? Hm, perhaps I should thrust at this particular moment."

It was almost as if she were trying to adopt her frequent sparring partner's defensive style as her own. After watching the water magician fend off her attacks with his ironclad defense, perhaps she wanted to acquire it herself...

An hour had passed since the mock battle started.

This...ain't good.

Hugh knew he was at a disadvantage. He was still on the offensive and Sera on the defensive. Compared to the start of the fight, her counterattacks had increased, but from the perspective of the spectators, it was still anyone's fight.

Hugh, however, saw the truth clearly. Being retired from active combat was a huge factor. Although Hugh exercised every day and trained whenever he had free time, his skills had not declined and his experience had not decayed, his ability to *continue* fighting diminished, bit by bit... This was what it meant to leave real combat behind.

Each bit of excess exertion, each slight miscalculation in the angle of his thrust, every small, unnecessary attack sapped his stamina.

'n' here I am always spoutin' off 'bout the best technique don't mean shite if ya ain't got the stamina to pull it off... Pathetic.

Hugh often said this to young adventurers, and he was shocked he hadn't been able to put it into practice himself. It was no wonder, though, since he'd been out of the front lines for quite a long while.

If they crossed swords twenty more times, it would be the end of him... Just as Hugh realized this, Sera suddenly stopped moving. Then, looking at the large clock hanging in the training ground, she spoke.

“Apologies, Master McGlass. It’s almost time for my session with Alfonso.”

“Huh?”

She was referring to Alfonso Spinazola, Margrave Lune’s only grandchild and presumptive heir. As long as nothing went wrong, the nineteen-year-old would succeed the title. Sera was also his instructor.

But Hugh didn’t accept her words at face value. He suspected she too knew his defeat was close at hand and had abruptly ended their match now to preserve his dignity. After all, nothing good would have come of her beating him.

Finishing their bout here allowed Hugh to save face, which in turn put him in her debt... Although he wasn’t sure if she’d actually thought that far ahead.

“I owe ya one, Sera.”

“Hm? Whatever do you mean?” she said with a smile.

“Well, that was certainly a fantastic match. I, for one, am impressed,” Neville remarked as he walked over to the two of them.

“I can barely feel anythin’, mate...”

“No, no, no. From where I stood, Champion McGlass’s sword was as strong as ever. You blew me away.” Neville was very clearly enjoying himself.

“Right then, I’m off to train Alfonso. Master McGlass, you’ll be stopping by next week as well for another round, yes?”

“Uhhh...” Hugh froze at her words.

“Brilliant idea. In fact, I insist. Hugh, help her out after our weekly meeting, eh?” Neville responded to her on his behalf.

That was when Hugh finally realized he found himself in an inescapable quagmire. Sera had ended the match early to protect his honor. To repay that favor, he now had to grant her wish and provide her sparring partner—or, in

other words, *himself*.

Neville didn't want to worsen Sera's mood, so he had to give her what she wanted: a sparring partner—or, in other words, a *sacrifice*.

The desires of the two powerful figures had aligned. In other words, Hugh had no other choice.

“Sure... Why not...”

Thus, Hugh McGlass, the master of Lune's adventurers' guild, was able to whip himself back into shape once a week...



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The Water Magician: Arc 1 Volume 3

by Tadashi Kubou

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