

SLAYERS

17

The Long Road Home

HAJIME KANZAKA

神坂一



Fantasia Bunko

Slayers Vol. 17

The Long Road Home

By Kanzaka Hajime

Illustrations by Araizumi Rui

Translation by: Sherrasama

Translation Assistance: ShinGraywords

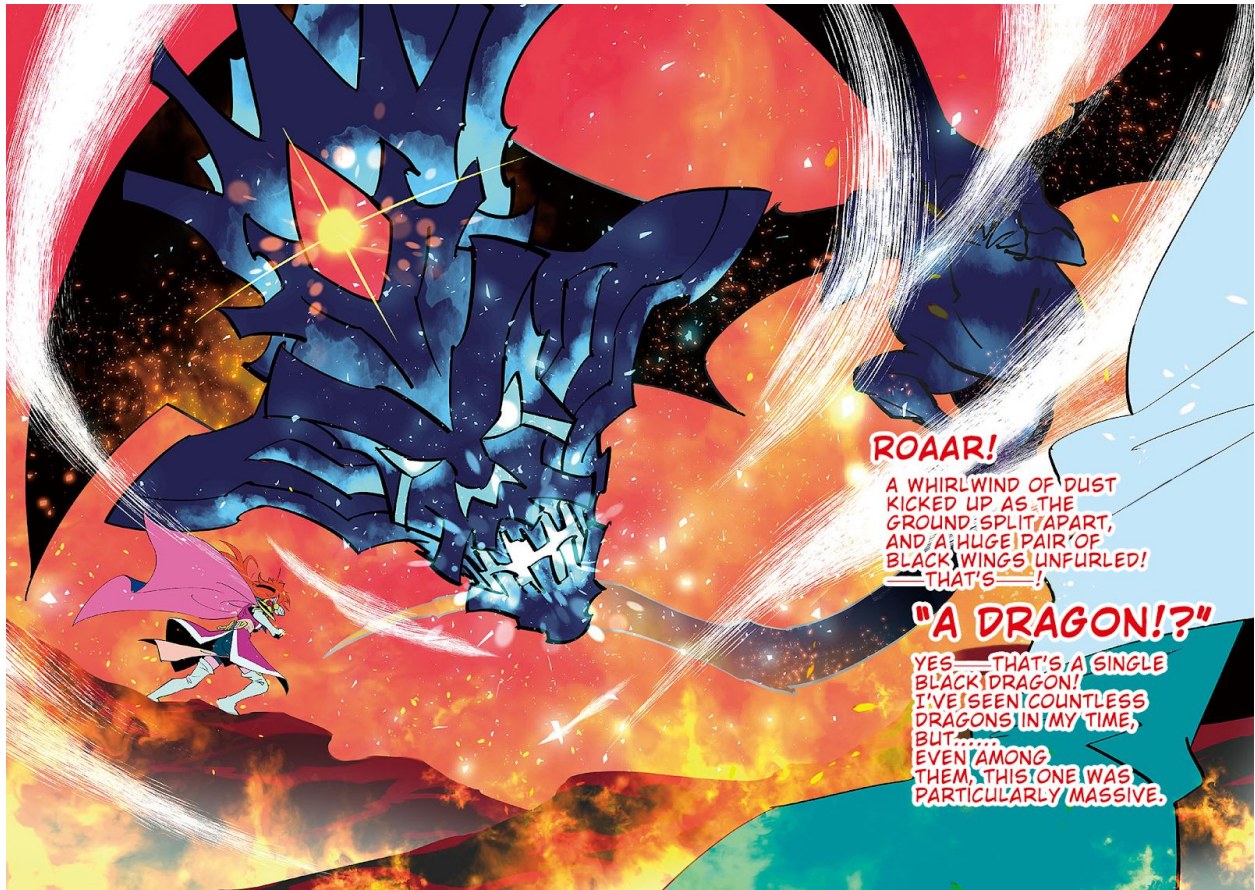
Edited by: NaioKiara and SavvyLiterate



"YOO-HOO.
SURE WAS
A FUSS
BACK THERE.

YOU CAN
CALL ME
RAN~♪"

Slayers 17
**The Long
Road Home**



ROAAR!

A WHIRLWIND OF DUST
KICKED UP AS THE
GROUND SPLIT APART,
AND A HUGE PAIR OF
BLACK WINGS UNFURLED!
— THAT'S —!

"A DRAGON!?"

YES — THAT'S A SINGLE
BLACK DRAGON!
I'VE SEEN COUNTLESS
DRAGONS IN MY TIME,
BUT.....
EVEN AMONG
THEM, THIS ONE WAS
PARTICULARLY MASSIVE.



Table of Contents

1: Before I Knew It, I Was Standing in an Unfamiliar Town.....	7
2: The Most Powerful Spells Are Not Necessarily the Good Ones.....	38
3: Escape: I Can See the Shadow of Approaching Pursuers.....	74
4: Aiming for the Border, What Awaits Us Ahead Is——.....	108
Afterword.....	137

Chapter 1

Before I Knew It, I Was Standing in an Unfamiliar Town.

Before I knew it, I was standing in an unfamiliar town.

"...Huh." Dumbfounded, my voice squeaked out on its own.

There were houses neatly lined up in rows. Scattered here and there among them were street stalls and shops. All kinds of people walked about on the street. The wheels of a passing horse-drawn cart kicked dust up into the air.

But. They were all *completely different*.

The decorations and architecture of the houses, the atmosphere and coloration of the shops, even the clothing and patterns worn by the townsfolk. Every single one of these things was unfamiliar to me.

Well, actually...maybe it's that the two of *us* that were completely out of place. As people passed us in the street, they stared at us and gave us the evil eye.

Alright, I admit it! For us, it wasn't *that* strange of a scenario.

I have long chestnut hair, a black bandana, and black cape. At my waist I carry a short sword, and all over my outfit are jeweled amulets. Against the bright scenery it rather stood out—No, that's not right. Overshadowed, perhaps. But as far as sorceress attire is concerned, it's relatively ordinary.

Beside me is my travelling companion, Gourry, who has long blonde hair and is tall and handsome. Although he doesn't quite conjure the image of a big scary warrior or anything, with light mail and a longsword, his is the common raiment of a swordsman.

But as you might expect, compared to the idyllic townspeople around us right then, our vibe was just a wee bit off.

"...Hey Lina? ...By some chance, are we...?" Gourry was muttering stupidly, at a loss for words. "This...isn't the town of Latoka, is it?"

"...I think you're right," I responded, in a daze.

"It *is* Latoka."

An accented, quavering voice caused me to whirl around and just behind us, in front of a cozy little house and sitting alone on a bench, a hunched-over and very old man was looking our way.

"I couldn't hear you very well...but the name of this town is indeed Latoka. In any case, you youngins' are travellers or something, right? You're extremely peculiar looking, like you set out very unexpectedly on a journey! But ... where did you come from?"

"Where, you say..." I withheld the rest of my reply.

Of course, we'd come from the town of Latoka. By no means would saying this be a mistake, but...to put it more accurately: We had just left the city of Latoka via unusual circumstances, and now we are *here*...

It all began this afternoon...

Hack—cough—cough—cough!

My drink sprayed all over the table when I made the mistake of trying to forcibly swallow it while overreacting to what I'd just heard.

"Hey...! Are you okay, Lina?"

There was a long bout of coughing before I could respond to Gourry's words. "Uhg... I... I'm okay..." I turned back to address the owner again. "Anyway! Old man!"

Not far from the capital of Zephilia, Zephyr City, is the city of Latoka. Gourry and I had arrived a bit before noon, and so I'd decided to have myself a bit of brunch. It was my intention to press on after eating through the next two towns before searching for an inn to stay at for the night.

Since I'd entered the restaurant a bit before lunchtime, there were no other customers. I was totally bored, and the elderly owner was blathering to me about all sorts of things. I was mostly ignoring him while devotedly stuffing my face, but...as soon as I heard **that** name, I nearly blew a fuse. Hence the choking.

"So, in other words, to summarize... What you're saying is that a wanderer from someplace or other has come to reside at the town mayor's residence?"

"That's right."

"And the name of that wanderer is..."

Without hesitation, the owner distinctly said, “*Norst.*”

“...Uhhhhhhmmm...” I don’t think I misheard him, but...

“Do you know them, Lina?”

“I wouldn’t say I know them... It’s more that I...know *about* them... I could be mistaken, though—” I responded to Gourry vaguely.

The basis for my worries was paper-thin: Nothing to lend credence to, really. I wished it hadn’t come to mind at all. It’s possible that after everything that’s happened in my short life, my imagination may be turning into paranoia... Nevertheless, if it so happened that my hunch *was* on the mark, then what would inevitably come to pass would be no laughing matter.

It goes something like this: Somehow, an unknown vagrant slips into the good graces and sizable estate of a big wig somewhere, after which the circumstances around that big wig become suspicious. It may be a scheme or a hijacking—something along those lines. It’s a very cliché pattern I’ve seen play out a bunch of times.

I’m not exactly proud of myself for this, but if I were to leave this alone, with *my* luck, chances were pretty good that some misfortune, whether big or small, would arise. Still, in spite of knowing that, I feel no grand duty to stick my nose into things that don’t concern me.

But—But the thing is... If the one behind these kinds of things was a human, the goal would usually be revenge, money, influence, or the like. But what about when it’s a Mazoku...?

Mazoku.

An existence which wishes for the destruction of the world. The natural enemy of all living things. With Ruby Eye Shabranigdo at their apex, and underneath him, five trusted subordinates: Hellmaster, Dynast, Deep Sea, Greater Beast, and Chaos Dragon. Further still under each of them are several high ranking Mazoku known as priests and generals...

Oh, and by the way, this story I’m telling you? To the average person, it’s just ancient history. Mazoku are not something people believe actually still threatens their very existence. However...the fact of the matter is, I’m always encountering and fighting with these exact beings.

Not to mention, in the past, I fought with General Sherra, who was under the command of Dynast Grausherra. But I’m also vaguely aware of the fact that Grausherra had three more subordinates. Their names are... Well...I’ll just say it seemed to me that Grausherra viewed his subordinates only as game pieces, because he didn’t put any particular care into naming them.

...Now, if you take all of that into account, can you see the pattern here?

“Dy”, “Nast”, “Grau”, and “Sherra...”

Yeah, you heard that right. Those are the names of his high-ranking, elite underlings. Please try not to laugh. And at that moment, the name of the person acting all suspicious in this city was “Norst.” ...Though actually...“Norst” and “Nast” aren’t really all that similar, are they? My bad.

There are a lot of lesser Mazoku with often monstrous appearances, but the higher ranking ones can take on forms that are completely indistinguishable from humans. Ultimately, it’s the high ranking Mazoku with human-like forms who end up infiltrating society, where they have the potential to carry out some devious plot or other.

Of course...I was probably over-thinking all of this. The possibility was much higher that it was a normal human who just happened to have a name similar enough to leave a sinking feeling in my gut. But, if I were to decide I was just over-thinking and ignore it, what if by some chance my worries were on the mark? What if at some point in the future, that oversight came back to bite me? I didn’t want to deal with all that annoying regret. Not to mention how close we were to my parents’ home. I couldn’t let this become someone else’s problem...! And therefore...

“...Old man, can you tell me where that Norst guy is staying?” ...I went ahead and asked him.

An ordinary town.

If I had to describe Latoka in a few words, that’s all I could really say. If the people who lived here heard that, they’d probably get angry at me. But if you asked ten travellers, seven or eight of them would answer the same way.

There were houses neatly lined up in rows. Scattered here and there among them were street stalls and shops. All kinds of people walked about on the street. The wheels of a passing horse-drawn cart kicked dust up into the air. A large main road crossed the city center. Not far from here, tucked away in a corner was the mayor’s residence. You wouldn’t exactly call it a grand mansion or anything, but it was a large house. A low hedge encircled the grounds, and the gardens were meticulously maintained.

...Now then, how should I approach this? At the entrance to the mayor’s residence, I was hesitating.

“Hey, Lina.” Gourry, who had been silent and spacing out until now, spoke to me.

“What?”

“Why exactly did we come to this house?”

“Uhh...”

...Come to think of it, I didn't explain a thing to Gourry... Should I tell him everything?
...*Nah.* To expect Gourry to comprehend the situation while playing ignorant, —with *his* personality, was probably an impossibly tall order. So, I had to handle it delicately.

“How should I say this... I'm a bit worried about some things, right? I have a suspicion that I need to confirm.”

“Yeah?”

Woohoo! He was interested in listening! Normally this would be the point to lay it out straight, but as things were, doing things this way was much more convenient.

But, as we were speaking, “Is there some business I can assist you with?”

Appearing as unexpectedly as the voice, from beneath the shadow of one the garden's trees, was a middle-aged man who, with his dirty work clothes, straw hat and thick gloves, was most certainly the gardener.

“...Ah, well actually, I'm a travelling sorceress named Lina. I was told that I might be able to speak to a Mr. Norst here. If I'm not intruding, I thought he might be someone that I know.” I said the most appropriate thing I could come up with on the spur of the moment.

“I see.” The gardener gentleman bowed his head, “Then it will be faster to take you to speak with him directly. Please follow me.” He spoke while briskly walking toward the entrance.

...Huh? I thought this guy was the gardener, but perhaps with his overly-polite way of speaking— Turning back now would have been too suspicious, I guess. I reluctantly followed him.

“Excuse me, you are...?”

“The master of this house.”

“You mean, you're the mayor!?”

“Well, that's one way of putting it.”

“That's—I'm sorry to trouble you,” I said, while panicking on the inside.

It looked like I had no choice but to meet Norst now. If this guy I'm about to meet is a normal human, it would be okay. However...if my concerns were justified, what would I do if he turned out to be a high ranking Mazoku of Dynast's?

Compared to when we fought against Sherra, this time I wouldn't have as many companions to fight with and I've also lost the means to amplify my magical power. Not to mention on top of that, the power level and kinds of spells at my disposal have been significantly reduced. If we were to end up clashing, I was somewhat doubtful we could win. For now, wasn't the best course of action to scope the enemy out while playing dumb, and then retreat?

We were invited by the mayor into the entryway, and guided to the guest room across from the entrance hall.

"Please take a seat and wait here," the mayor instructed us, and then quietly exited the room.

The interior design was not very flashy, but it was a pretty big guest room. There was a huge table and an equally huge sofa, upon which perhaps ten people could relax. The two of us sat down on the sofa and waited for a while... Then with a click, the door opened.

"Pardon me," came a voice as the man entered.

A tall and lanky nobleman entered, looking to be about thirty years old, with simply styled brown—nearly black—hair to about his shoulders. His moss green robes were embroidered with various intricate patterns in gold thread. They seemed a little big—or rather, they had the look of having been thrown on rather than worn properly, somehow.

Together, Gourry and I stood up from the sofa in a show of manners. When he looked at us, the man's face betrayed just a tiny bit of bewilderment.

"...I am Norst, here at your service," he said, while closing the door behind him. "The mayor told me that you said we might be acquainted... He said your name was Ms. Lita? Unfortunately, I don't believe I recognize—"

Lita? *Mr. Mayor, I think you might be losing your hearing.....* Actually...wait, this was perfect! Honestly, I wasn't expecting to waltz in there so easily and get a face-to-face meeting. Now, how would I weave this little tale...?

"Um, no, how should I put this... We're not directly acquainted with you, but rather...we're an acquaintance of an acquaintance, you could say." I kept idle conversation going while trying to keep my mind clear of anything that would give me away, "That's only just a possibility, mind you..."

“Oh? So then, what was the name of this acquaintance?” He asked, remaining nonchalant.

“Her name was *Sherra*, if I recall.”

The moment I said this, the door behind Norst began to bend and distort.

“...!?”

The decorative boards adorning the door began to twist into a peculiar pattern as they disassembled and divided, until eventually the door did not even resemble itself anymore. At the same time, the floor, walls, and ceiling began to separate and fade away. Before I knew it, the table and sofa had disappeared, and Norst had also gained some distance from us. In the end, even the walls had vanished completely. Inside that vast space in which remained only a floor and ceiling, Gourry and I faced the direction Norst had retreated.

“...I see.” A lax smile tugged at the corner of Norst’s mouth.

...Picking a fight without asking any questions first, huh, buddy!?

I’d assumed we would have an ambiguous conversation to feel each other out first and maybe play at formalities a bit longer, but...this was completely unexpected...! Furthermore, while it may seem obvious, there was no way a human sorcerer could have cast a spell like that without an incantation.

He’d definitely shown us his true colors...which was fine, I guess. But how were we supposed to escape now...!? But if I were to panic here, it’d be like confessing that we had no means of winning. So I deliberately, and with an air of calm, took a look at our surroundings.

“So this is some kind of barrier, right?” I asked, and Norst laughed with a small snort.

“You sure are complacent. I thought for sure you’d try to run first thing, so I created for us a place that doesn’t exist anywhere.”

“A place that doesn’t exist anywhere?”

“That’s right. A place that is both everywhere and nowhere at all. Consequently, nothing from outside can interfere and nothing inside can escape. No matter how much you run around looking for an exit, there isn’t one to be found. Yes, the spell will be broken if you defeat me, but how do you know you’ll return to the same place you left? After all, this place is everywhere and nowhere. Even if the spell is broken, you might end up inside a mountain, or in an unfamiliar city. Or maybe even drifting out at sea...?

“...That is, assuming you can defeat me.”

...Well that sure was a #@!#! troublesome thing to do... Essentially, it was impossible to escape...

"And? You said you're an acquaintance of Sherra's? What is your business here?"

"Before I answer that...there's something I want to confirm, just in case. With a name like 'Norst', you're a general or priest of Dynast's. Is that right?"

"To ask such a thing...you'd have to already know it ahead of time, wouldn't you?" A thin smile spread out across Norst's face. "You sure have some nerve... But you're exactly right. I am a subordinate of Dynast Grausherra—General Norst—And what of it? What is your business with me?"

And with that he began to exude an invisible, but palpable, whirlpool of naked bloodlust.



This situation is...super not good. There had to be some way to get the hell out of there...

"What do we do, Lina!? This guy - isn't he about to come for us!?" Gourry was starting to lose his cool...

"...*Lina*?" Norst's eyebrows knitted into a frown, "But I thought I heard your name was *Lita*?"

"The mayor must have misheard her!" said Gourry.

—*Dammit, Gourry.*

Norst appeared lost in thought for a moment...

"...No way, not *you*!" He turned his astonished gaze toward me, "*Lina Inverse*?"

...*Not good at all!*— To know about the whole Sherra business and then guess my full name just from hearing "Lina," it was safe to say this guy knew about me.

...When it comes to Mazoku, holding a grudge is deeply ingrained in their nature. From the moment I'd spoken Sherra's name, this jerk had abandoned any attempt to deceive us and instead locked us in this strange barrier. And since he'd discovered my identity, there really was no way to escape now. Pretending to be somebody else wasn't an option anymore, so the only way to break out of there was—

But before I could come up with something...Norst swayed—and began to make a move. Gourry and I immediately positioned ourselves to guard. Norst kneeled on the spot, and placed both palms on the floor.

"*Se—riou—sly...!*" He screamed, "There's no way! *No—freakin'—way!*"

"..."

"So that's it! And now me, too! I've been bad, after all! I'm a Mazoku! But I'm a general! Even without an assignment or whatever, I have a title and prestige to maintain, so I'm not allowed to just stand around doing nothing forever. It can't be helped! ...It can't be helped, so I planned things out carefully and meticulously, but I haven't done anything bad yet—and then, at the moment when it's finally time to actually do something, you show up all—'Good day. I'm Lina Inverse. I've come to defeat you!'—is that it!? Well!? There's seriously no way! *What the hell!?*"

He went on like that for a while, screaming in a tearful voice.

...*Uhhh... Wow...*

His reaction was so different from what I'd expected that I was completely at a loss—Our opponent was a high-ranking Mazoku, after all. I couldn't deny the possibility that this might've been some kind of weird plan to throw us off our guard...at least—maybe?

Instead of anticipating I would lob off a spell, Gourry spoke up, "Is Lina's name really that famous among you guys?"

"Huh!?" Upon hearing this, Norst stood back up, sporting a look I can only describe as 'offended,' and in a blubbery voice, repeated Gourry: "*Really that famous?*"

After finally dropping the stupid expression on his face, he added, "Defeating The Dark Lord by calling down 'THAT PERSON' into her body...! Furthermore, defeating Lord Hellmaster like it was nothing, kicking Lord Dynast to the curb, and then defeating The Dark Lord *again*! If someone like THAT wasn't famous, wouldn't that make us Mazoku completely oblivious!? Devoid of any sense of self-preservation!? Lacking any synergy!?"

I guess this pitiful display was the result of all of my battles with Mazoku leading up to now... With it all laid out in front of me like that—well...luck had also played a big role—but I guess I've quietly dealt the Mazoku a rather severe blow...

"Argh! Not just famous, but *SUPER* famous! I mean...! An angel of death to the Mazoku race! More than just a Demon Slayer, but frankly one even *Mazoku* step past out of clear revulsion!"

"*That* name again!?" I defensively raised my voice.

I've been called "The one that Dragons Step Past Out Of Clear Revulsion, aka *Dragon Spooker*," but now it seemed I'd earned myself *two* incredibly rude nicknames. And by the *Mazoku* no less...! *Goddammit*...

"That being said!"

"...Well, because there are all kinds of Mazoku, there are of course the types who want to get revenge no matter the cost and who get all worked up about it, right? But the opinion expressed by all the higher-ups, including myself, is that it's impractical to obsess about it. With the kind of military force we'd have to muster to turn the tables on you, we'd have to face the likelihood of getting our priorities backwards and ending up severely diminished!"

"In other words...you don't feel like fighting?" This time it was Gourry who spoke up.

"I don't!" Norst responded sharply and quite immediately.

“This is just my own personal opinion, but instead of squabbling over who is the strongest or the weakest, when it comes down to Lina Inverse vs. the Mazoku race, nothing but terrible things happen! Simply existing together is too incompatible!”

“Simply existing together, huh...?” A girl could get flustered with all this high praise.

“Ever since the time you called ‘THAT PERSON’ down into your body, some kind of residual interfering power has remained within you—we’ve concluded as such. But then, what about *before* ‘THAT PERSON’ was called down? It turned into a discussion, you see. And it comes down to this. Something that is unobtainable, even with all the knowledge of Mazoku, let alone that of humans... Something for which we are unable to determine any logical explanation, and can no longer claim is fate or affinity, there is no choice but to interpret it as ‘something that is ambiguous!’ There’s no counterargument to such a meaningless outcome! All I can do is say ‘*I don’t care!*’

“*NEVER—THE—LESS!* You came! Here you are!

“Without any advance notice or context, when you waltz in here like nobody’s business and proclaim ‘Here I am~♪’ or what have you, what the hell am I supposed to do!?” After loudly complaining for quite some time, Norst suddenly straightened himself out, and bowed very deeply, “In conclusion, I sincerely ask for your forgiveness. Somehow! Just this once!”

.....

“Um...”

Even if you mobilized the army and all the sorcerers of an entire nation, it’s doubtful that you would win against a high-ranking Mazoku such as this one. So to have to handle Norst—who was behaving like a malignant malcontent—with kid gloves...? Well, I didn’t know what he expected me to do with his dissatisfied attitude.

“Ah-hah! Then how about this!? If the two of you are returned to Latoka safely, I’ll make my way out of town! And, a bonus offer! I won’t show myself again for five—no—*ten* years! I swear I won’t lay a hand on any humans! In exchange, you’ll leave this place without putting up a fight and go home quietly, and if we should happen to pass each other again in some city in the future, I’ll pretend I don’t know you. And perhaps you could just look the other way too!”

Somehow, he had come up with a compromise all on his own —*This guy...jeez. What am I, chopped liver?* ...To be honest, this exchange was starting to make me kind of mad. In spite of that, this wasn’t an opponent it would be wise to hastily pick a fight with.

“...Fine by me, if that’s all.”

“Yes!” Norst finally grinned in relief and struck a guts pose.

OK, now I’m pissed.

“Well then,” he said, “there’s no time like the present...”

“It *is* the present.”

Ignoring the dig I’d taken at him, Norst made some kind of gesture. He must have done *something* because the countless strange patterns swirling all over the floor and ceiling took prominence and filled my field of vision. And—

Before I knew it, Gourry and I were standing in an unfamiliar town.

The wind blew. The rattling of a cart wheel went by...

“...Ummm...”

After reminiscing here for a little while, I asked the old man on the bench, “This isn’t the town of Latoka, near Zephyr City, is it?”

“*Se-fir*...? What’s that?”

...*Uh-oh*... “Okay, then, **which kingdom’s** territory is this city part of?”

“Which...” the old man began, this time while frowning. “Well, a very long time ago, this territory was under Luzilte rule.”

Out of the old man’s mouth had come the name of a kingdom I didn’t know—Did that mean we were in a small kingdom somewhere in the Alliance of Coastal States?

“Well ... he sure got us...” *Scratch scratch*. I scratched my head.

“Got us? Got what exactly?” Gourry asked.

I raised a single finger; “This is harassment! That Norst guy ‘got us’ by sending us from that weird space where he had us trapped to a completely different city somewhere!”

“...But didn’t he say he was going to return us to where we were?”

"He didn't say that exactly. What he said was that we'd be '*returned to the city of Latoka.*' Although the name of this place appears to be Latoka, we were tricked and sent to a completely different town that's also named Latoka."

Occasionally, even though they're in different places, there are towns with the same name by coincidence. I had the feeling that was the case here.

"He wouldn't fight, but figured at the very least he could harass us, I guess... Jeez!"

Growing up, I used to play a game called Chutes and Ladders. There were times when, just before the goal, I would get returned to the start... I never imagined it would happen in reality! Just before reaching my hometown, I had been carried far, far away. Oh well. It wasn't as if I'd been travelling in any particular hurry. If this was how it had to be, no big deal. Just a matter of enjoying the trip while heading home.

I addressed the old man again, "To tell you the truth, it looks like we've gotten quite lost while on the road...so I'd really like to know if there's a Sorcerers' Guild in town?"

Once again, the old man rotely tilted his head and furrowed his eyebrows in a frown. ".....No, I've never heard of one."

"Then perhaps, would you happen to know if there's a large city nearby with a Sorcerers' Guild?" *Maybe if I keep asking...*

"Hmm. No..." The furrow in the old man's eyebrows deepened, and he looked up at me regretfully. "I'm very sorry, but I don't really know anything about this 'Sorcerers' Guild'..."

"Ah, I see." It was right then that I realized I'd made a bad assumption.

The Sorcerers' Guild ... As you might have expected from the name, it's a guild comprised of sorcerers. In other words, an organization for mutual cooperation of magic users. You would usually find them in big cities, but there are branches all over the place. They mostly deal in magic items, but at some locations you can make long-distance calls to other branches.

Here's the thing, though. For a sorceress like myself, it's only a matter of finding a location and going there. But the average person with no relation to magic whatsoever would have no interest in or use for one. So even if you were in a town with a branch, it should come as no surprise when someone like that pays it no mind. And since that seemed to be the case here, I needed to find a place to gather information.

"...Then, where can I find an inn in this town?"

"Ahh. *That* I can..." The old man finally broke into a proud smile, and started giving me directions...

...*Ugh*... A disappointed groan almost escaped my throat, but I managed to stop it at the last moment.

On the first floor was a restaurant and tavern that ran until late, and up on the second floor were the guest rooms. And my opinion of this particular inn was...well, how do I put it nicely? When I first arrived here, the impression I got was that this was somebody's very messy house. Even compared to the houses around it, the inn didn't stand out as much larger or fancier.

Actually, I thought I had arrived at the wrong place, but right there next to the entrance door, in writing that looked like it was scratched out by a child, was a signboard that said 'INN,' so it must have been the right place... But, it kind of felt like somebody's regular old home and, because there were a couple of empty rooms, they decided to rent them out to travellers sometimes. That sort of thing.

"What's wrong, Lina?" Gourry, who had been loitering behind me absentmindedly, spoke up. "Don't just stand around here; let's hurry up and go in the inn."

"...You know, Gourry—"

"What now?"

While turning around to look over my shoulder, I nervously pointed to the building right in front of us. "—It seems this is the place..."

Gourry, meanwhile, had a smile spread across his whole face. "...Where?"

"No. Really."

This time, Gourry's smile froze in place. "...Huh?—So, this is where we're staying tonight?"

"No, no. The reason I was looking for an inn was to find a place where people are gathered and see if we can't pick up some useful information."

The time was still just a little before noon. If by chance there was a large city nearby, we could travel that way instead. There was no reason to bother staying here. So, from the standpoint of gathering information... "We're going in anyway..."

"I don't think there are any other customers..."

Sheesh, Gourry, why don't you tell me how you really feel? Well...actually, I agreed with him, but that's beside the point.

As a last stop before trying the inn, I decided to set off toward a street lined with shops and street stalls nearby. There I discovered a fruit seller. I couldn't say it was a big place, but, unexpectedly, the storefront was lined with a variety of unusual items. From the display, I picked up two apples.

"Auntie! Two of these, please!" If I spoke to the owner of this store, maybe...

"Of course! That'll be 4 corsena."

Sure enough, a currency I didn't recognize. Like the old man from before, there was a bit of an accent to her speech. Given the name of the currency, I would often have a clue as to which kingdom I'm in, but...I didn't know of anything called "corsena..."

"Can I use copper coins from another kingdom?"

"Are you folks travellers? I don't know if I can do that..."

"Then can I pay with silver coins, and receive change?"

"Well, that should be fine."

Business negotiations: concluded! Often the currency and names of money differ from kingdom to kingdom. Some kingdoms' copper coins cannot be used in other kingdoms, so this wasn't all that unusual. However, when the material of the coin itself is valuable, such as with gold and silver coins, then there are many flexible ways to exchange like this.

I handed over the silver coins, then looked at the copper change I'd received. Upon one side of the coin was engraved a design of a seashell that I didn't recognize.

"By the way, auntie, I have something I'd like to ask you about... I thought that this kingdom was located around the Alliance of Coastal States. Which region of the Alliance are we in?"

"...Huh?" She stared at me with a vacant expression as I asked her the same question over again. Her smile gradually wilted into a frown, and eventually I went silent.

"I'm very sorry, but what are you talking about? That '*All-i-ance-of-Coast-al-States*' thing?"

"...Huh?" It was my turn to stare vacantly... *Ohhh nooo...*

It could have been that auntie here was just a regular person who wasn't interested in politics or anything like that, and who didn't know the names of kingdoms in faraway places... However...not knowing the alliance to which one's own kingdom belonged? ...That was not normal.

"Um, you see...close to the ocean, a number of different kingdoms all allied themselves ... isn't this country one of them?"

"...Hmm...I'm not very well-informed about the kingdom, but I've never heard of it being allied with anybody."

...*What the...?* Woo. A chill had just run up my spine. Then a thought came to mind ...but I was desperately trying to deny it.

"Ah. Then, have you ever heard the names of any of these kingdoms? Ralteague, Zephilia, Saillune, Lyzeille—" One by one, I listed off the names of every kingdom I knew, and the shop owner kept apologetically shaking her head 'no'...

"W—Well... Well then, can you tell me the names of every kingdom *you* know?" As I asked her this, she was beginning to look suspicious.

"Well, alright, but I really don't know that much. Let's see—"

What she answered with was..... The name of a kingdom I didn't know, another name of a kingdom I didn't know, another name of a kingdom I didn't know—and the more I listened, the more I became aware that the blood was draining from my face.

"...but *this* kingdom is Luzilte—Hey you, are you okay!? You've gone white as a sheet!"

"...I—I'm... I'm fine..." The more clearly I understood, the more my voice faltered.

"Are you really okay, Lina!? What happened!?"

"Ah...I understand." I answered Gourry, who seemed to be worried about me, in a faint voice.

"What is it?"

An unfamiliar townscape. Unusual fruit. A distinct accent. But those things were normal around here. Auntie didn't know the names of the kingdoms I named, I didn't know the names of the countries she named. Which means—*Oh, I really don't want to think about it*—It wasn't really a laughing matter, but I half-heartedly chuckled and informed Gourry.

“...I know where we are. We’ve jumped beyond the Desert of Destruction and into the world outside of the Mazoku barrier...”

There’s a legend from long ago... In the past, there was a battle between the gods and demons of this world.

On one side, Flare Dragon Ceifeed. On the other, Ruby Eye Shabranigdu.

Ceifeed, who wanted to protect the world, and Shabranigdu, who wanted to destroy it. Each battled the other until eventually they both began to run out of power. The weakened Ceifeed divided his power into four pieces - the four elements - to create a four-pillared Dragon King. The also weakened Shabranigdu was split into seven pieces and his mind sealed into human bodies. As he was reincarnated over and over again, he awaited a chance to revive.

And then, a thousand years ago... Aqualord, who was safeguarding the Kataart Mountains to the north, was challenged to battle by the Mazoku. At the same time, a fragment of the Dark Lord was revived. Furthermore, four of his distinguished subordinates, Hellmaster, Dynast, Greater Beast, and Deep Sea, had deployed a barrier over a large portion of the continent surrounding the Kataart Mountains. As a result of this conflict, Aqualord was destroyed. However, they say that the resurrected fragment of the Dark Lord was again sealed away in ice.

Today, the areas we inhabit—which include my homeland of Zephilia, the Alliance of Coastal States, and Saillune—are limited by Hellmaster’s barrier. At the edge of the Elmekian Empire stretches out the “Desert of Destruction”, the geography of which forms an impassable land bridge. Access by sea is also blocked by the barrier...or perhaps there was never any suitable sea route to begin with. In any case, it’s not possible to come from or go to “the outside” through the barrier.

No... “It *wasn’t* possible” might be the correct way to say it. The fact of the matter was that right then, it was unimaginable that this place was anything but “the outside.”

“*Se—riou—sly...*”

I plopped onto an empty wooden crate that had been left in an alleyway beside the fruit seller’s shop, eating my apple for the time being, “There’s no way...” I muttered, with no conviction.

“Lina, you seem really depressed. You’re starting to sound like that Norst guy.” Gourry said to me, while standing at my side and also eating his apple.

“...You’re not troubled in the slightest, are you?...”

"Well, there's no reason to panic, right?"

...*Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa*... I sighed very deeply, "...You don't get it, Gourry..."

"Get what?"

"...It appears that right now, we're outside the Mazoku barrier... Somewhere beyond the Desert of Destruction."

"So you said." Gourry said, talking as though this were someone else's problem.

"I have no idea how far away or where exactly this city is!"

"I suppose."

"I don't know if we can even get back to where we were!"

"...That may be..."

...*Yup, he doesn't get it. He really doesn't get it.*

"Which means!" I proclaimed miserably. "If we can't, Milsa's tasty fish market, the perfect fall flavor of Nigitage Saute, the Otar Sea Bream wherein gods dwell, Mineva's green-winged duck -which is always overflowing with umami and richness- and all the other tasty cuisines of our homeland, we won't be able to eat them anymore!"

Thud.

"...Seriously..." (Gourry had face-planted on the spot.) "...There's no way..." From his eyes, huge streams of tears began to flow.

You're crying!?

"...Lina... I...really—what do we do from here...?"

I was also wallowing in depression, but there were other things I was depressed about besides food. It was better to turn things around and think positively.

"...Well... I understand your feelings all too well. But you know, Gourry, you're way too quick to fall into despair." Slowly, I stood up from my crate.



“Certainly, I was also feeling anxious, but all hope is not lost!”

“.....?”

Gourry dimly looked my way, and to encourage him (but really for myself more than anyone else), I vigorously nodded my head. “That’s right! If you think about it, there might be flavors that are only found here! There’s gotta be something delicious!”

“Yeah!” A light burned in Gourry’s eyes.

“Trying delicious foods while travelling all over the place! Searching for a way to go home! If there’s ground beneath our feet, we can keep walking! If there’s an ocean, we just need to find a boat!”

“Definitely!” Gourry, once again at full power, stood up. Into my eyes, he gazed earnestly. “Besides...if I think about it, I’m not alone! Lina! You’ll be together with me!”

“.....” *Wai...!?* *What is this man suggesting so suddenly!?* I felt my face getting hot. For a moment, I was at a loss for words.

Gourry continued, “Because you’re here, I don’t have to worry about making ends meet for our travelling expenses! That aspect of you is really reliable!—Are you alright? You’re making a weird face.”

“...Ah. No. Yes.”*Oh, is that all? ARRRGGGG.....*

I sucked in my breath, “Anyway! Now that that’s decided, we mobilize at once! Let’s gather all sorts of information around here, and depending on what we hear, we leave here at once!”

“Yeah! I’ll leave the information gathering of our whereabouts to you!” Gourry energetically spat out such a reliable-sounding line. But the energy was the only thing! How was I supposed to find anything about what he said reliable at all!?

Thus, Gourry and I, who had been unceremoniously chucked to “the outside” as a means of harassment, set off on our journey to our homeland...

Regardless of whether you’re talking about “the inside” or “the outside” of the Mazoku barrier, the way people live their lives basically never changes. There are, after all, the same kinds of activities. For example—

“...Hey you! If you take off everything you own and leave it behind, you just might be able to save your life. Sounds good, eh?”

Block the path of travellers on the road. Steal some stuff while spitting out horribly cliché lines. Stick pointy weapons in their faces... What I was saying is that, as expected, such a lot had shown itself before us.

“If you leave Latoka and follow the road, by evening you will reach the slightly larger city of Marisida.” After hearing this tidbit, I'd immediately set off with Gourry in tow, but... It wasn't long before we stopped seeing any pedestrian traffic. And then about ten men suddenly appeared in our way whose fashion choices just screamed *“oh, these guys are bandits,”* with tattoos on their cheeks, shirtless torsos, and mohawks. And while they were flashing their short swords at us,

“Eh!? Whatcha gonna do!?”

...Ah. If you ask if I'm gonna do something, then of course—

“Fireball!”

Kaboooooom!

The ball of light that I released impacted directly in the center of the group of bandits blocking the path and exploded, and every last one of them was blown away. While Mr. Originality at the front there had been regurgitating every bandit line in the book, I had already cast my spell in advance.

...Now then. I made certain that there were no undefeated stragglers before us, and turned around. A little further up ahead was a different band of five or six more men.

Ah-hah. Of course. Group 1 stands in front, making speeches at the prey to distract them, while Group 2 swoops in from behind. This too is a frequent strategy in *Banditry For Dummies*—But, because the men in Group 2 had all just witnessed the destruction of their friends at the business end of my attack spell, they were frozen in place with their mouths agape.

I began to recite another spell...and just before it was finished,

“W-W-Waaaait!” One of the other group, this one wearing a bear pelt, called out in a panicked voice. “I acknowledge your power! We'll back off! So—”

“So don't do anything and *pleeease* overlook us?” I cooed at him and the color drained from the faces of the other bandits.

"Feh! Don't be cheeky! We're not bandits because we like it or anything! Since I was a kid, my deadbeat parents gave me hell!—"

"I see... If you think about it, certainly, there isn't anyone who chooses to become a bandit because they like it."

"R...right!?"

"I *do* sympathize with your past."

"Then...!"

"Of course, as a result of your word choice, I unconsciously think, 'In that case, this lot shouldn't be giving *me* hell.' Similarly, since you've probably been giving other people hell by taking things that don't belong to you, right now I feel no duty to go easy on you at all, so..."

"...Huh...?"

I smiled sweetly—

The satisfying rumble of a second *Fireball* reverberated through the forest.

"...And, what do we do next, Lina?" Gourry asked me over breakfast the next day. We were not having breakfast at an inn, by the way—

We'd arrived in Marisida yesterday afternoon, and while this place was certainly large in scale, it didn't seem to be all that crowded with people. Unlike an established city, it gave the impression that two or three smaller villages had been hastily fit together, and was not quite halfway to becoming properly developed.

I'd searched for an inn yesterday, trudging all around the city, but compared to where we were on "the inside" of the barrier, there were hardly any houses over two stories that could be considered large buildings. The number of stores was not all that great either; it felt like they were scattered around in about the same ratio as in Latoka.

But more confusing than anything else compared to back "over there," there were hardly any establishments designed with travellers in mind. The inn I found in Marsida at least wasn't as pitifully small as the one in Latoka, but in the end there were only a few overnight rooms available and they didn't come with a meal. In other words, it was like telling the customer to "*go find breakfast and dinner somewhere else.*" When there's a restaurant on the first floor of an inn, after you have dinner, you can go right back up to your room and rest. And if you get up first

thing in the morning, you can go down to the first floor and have a meal. I'd gotten used to that sort of system "over there", so this felt a bit inconvenient.

However, once you left the inn, until fairly late at night and starting early in the morning, there were various stalls where you could find food, so it's not like I couldn't eat anything at all. The two of us had stopped for breakfast at one of these stalls.

Flat noodles made of wheat (or something), slightly bland and thickened with a vegetable sauce, and topped with a strong-tasting marinated minced meat: This was a dish you could probably have found "over there", but around here it was apparently called "soury." The familiar flavor was welcome and it was quite tasty, but there only seemed to be these small stalls, and the menu variation was limited and the portions conservative. We were seated on wooden crates in place of chairs, and at the moment, Gourry and I had each put away two bowls worth and were relaxing, discussing what we would do from here on out.

"Let's see..." When asked, I thought about it for a bit, "Going for a third bowl would be fine, but I was thinking of trying out a couple other stalls. That *yakiniku*-or-whatever place looks like a safe choice, but, since I can imagine the taste... I want to try for a dish that I wouldn't find very often. Of course there's a risk that you won't find the taste agreeable, but if that's the case, you don't have to eat it..."

She's talking about food!? I hear you screaming, but you mustn't laugh. Food and sleep are the absolute most basic of the basics when it comes to sustaining life!

And actually, becoming acquainted with the taste of ingredients in an unfamiliar place is quite important. There were a number of differences in what you would find "over there" compared to where we were now. In the first place, there were a bunch of ingredients I didn't even *recognize*.

If there comes a time when you need to sleep outdoors and gather your own food, as long as it's about the same as what you saw and tasted at a restaurant, it's probably fine. On the other hand, there is the danger of inadvertently consuming poisonous things if you go eating stuff you've never seen before. So in order to make a proper judgement, you need to know as many of these ingredients as possible.

"Mm, but after that...?"

I went to respond but swallowed my words halfway through. There was something abuzz in the air. When I became aware of this sensation, I turned my gaze towards the source of it. On the roadside a little ways from us, an armed troupe was walking.

Is this a vigilante group or something? There looked to be about twenty people, and not unlike the city of Marisida itself, they were unable to disguise the mismatched sort of feeling they were giving off. Only about five of them were...soldier-ish, reinforced with armor, helmets,

spears, and so forth... The other ones had makeshift weapons and wore poor excuses for armor. From the manner in which they carried their equipment and the way they marched, I could clearly tell they hadn't acquired proper battle training.

Each of their expressions, rather than of fighting spirit or tension, were full of fear... *This is...*

"Let's go, Gourry. I'm putting off the food stall tour." I said, and finished paying the bill for our order.

"Yeah!" said Gourry, standing up.

The two of us jogged over opposite to where the armed troupe was.

"...Isn't this kind of unusual, Lina? You sticking your neck into things of your own accord?"

"I also don't want to deal with something troublesome, but we should gain the confidence of the people of the city, right?"

Of course, depending on the nature of the conflict, there may not have been anything more valuable than trust to be gained, but... "—Excuse me!"

When they heard my voice as we approached, all of them stopped marching and turned around towards us. "...What is it?" The one who'd spoken up appeared to be the leader. He had a full red beard, was about thirty years old, and had the air of a soldier about him.

"We're a travelling sorceress and mercenary, so—" I lowered my voice, "by any chance...did something happen?"

As I spoke to the soldier, he stared at me and Gourry, sizing us up.

"*Sorceress*... Is that like a magician?"

The expressions of the downcast soldiers began to light up. I guess, around here, the term "sorceress" wasn't recognized. At any rate...

"Well, basically."

"That's great! Lend us your power! We'll pay you back!"

"That depends on your story."

“...Let’s talk while we’re walking; this is urgent.” By the time he had finished speaking, the soldier was already setting off.

“Okay.” I answered and followed after him.

“I’m Bronco. I’m this city’s head soldier. The people behind us are my subordinates.”

To be perfectly frank, most of them look like amateurs— I swallowed my retort. “I’m Lina. Lina Inverse. And this one over here is my companion, Gourry. We’re in the middle of journeying around aimlessly... In any case, I felt like I ought to, so I just called out. So? Did something happen?”

“.....” At my question, Bronco frowned bitterly and went quiet for just a moment, “...I don’t know a good way to put this—I’m not confident I can explain it properly. At any rate, come with us. Perhaps you may be able to understand the details.”

“...Is it serious?”

“...It may be my imagination...but it’s possible...” He defiantly kept his expression neutral, but he still looked rather pale. Bronco continued, “In the worst case scenario, it may be the end of Marisida...”

The moment we saw **it**, everyone suddenly stopped walking.

“...What ... is that?—” From among us came astonished whispers that quickly turned fearful. The spectacle that was before us...it must have been very shocking to them.

“—I don’t know...” Bronco’s reply was also wavering. “But ... there’s something like a monster around here; that I’m sure of.”

“Speaking of which... I heard from my old man—” another one of the armored soldiers spoke up, “A long time ago when he was still just a child, and when Marisida wasn’t as big as it is now, a vicious Greater Demon appeared in this city. He said that the city was about to be destroyed... At that time, a hundred soldiers were dispatched from the royal capital, and although they were able to defeat the Demon, half of the soldiers died. Marisida is about to be destroyed again, so—no way...! That thing revived...!”

“Don’t say reckless things!” Bronco sharply rebuked, “I know that old story too! But, that kind of thing—we can’t just sit back and let it happen!”

“Then please tell me, Bronco! Why do this!? Can we really do it with this morale!?”

While they all continued to argue like this...I was hanging my head in repentance. *I'm so very sorry...*

The soldier continued, "We are thoroughly out of our league! That bandit gang was outright annihilated! The ground—the ground is all burned to a crisp! If it wasn't a monster that did this, then what the hell did!?"

...I'm sorry teacher. It was me.

Bronco and the others, *who are completely screw*—er, I mean... The place that Bronco and the others had brought us to was the road that connected Marisida and Latoka... Where yesterday, as fate would have it, in this exact spot, I blew up a group of bandits who'd picked a fight with us by pitching out two Fireballs. Naturally, because of that, on the ground there were two giant grill marks. As everyone looked at them, they were panicking, cowering, and fearing the resurrection of a legendary Mazoku...

So, that's the reason they're shaking in their boots. Whoops.

—But...from this reaction, I wondered if they were not very aware of the existence of a spell like *Fireball*... Even back "over there," it isn't quite so common that every single sorcerer could use it or anything, but it's common enough that it's a spell you'd know the name of. After all, it's the kind of thing you might see in battle against an opponent. So even if you're not a sorcerer, if you're a typical warrior or mercenary, you'd at least be aware of something like "an attack where a ball of light flies through the air and explodes on contact." You'd expect that there should be at least that much knowledge about it...

"We're...done for..." The soldiers fell to their knees, and begin weeping...

"...Lina..." At that moment, Gourry placed his hand on my shoulder with pat, "...I think it's better if you tell them sooner."

"...Yeah, I guess..." Reluctantly, I raised my hand, "...Um—"

When Bronco noticed I was about to speak, he did a sudden about-face. "Please wait! After seeing something like this, I really understand how you might feel like running away! I won't tell you to fight with us! But at the very least, I beg you! Anything you've noticed, or anything you can do is fine! Please tell me!"

"...Uhh...It's really hard to say this, but..."

"It doesn't matter! Whatever truth you lay upon me, I am prepared to accept it!"

"...That." I pointed, "...I did it."

“.....”

Bronco, who had been frozen for a while, finally blinked. “...Huh?”

His eyes are scary. They're beyond scary. While reflexively averting my gaze, I stammered, “Ah. No. Because. That's—Yesterday, just a bit... Gourry and I...tangled with some bandits here... My spell...how should I say this—blew them all to smithereens...”

“...Ahh—” As if he'd realized something really significant, Bronco's expression changed completely. Then, with a gentle gaze, “You're trying to quiet our fears, huh? ...If everyone believes your little white lie, it will put them at ease... However, we've got to protect Marisida! No matter...no matter what kind of monster our opponent is: even if we have no chance of winning the battle...” With a heroically tragic look, he gazed into the distant sky.

...Ah—This was the type of guy who, no matter how I said it, wouldn't believe me. In that case... *It can't be helped...* I recited the incantation, and aimed towards a spot away from everyone.

“Fireball.”

All of them prostrated themselves before me.

So sorry. Seriously sorry.

As we entered the lively tavern, I overheard the neighbors nearby complaining that the noise level was too high. From within, “GYAHAHAHAHA!”...and other raucous behavior. It was so loud that there wasn't a single moment you couldn't hear someone who was drunk and laughing wildly.

In the end, on the road back there—Once everyone was convinced that I was the one who'd done it, they came to see reason and were actually quite grateful that I'd eradicated the bandits. And the moment we returned to Marisida, they'd immediately broken into a bout of feasting, drinking, and revelry to celebrate.

It was early evening, but still too early for dinner. While I suppose it was possible that they'd really had a lot of resentment for those bandits, it was equally as possible they just really wanted an excuse to drink.

Bronco called out to the soldiers and vigilantes that were waiting nearby and summoned them over, about forty or fifty altogether. They couldn't all fit into the tavern, so more than half of them were drinking outside. *I'm seriously worried that the neighbors are going to toss us out.*

“—My! Anyway, Ms. Lina! Your magic is really something awesome!” Bronco took off his armor and helmet. He had a wild red mane and beard, and due to the nature of his job, I guess, also a keen glint in his eye and sturdy physique... Long story short, the entire package made him look like a *punk*.

Forgive me for saying so, but if I ran into him unexpectedly on the street at night without him announcing his presence first, I’d probably pop off a spell without a second thought and murmur “*whew, that was a close one*” or something as a result.

“*Fireball*, is it? If you can do that with just that one spell...! Even among the great magicians at the royal capital, there probably aren’t many who can do something like that!”

While Bronco was singing our praises, Gourry was gnawing on the bones of his chicken leg. Without bothering to stop, he asked me, “Lina, is that spell of yours really so great?”

“Of course it is!” Bronco enthusiastically jumped in, “That level of magic—! ...Ah, no. Mr. Gourry, since you’re by Ms. Lina’s side all the time, you might be used to it already. But ordinarily, that level of magic is not something you’d be able to just see any day of the week! Rather, unless you’re part of the royal family or one of the royal court’s magicians or something like that, you’d probably never even get the opportunity to see magic *ever*.”

“In fact, except for just this afternoon, I’d only seen it one time, when I was just a kid. It wasn’t such an amazing technique, though. But, in an instant they turned some vertically striped handkerchiefs into horizontally striped ones. It was something like that.”

Magic!? That!? There are various retorts I wanted to make here, but certainly, it seemed that “over here,” *real* magic wasn’t all that prevalent, I guess you could say. Even Bronco, whose job it was to fight, had almost no knowledge regarding magic. I wager this meant that he had probably never encountered an opponent who could use spells.

“Court sorcer— ...that’s not it. *Magician*, is what you said...” Honestly, I was getting confused by the subtle differences in the semantics. But in any case, I asked Bronco a question, “That means, if I go to the royal capital, is there a Sorcerers’ Guild—or rather, is there a guild or a school of magicians or something like that?”

“A guild or a school of magicians, you say...?” Bronco’s eyebrows creased in thought; “I’ve never heard of one... Although, just because I don’t know of one doesn’t mean that there isn’t one to be found, but..... I’ve heard that the Ceifeed Church’s high priest can perform miracles of the gods, but it’s probably not the kind of guild or school you’re after...”

...Admittedly, there was a Ceifeed Church here in Marisida city. Gourry and I visited it together yesterday. But the priests and priestess there weren’t able to use any particular magic or anything that I was aware of. Back “over there,” demonstrating the church’s blessing is extremely straightforward. Priests who can use healing magic at about the level of a simple

Recovery are commonplace. Only yesterday, I wasn't thinking that deeply about how much churches "over here" differ in their conventional practices, but...

"Hm... Then, Bronco, if you don't mind, could you tell us the way to get to the royal capital?"

"Well, that's not a problem at all! I can draw you a simple map, too. Oh, by the way, in the capital, Parvassos, there's a guard who's an acquaintance of mine. I will even write you a letter of introduction!"

Well, that certainly leaves nothing to be desired. "I am extremely grateful, but right now, I don't think I'm in a position to repay you at all. Is there perhaps something I can get for you at the royal capital...?"

I stuffed down all my inner worries. The best thing to do for the time being was to stuff my face instead. While pleasantly chatting with Bronco and the others, I savored a number of unfamiliar delicacies.

Chapter 2

The Most Powerful Spells Are Not Necessarily the Good Ones.

The color of greenery. The smell of the wind. *No matter where you go, these things never change.*

Though I always thought that was the case, now that I was really paying attention, they do actually vary. To gaze at all of the green flora around here as a whole, it mostly appeared to be all the same. But to approach and study each and every plant closely, among them were mostly unfamiliar kinds of trees, and strange flowers.

Actually, compared to “over there,” no matter where I looked, so far I'd not really been able to find any of the popular raw materials I needed for magic items. I'd seen all sorts of things that I'd liked to have researched, but there were far more important things to be prioritized just then.

At dawn the next day, after departing the city of Marisida, and while heading toward the royal capital of Parvassos, we stopped at a fork in the road. I took out the handwritten note Bronco had written up for us from my chest pocket, and unfolded it to check. Rather than a map, it was more of a simple scrap of parchment with directions written out on it. Separately, a letter of introduction had been prepared. Bronco had also given me some of the bounty for exterminating the bandits on top of everything else.

“...I didn't want to say anything, but...” Gourry said, suddenly looking at the note from my side, “that guy was really considerate, but his handwriting is awful.”

On the note were roads drawn with lines, and writing indicated points along them, but to be honest, I couldn't read it. I couldn't read it, but—

“It's not that the handwriting is bad, it's that the letters are different from the ones we use.”

“Different letters!?” Gourry's voice cracked into a falsetto.

“Looks that way. After all, ‘there’ and ‘here’ were divided a thousand years ago. Since there's been no mingling of cultures or anything, it appears as though many things are done a bit differently, or have changed entirely. At first, I thought the manner of speech used by people around here was improper, or a local accent, or something along those lines.

“I guess we're pretty lucky that there's not that big a variation in the language itself. If there was, it would have been impossible to communicate with anybody in the first place, I

suppose. Anyway, it seems that the style of written letters has changed in some ways - not that Bronco has bad handwriting, you see."

When we'd first been transported to "here's" Latoka city, I had thought that the inn's signboard was written very crudely, but that wasn't the case. The level of variation could be described as the letters themselves having the same basic shapes, but a shifted balance... Come to think of it, perhaps the letters from "here" weren't the ones that had changed over the last thousand years, but instead, ours were the ones that had.

"Then, you can't read anything that's written?"

"I can understand *some* of what's written, but..."

"You can understand it even if the letters are different? How do you manage that?"

"A single portion of the shape of the letters, or the spelling of a word might be different, but shouldn't have changed to that large of a degree. After all, the spoken word hasn't changed that much. As an example, I'm looking at a combination of letters that don't look quite the same as ours, but that make a similar impression.

"See, because it's a note that shows directions: east, south, west, north, left, right; and mountains, rivers, and so on, I can take these letters here to be the words for those directions and topographical features. With that in mind, you should be able to generally surmise what's written, right?"

"Oh! That's amazing!"

".....Well, as you might expect, not all of the letters can be properly read, though. For example, like this—" I pointed to one part of the note, "We're supposed to go left on this road now, according to the directions, but beyond that, something called a 'bus stop' is indicated here. This 'bus' thing? I don't know what it means. I wonder if it's a stagecoach or a ship or something."

"Well, we can just go there and find out."

"Yeah, I guess so." I nodded, and put the note back into my chest pocket, and we followed the directions to the left.

"But Lina, if we go to that royal capital place, isn't that just asking for *something* to happen?"

"Be that as it may, if we don't go, that's like asking for *nothing* to happen at all."

While walking, Gourry and I chatted with one another. On the left were all manner of trees, and on the right, a huge meadow. Not a single thing passed us by. Was it because it wasn't all that big of a road, or because there weren't many travellers or merchants in the area? There were also weeds sprouting up conspicuously in the middle of the road.

"Where we are right now, what route to take to get back, things like that... If we could obtain *that* kind of information, that would be the best. But, there's also the problem of travel expenses."

"Do we not have enough?"

"Ultimately, I can't even estimate how much it will take to cover our expenses. Of course, I still have gold coins, and it looks like I can exchange them here. But I worry about whether that will be enough. Also, I have a lot of magic items that I could exchange, but...even if those could serve as currency, there doesn't seem to be anything like a Sorcerers' Guild 'here.' So even if I found a shopkeep to sell them to, without an understanding of what they are, they'll probably just be considered junk.

"Therefore, if we go to the royal capital, even though it might not be ideal, I can look for a place that will deal me a decent, or at the very least, *reasonable* sum. And of course, in regards to our route, I want to obtain the most accurate information possible, as quickly as possible."

To put it in very simple terms, "over there" and "over here" are separated by the Desert of Destruction to the south of Elmekia; so, if we were to head north, we should be able to get closer—while technically accurate, there are most likely sections of terrain that can't be crossed in a direct manner and instead require a roundabout path. If we'd had something useful, like, say, a map with a rough approximation of the entire world drawn out, it would have made things really simple. But that wasn't going to happen. Something like that would be at the level of a national secret, so it wasn't something an ordinary person could get their hands on.

Now you may be thinking, *for your average peace-loving citizens like Gourry and me, why would a map be a national secret?* Well, the fact is that the existence - or nonexistence - of such an item would have a huge influence on all kinds of things. Take for example a situation where a war is to break out. Suppose some kingdom is trying to invade a neighboring kingdom. Now imagine that somewhere, there's a thoroughly drawn map of that neighboring kingdom's roads, towns, mountains, and rivers.

Conversely, imagine that you have no geographical data at all about them. Which situation makes it easiest to invade and which means you cannot advance carelessly really goes without saying, right? Advancing a large army without knowing the topography or anything else could mean constantly becoming entrapped by the terrain. If things go poorly, it wouldn't be unlikely to suffer severe losses without even fighting a single battle.

To sum it all up, every kingdom in the world fundamentally thinks, *while I want a detailed map of my own kingdom, we'd have to be cautious about leaking it to another kingdom*. So naturally, for travellers and common folk, there's no way to get your hands on one. That would seem to be the same case whether you're "over there" or "over here," I suppose.

Of course, where the big roads are, where they're connected, and so forth? Such things are known to some extent among peddlers and travelers. If that was also the case here and we were to go to the royal capital, I was hopeful we'd be able to hear what the peddlers and travellers had to say.

While I was walking and thinking about this and other things,

"...Lina." Gourry called out abruptly to me. For a moment, I thought some bandits or something had come again, but there didn't appear to be any indication of such. Gourry's pace remained as it was. Well then...

"What?" I asked.

"Are you alright?"

"..." *Why ask so suddenly?* "About what?"

When I responded, Gourry fixed his gaze on me, and asked once again, "Like I said, are you alright?"

".....You know, Gourry, I don't know what you mean. Alright about wha—?" But in the middle of my reply, my mouth snapped shut.

".....*Haaaaaaa*....." I let out one deep sigh, and while pushing my bangs up with my hand, ".....Well, since you're my companion, Gourry, I guess I can't dodge the question....." I muttered, and I looked up at some white clouds in the sky, and watched a bird I felt I'd seen somewhere before.

"Certainly, after being transported 'here', it's not that I'm depressed or low-spirited, or anything like that, but...somehow, my mood isn't all that great, either. It's like, little by little, it seems like things just keep piling up on top of each other..."

"Do you think it's homesickness?"

At Gourry, with his uncomplicated opinions, I let out a strained laugh; and while I was waving my hand dismissively, "No, I don't think it's as much as that. After all, I was travelling alone before I met you, Gourry. And even after we met, from then on we've just been wandering aimlessly, right? And now, I can't go home—"

The words caught in my throat, “.....Ah.....” *That’s it...* I scratched my head. “No. As expected, it’s as you say, Gourry. It may not be like me to be homesick, but...”

The moment I had uttered “*can’t go home*” ...how should I say this...? I clearly felt my heart sink.

“Probably, it’s the difference between ‘not going home’ and ‘*can’t go home.*’”

“What do you mean?”

“Before—If I felt like it, I could just walk on back to my hometown. But I kept travelling and didn’t go back. I made the decision myself. But now, I don’t even know if we *can* go back, and there’s definitely no way to go back *immediately*... I guess that distinction makes all the difference in my feelings.

“By the way Gourry, how are you handling our predicament?” I was certain he had mentioned it before. I think he’d said his parents’ home was in the Elmekian Empire, but...at the question I had just posed to him, he just laughed carelessly,

“Predicament? Comparatively, I’m just fine.”

“Is that so?”

“After all, I forget all kinds of things, huh?”

“Don’t forgeeeeet!”

“Oh no, it’s just a joke. A joke!”

“When *you* say things like that, it doesn’t sound like a joke at all!”

Maybe it was because I had put all my heart into mocking Gourry, or maybe because the reason why my mood had been in the dumps lately had become clear, but...



I noticed it so suddenly...that my heart had become somewhat lighter. I looked up at the sky and stretched.

“...Well, if I think about it... To get to where we are now, we've managed to push through some ridiculously impossible-seeming battles, so things will work out—I haven't said that until now, but in comparison to all that, merely searching for the way home isn't so bad, right?”

“I feel the same.” Gourry had a tender smile on his face.

...It's not that my feelings had been completely cleared up. It was possible there may be more depressing things ahead of me. However, because I wasn't alone, I knew things would definitely work out. Before realizing it, such a mysterious conviction had begun sprouting in my chest.

While listening to the song of a bird I didn't recognize, we followed the directions on the note. The trees on the left side of the road were becoming less dense. Before long, I could see sparkling sunlight scattered everywhere, peeking from between the gaps in the grove. The smell of greenery began to blend with the smell of water.

Around where the tree line broke away, Gourry and I both stopped at the same time. Along our path, spreading out beside the road: blue.

“—A lake?” said Gourry.

“Might be a river,” I said.

There were almost no waves, and the because the clarity of the water wasn't that great, the landscape around us was projected onto the water's surface. When I surveyed the scene, on the other bank, the water's surface seemed to become hazy. Whether it was a river or a lake, it seemed to be pretty big.

“.....So that means.....”

When I looked back from the waterfront to where I'd set my sights earlier, on the road ahead, I noticed a small building.

When Gourry looked the same way, “That's a wharf or something, yeah?”

“Looks like.”

We started walking again, in sync.

“Sure enough, this looks like a wharf, but...”

At first glance, the water's surface appeared to be motionless, but as I looked more carefully passing along the waterfront, I saw it was actually flowing very slowly. Thus, it seemed to be a fairly large river. As we approached, I could see the structure of the wharf more distinctly. The building was a fine little hut, I guess you could say. At the pier, ten or more people seemed to be comfortably awaiting a ride from a boat tied off with a mooring line. There was no roof, and the seats were simply long planks laid horizontally in several rows. There were already several passengers on board. In addition, there seemed to be a ferryman-ish fellow on board...

Perhaps...it's departing soon!?

"Gourry! Let's hurry!"

"Yeah! Hey! Wait for me—!" Gourry called out to me in a loud voice, and we broke into a frantic run.

Fortunately, his voice appeared to carry ahead of us. The ferryman turned our way and waved his hand in a sweeping arc, seemingly taking the trouble to wait for us. We finally arrived, out of breath.

".....Is this the boat heading towards Parvassos.....?"

When I asked, the middle-aged ferryman smiled broadly and laughed, "Sure is! But you gotta pay in advance!"

"Got it."

While catching my breath, I paid the fare we had agreed upon. As we boarded the ship from the pier, it didn't sway as much as I thought it would. Probably, to some extent, due to the size of the ship. There was a passenger who seemed to be a peddler carrying a large payload on his back, a normal traveller, and in addition to everyone else, stuffed to the brim in a wicker basket, were some chickens.

I wonder if they're not only carrying passengers, but also various kinds of cargo?

The boatman made sure that Gourry and I found seats,

"—The boat is leaving!"

That's a departure warning, right?

He called out with a resounding voice, and at the same time, with a feathered lure attached to the end of a long pole, tapped the quiet water's surface with a *slap-slap* off the bow. And, with a sway of the boat, a shadow appeared within the rippling water. I watched the

shadow gradually blacken as it rose to the surface. Without a doubt, it had to be bigger than a person. In the worst case scenario, its total length was perhaps about the same as an ogre's. And then, a second—

“Fish!?”

“Hey now! It's dangerous to stand.”

As I unconsciously raised my voice, and leapt to my feet, the ferryman admonished me.

“You're awfully surprised. Perhaps, is this your first time seeing a bass?”

“...Huh? The note said this was a 'bus stop', isn't this boat called a 'bus—?’”

“No, silly, it's the fish!”

“Wait, so it's a *BASS* stop!?”

“That's what your note says.”

Stupid note!!

“...Now then, we're leaving. I'll explain after that.”

The ferryman tapped the water's surface again and again with the lured pole. Lined up in front of the boat were the two shadows, and with another large sway, it started to move. Simultaneously, a rope that connected them to the boat materialized from under the water. As the two fish pulled, the boat slowly began to move.

“These guys are called giant bass. Even though they're fish, they're pretty darned smart,” said the ferryman, bragging for some reason. He pointed his gaze to the wicker basket full of chickens, “If they pull the boat, as payment, I'll feed them accordingly. Even though they don't understand human language, as long as I keep that promise, they're obedient, yeah?”

“Then you mean, those chickens are the fish's food!?”

“Sure are. They can down this much in one swallow.” He said, bragging again.

...It goes without saying, but... There were no such fish from “over there” where Gourry and I came from. Not to mention ones who would put up with being made into workhorses and pull boats or whatever like this. But come to think of it, the giant fish from “over there” appear to have sprouted arms and legs, since there are fishmen with above-average intelligence and who can speak human language. I don't know if there are fishmen “over here,” but it's not too surprising there are such huge and clever fish...I guess.

The ship, which had been progressing slowly at first, gradually increased in speed, and before long—

“.....Wait, wait, waaaaaaait!”

When I turned my gaze, coming from the same direction that Gourry and I had and aiming for the boat, was the figure of a single person racing this way.

“Wait-wait-wait-wait-wait-wait-wait-waa—!”

The voice came closer and closer. Apparently, the straggler was a young girl. She was slowly gaining on us with a lot of vigor, but the ship was already some distance from the pier. Nevertheless, she wasn't giving up... No! Instead, she was accelerating—

“—ait-Waaa!”

With a peculiar shout, from the riverbank, she jumped toward the boat! Of course, there was no way she would reach it. Between the riverbank and the boat, with a splash, she...*didn't* fall! The jump trajectory unnaturally extended mid-air and reached straight toward the ship—

Thud!

She just barely landed on the edge—but she made it on board. A huge jolt shook the boat from the impact and the other passengers screamed in surprise.



“Hey lil’ miss!” As one might expect, the ferryman went red in the face, “Don’t jump on board like that! It’s dangerous, and the fish’ll get spooked!”

“Ehehe~ Sorry!” The girl offered a frivolous apology without a hint of remorse.

If wondered if she was perhaps a bit younger than me? She had golden hair grown out to her back, and wheat-colored skin. The measure of her height and breast size were.....*dammit*. Well, I’ll just leave it at that. Her attire seemed as though she were just going for a stroll around her neighborhood. If I put it nicely, she was very casually dressed. If I put it bluntly, she looked like a dumbass who didn’t seem to take travelling very seriously. Her luggage was only a small pack on her back and, though I didn’t know what its significance was, also a single tree branch. To give my initial impression, her outfit seemed like that of a weird country gal who got into a fight with her parents and ran away from home in a huff.

“—In the first place, missy, do y’have the fare?”

“Ah. Yeah-yeah.”

Despite my first impressions, she seemed to have at least prepared for the trip enough to pay the fare.

“—Don’t do that kind of thing ever again!”

“Ehehheh~ I’m sorry—Ah, I’m sorry to everyone else too~”

After being admonished by the ferryman, she bowed apologetically to all of us passengers, and settled down into a seat. Hauled by the fish, the boat glided upstream on the water’s surface while picking up speed... When I found an opportunity, I stood up again, and switched to the seat next to the girl. I suppose I had rushed to judge her, or perhaps I hadn’t managed to judge her at all yet. Gourry also followed me over.

“Hi~♪”

When I sociably called out to her, the girl turned her large brown eyes my way. “Yoo-hoo. Sure was a fuss back there.” she said, while also smiling amiably at us.

“I’m Lina. Next to me is my travelling companion, Gourry.”

“You can call me Ran~♪”

Halfway into taking out my own hand, the girl—Ran, had already extended hers for a handshake. When I grasped her hand, I was a little surprised because it was so soft and supple.

“Actually, I’d like to ask you a little something...” I said, while maintaining a friendly smile, “You used a wind spell, right? When you got onto the boat.”

Changing the trajectory of a jump mid-way...it was unlikely something like that was considered normal. Magic was the only thing I could think of to explain it. However, there weren’t any Sorcerers’ Guilds and magic itself didn’t seem very typical “over here”, so just exactly who was this girl who could use wind magic...? Skipping any awkward leading questions or finagling, first I’d take a straightforward approach and observe her reaction. She turned to face me—

“Isn’t it awesome? An Elf taught it to me a long time ago!”

Instead, she’s boasting!?.....so it’s not a secret.....Wait—

“—Huh!? That means there are Elves here, too!?”

“There are. Not many though~”

Possibly, this might be...a very big lead if this is true!?

There are also clans of Elves “over there.” They have longer lifespans than humans, and they’re also proficient in magic. I wagered that if I could possibly talk to the ones “over here” about our situation, I might be able to get a big lead on how to get back. Be that as it may... If I started bombarding her with questions without hesitation here, even if this girl seemed kind of air-headed at first glance, all the same, it would be best if I was on guard. With great effort, I restrained my inquisitive inclinations.

“I also have an Elf acquaintance,” I said, matching my disposition to Ran’s.

“Really? That’s awesome! What a coincidence! What sort of Elves d’ya know?”

“I know several of them, but one of them has only ever ordered cabbage at a restaurant, and another is a hot-tempered homebody with a terrible fear of strangers—”

At my explanation, Ran tilted her head and muttered, “.....You bad-mouthing ‘em?”

“No! I really did meet an Elf like that! Of course, I can’t say that all Elves are like that, right? But—”

And then, “Oi! Ferryman! Behind you!” Interrupting our conversation, what’d rung out was the voice of one of the other passengers. Everyone swung around at the same time, and at the end of our line of sight was a large swell of waves in the river. But the problem was...that wave - it was moving against the current — in fact, it was presently approaching the ship!

“What’s that over there!?” I unconsciously raised my voice—

“You’re kidding me! It’s Rokkay!” The ferryman shouted back.

“What’s that?” Gourry asked, but the ferryman did not spare him a glance.

“It’s a huge fish that eats the bass! Goddammit! In a place like this!?”

Eats the bass!? Those huge fish that are bigger than humans!? If that was the case, then Rokkay’s size could easily be guessed. If something like that were to attack, even this ship—*by the way, what if that thing eats humans!?*

The ferryman brandished the rod in a panic, urging the fish on. And in response, or maybe because they’d sensed danger approaching them, the fish increased their speed. But when I looked back around, the wave coming upstream was closing the distance little by little! When I looked closer, under that wave was the shadow of something flat! I couldn’t see its shape clearly, but from the size, it looked like it could swallow two or three of the giant bass whole. Was this thing possibly something like a water dragon? At any rate, if this kept up, it was going to get the boat and all of us. But what was I to do!?

If we had been on solid ground, this would’ve been the perfect situation to use the “Leave it to Gourry” strategy. But since our opponent was in the water, it was useless to try to do anything with something like a sword. If I shot out a lightning-type spell, it would arc to the boat and hurt the giant bass. And if I indiscriminately started throwing around violent widespread attack spells, even if I managed not to hit them directly, wouldn’t they get spooked and swim away? The force of the waves rising up would also likely capsize the boat.

Then—How about this !?

I turned around to the stern of the ship, aiming under the approaching wave and toward the lurking silhouette, and chanted a spell: “You, who sleeps in the depths of the earth, Supreme King with the frozen soul—”

At that moment, from underneath the water, I was certain that I’d locked eyes with **that thing**. In the case of ordinary attack magic, water almost always becomes a hindrance. However, what about those spells that borrow the power of high-ranking Mazoku? Black magic only consists of life, spirit, and magical power. It wouldn’t matter if the target was above ground or underwater. That thought crossed my mind in an instant—and before long, the spell was completed!

“Dynast Breath!”

A high-ranking Mazoku who is one among five subordinates, this spell borrows the power of Dynast Grausherra! The moment I issued the *Power Words*, under the water, the head

of **that thing** was frozen - and crushed. The debris scattered underwater and only a small swell came up to the river's surface of a scope that couldn't even be called an explosion. The rest of the body that couldn't be completely covered by the magical ice was still wriggling slightly, and buoyantly floated to the surface of the water. It had already lost its life, and before long, ceased to move, floating ever further behind us into the distance along with the gentle flow of the river.

"—Wooaaaaaaaaaah!?" It wasn't until this time that everyone on the ship raised their voices.

"Awesome!" "Seriously!?" "How did you do that just now!?" "In one huge blow, you—!?"

.....Being praised in such a candid way, honestly, I was a little embarrassed.

"You're amazing! Perhaps, was that magic just now!?" said even the ferryman.

"Mm. Well, yeah~" I replied honestly.

"Are you one of *those*!? A court magician or something!?"

"No, that's not the case, but....."

"At any rate, you saved us! Rokkay wasn't something we came across very often, but that fiend was somethin' sort of like this river's master. If we'd encountered it without you, we most likely would've had to give up on the fish and the boat in order to get away with our lives.

"That horrible beast! Among my fellow ferrymen, there were many who've completely lost their livelihoods to that thing.....For that.....really.....thank you....." He turned his back dramatically as he said this.

My opponent had been that fearsome, huh?.....Because I'd only seen its form after the head had been blown off, at the very end, unfortunately, I never got to learn what kind of fish it was.

Without my notice, in the meantime, Ran had come up beside me and turned her sparkling eyes in my direction, "...Lina-nyon, that was awesome!"

"Nyon!?"

"Ah, sorry~ 'Nyon' is the way it's said in my local dialect."

"It's a dialect!?"

And here I was thinking it was some kind of screwed-up personality trait!

“Yeah. Around these parts, I guess.....‘Madame Lina’ is how you’d say it.”

“Wait, so that was a *polite* way to refer to me!?”

“.....Would you prefer if I call you ‘Madame’ instead?” When she asked, Ran tilted her head.

.....“*Nyon*” or “*Madame*”*I don’t like either*..... “Just Lina is fine.”

“Oh no. We can’t have that. So ‘Lina-nyon’ it is.”

“Ah. Yes. Well then.”

At being called “Madame,” *my* personality trait meant that I couldn’t help but cringe in repulsion to such a stuffy title. *I suppose this way is better then, right?* Conceding to all sorts of things, I nodded my head..... Well.....considering that things like words change over time, there may be regions where all kinds of words that feel “weird” to our current sensibilities have managed to establish themselves over time. I guess it’s really not all that strange, but.....

While Ran scratched her back with one hand, she said, “Well...the differences aren’t so great between my homeland and here that we can’t understand each other. It’s more like we have different mannerisms? Or somethin’ like that, anyway. What surprised me at first was how different the manner of laughin’ was—”

“The manner of laughing?”

“Yeah. Where I come from, you would never go ‘Ahaha,’ or anythin’ like that. Normally it would be like ‘Eheheh~’ Also, when someone like a demon lord shows up in fairy tales, it’d laugh like ‘Teheehee~’”

“How is that dignified at all for a demon lord!?”

That’s rather cute! Although words can change, try a little harder than that! At the very least, go for something like “Kukuku” or “Fuhaha!”

“Ah. Butbut. When someone laughs like ‘Teheehee~’ for us, it comes off like they’re a bad person...”

“.....I see.....”

...Supposing...if Norst had instead sent me and Gourry to someplace near Ran’s homeland—Just thinking about it made me mentally tired all of a sudden.

As always.....words are important, huh.....?

"Well then—" I said to Ran.

"Lina-nyon and Gouryos are—"

"-ryos!?" Gourry and I exclaimed in unison.

"Ah, sayin' '-ryos' means—"

"It's fine. Just use it," I hastily dodged the explanation.

".....-ryos....." Gourry muttered under his breath while frowning deeply.

"Well then, Lina-nyon and Gouryos, where d'ya'll intend to go?"

"Ah~ Yeah. For now, the plan is to get to the royal capital. There are many things I want to investigate."

"Hm..... Heyhey, then is it okay if I accompany y'all?" Ran asked easily.

"Well, I guess that's fine, but—is that okay for you? Is there a purpose for your trip, or something—?"

"Nuttin'!"

"I see. Nuttin', huh..."

What the heck? While I understood that her dialect had a really shitty way of using words, I started to get the sinking feeling that this person might not be *all there*.

Gourry and I had absolutely no familiarity with this land, and now Ran, who didn't seem to have any either, had joined us. I didn't know where the silver lining in this was supposed to be, but.....this girl had said something about an Elf earlier, and while I'd wanted to press her with more questions about it, there was no good reason to charge ahead carelessly.

"Then for the time being, let's go as far as Parvassos together. And from there we can just go with the flow."

"Ayup—!" Ran raised her left hand energetically...and then slowly lowered it while blushing slightly, ".....Sorry.....I goofed.....I meant to say 'Okay'....."

"You're difficult to understand." With an icy cool disposition, I snapped a wisecrack at the girl.

Ran's accompaniment actually wasn't bad—far from that, it was quite welcome. I'd come to that heartfelt conclusion by the evening of that same day. It had been about midday when she'd jumped aboard the boat, and just around the time the sun began to sink deep in the west, we all arrived at a post town where there was a dock. Because there was no view of the land, the town really felt as though it had no presence at all. The story I'd heard from the ferryman was that if you came via the land route, going around the long way, it took about two or three days to get here. If that was so, then this method was considerably shorter.

Gourry, Ran and I all got an inn together, and decided to eat dinner as a group as well, so...that was perhaps when I realized it: that the menu poster on the wall was completely unreadable. I guess it made sense when I thought about it. In the first place, the fact remained that the letters were different. Of course, there were letters that gave similar impressions as I explained before, so it's not like it was impossible to try to pronounce them, but being able to read them correctly was another matter entirely.

In fact, at the top of the menu, when I looked at what appeared to be the day's recommendation and attempted to read it aloud, it came out like "Gogi Ruhante." I really had no idea what that meant. So that's where Ran came in! *Perfect timing!*

"Hey, Ran." I called out to the girl who was staring at the menu.

"What is it, Lina-nyon?"

"This stuff at the top of the menu: can you read it?" When I asked her, she looked at the menu.

"Yeah, I can read it~"

"....."

"....."

"Oh, I mean, can you read it aloud?"

"Uh-huh. 'Gogi Ruhante.'"

I was correct!? But I still don't know what it means!

"Um, what is that?"

“Uh~ There’s a bird called a ‘gogi;’ it’s pretty tasty. ‘Ruhante’ is a dish where wheat flour is kneaded thin and submerged in hot water for a bit, and then the ingredients and sauce are put on it and rolled and rolled up... The outside is all crispy an’ the inside is nice and springy~ And, because the main ingredient is gogi: ‘Gogi Ruhante.’”

“I see.....”

In just this manner, I entrusted Ran to reading aloud and explaining the menu. I was saved! Ran had really come in handy. Otherwise, I would’ve had to just order whatever, like “I’ll take this thing and that thing, starting from the top of the menu,” or something along those lines. If I had done that and my luck was bad, it wouldn’t be unlikely that a bunch of similar dishes would be brought out in a row. Furthermore, for the words Ran had read aloud, I committed the pronunciation to mind..... Although, if restaurants were the only places we’d end up going, all I’d learn would be culinary terms. In any case, I included some drinks in our order...

“But Lina-nyon...” While waiting for her dish, Ran asked me while tilting her head, “The letters: can’t you read ‘em?”

.....Uh.....

For a moment, I was at a loss for an answer. Of course I couldn’t read them... Well, I guessed it was simply inevitable, but I still didn’t want to admit that I couldn’t read them. But there would be no better time, so I supposed I should explain the circumstances of our unfamiliarity with this land. Sooner or later, she was bound to find out about it anyway.

Even deciding that, it’s not like I could say “I lived inside a Mazoku barrier that was put up a thousand years ago, and because I’d become a burden by kicking the ass of some high-ranking Mazoku one after another, another high-ranking Mazoku tossed us out here as a form of harassment.” If I told the unbelievable truth without glossing over any of the details, it would probably only be heard as a lie.

“Actually, Gourry and I came from a place far away from here,” I said instead, choosing my words carefully. “We had a minor accident, you see.....”

“Accident!? Like your ship sank!?”

“Hm.....well, something like that.....” I spoke ambiguously without confirming or denying anything. “Anyway, it was quite far away and because of that, the look of these letters is very different. So to tell the truth, it would be a big help if you could teach me their various readings and such.”

“No sweat!”

Ahem! (She’d stuck out her chest.)

“Thanks. You’re a lifesaver. You see, we’re searching for some way to go home— Ran, you’re familiar with this area?”

“Um.....” When I asked, the girl answered with a small groan, “I also left my homeland, and since I’m travellin’ without a place to go in mind, if y’ask me if I’m *familiar*, well.....”

“Heh. What kind of place is your homeland, Ran?”

“S’all green...”

“I see. A nice place, huh?”

“Nothin’ except nature...”

“I see. An annoying place, huh?”

Speaking of which, she’d told me that she was taught the jump-amplification-via-wind spell by Elves; surely they preferred a place with a lot of greenery.

“Were the Elves that taught you how to do that spell also living nearby?”

“They were for a long time...but, about ten years ago, they unexpectedly left for someplace else~”

“.....Is that so?” Which meant, Ran’s connection to the Elves, or some way to contact them? My plans for that appeared to have crumbled.

While we were discussing that and other things, “Sorry to make you wait~♪” The waitress brought out the numerous dishes we had ordered, and, more than just lively.....a rather boisterous dinner began.

After three days on the road, Gourry, Ran, and I arrived at a huge wall with a gate in front: The Kingdom of Luzilte’s royal capital, Parvassos. Long ago, this place was— well, I’d like to recount at least one tidbit of knowledge like that, but unfortunately, I don’t know its origin or history at all. After all, it had been isolated from “over there” for a thousand years. There’s no way I could know anything like that.

On the way here, I’d asked various people, “what kind of place is Parvassos?” but the only replies were “It’s a big city” or “It has a splendid royal castle,” and other things you’d expect to hear about a royal city. No one talked about the general history of the city or the origin of its name..... Well.....a normal person may not be very interested in that kind of thing, but.....

“Sure is big~” Looking up, Ran had amazement in her voice.

Even “over there,” I had visited things like fortress cities and the like, but they couldn’t be compared to anything of this scale. At the gate, there were formalities to enter the city. In essence, it was a toll collection. After paying up and some other nonsense, once we entered the gate, the huge cityscape stretched out before us.

This may have been a precaution for when a foreign kingdom attacks, but the streets and buildings were not side-by-side in straight lines, and that wasn’t very helpful in terms of visibility. In the distant city center, there was a wall even higher than the one that surrounded the city, and the spires of the royal castle stood out behind it.

“Now then—” While moving through a shopping district-like street, I asked Ran a question. “We’ve only just arrived, but what are you going to do from here, Ran? As I said before, we intend to investigate various things, but as for me, I’d like you to teach me just a bit more of the writing here. I can’t say that isn’t kind of unreasonable though.”

“Hm~” Ran thought while excessively tilting her head, “I didn’t set out for any reason in particular. Lina-nyon and Gouryos are really good at findin’ tasty shops n’ stuff, so I think it might be fun to travel together a lil’ more, but...I don’t know if I can be of any help or anythin’ with your investigation..... Ah, then-then. For the time bein’, how ’bout we get an inn together and then we can go sightseein’ all over the city. After that, we’ll just see what happens?”

“That could save us some trouble,” I said.

“Sounds like a plan~♪ But, Lina-nyon, how d’ya plan to go about your investigation?”

“Hm..... Let’s see.....”

Naturally, while conversing with those that I’d met along the way, I’d also listened to various tales about the kingdoms and roads in this land. I was sure that there might be a story among them, about “a kingdom to the north with a huge desert you can’t cross,” but...there were only rumors. The story varied so much from person to person that misinformation was obvious. However, by process of elimination, if such a thing *had* been true about a neighboring kingdom around here, I most likely would have gotten a reply along the lines of “oh, that sounds like the next kingdom over.” Because I didn’t hear anything like that, it meant that there was no kingdom like that, at least nearby.

If it was possible, while we were in such a large city where information would be relatively easy to gather, I would have preferred to seek out some more reliable conversation, but..... Church, court magicians, library—There were so many places I wanted to check out. If I’d suddenly barged in, though, surely I’d be turned away at the door. Then again—

“Some time ago, I was written a letter of introduction addressed to one of the guards here by the head soldier of a certain city. For now, I think I’ll start with that.”

As I was saying this, I took the letter of introduction out from my chest pocket and looked at it. On coarse parchment rolled into a scroll, along with Bronco’s name, was addressed a “Commander Morgan, Parvassos Fourth Garrison—”

“—I understand the situation.”

I’d understood from the first few words of his response that something was not quite right. After speaking with the people of the city, I was immediately able to discover where the fourth garrison was. I’d handed over my letter of introduction, and after requesting to speak to Morgan about some things, I’d been made to wait for a while in a dreary little room in the garrison office. It seemed more like an interrogation room rather than one for guests, but I hadn’t been in a position to ask for luxuries under such circumstances. So we’d sat down and waited for a bit.

After some time, a handsome and debonair blond-haired older man had introduced himself as Morgan. In this way, although not entirely to my satisfaction, we’d finished our self-introductions. He’d taken a seat as he began to speak his first few words. So while it seemed as though he understood our request, whether he planned to accept it was another matter—I had a sneaking suspicion about this whole thing.

“My association with Bronco was a long time ago. He’s not exactly an unrecognized acquaintance, but—” He took another look at the letter of introduction he was given: “‘In any case, Ms. Lina is an amazing magician, so please accommodate her. Also please consider my promotion for finding such a talented person.’ ...That’s what it says, but—”

*Broncooooo!? Is that guy using this whole mess to advance his own career!?.....
Well.....I can’t say that I don’t understand the need for self-promotion, but.....*

Morgan set his gaze fixedly in our direction, “‘Accommodate you,’ it says, but what specifically is your request?”

“Information,” I answered immediately, “Me and —this is Gourry over here— we took a ship from a faraway kingdom called Zephilia, but it wrecked and we ended up here.”

“Eh!? Is that what happened!?” At my words, Gourry raised his voice.

Hey, wait! We talked this over! Didn’t we have a secret briefing session earlier!?

I really wanted to pop him one, but I couldn’t say anything in front of Morgan.

“What does he mean by saying ‘Is that what happened.....?’” Sure enough, he asked with suspicion in his voice.

I put on a grave expression. “The truth is, he.....because of the shock of the accident, he has become.....memory-challenged.”

“‘Memory-challenged’ you say!? Not ‘lost his memory!’?”

To his question, I calmly responded, “That’s what the doctors said.”

“I see..... The doctors.....erm..... That’s..... If that’s the case, you’re probably searching for housing and employment here?”

“No—a way home,” I said, “There might not be any roads or routes we can use to go back right now. Even so, I thought it would be prudent to continue searching for a way to go home. To that end, possibly in the north, is there a kingdom where the northern part of the kingdom touches a big desert? I want that information.”

“Hrm—Where the northern part of the kingdom is a desert, huh.....?” Morgan thought for a while. “Nothing comes to *my* mind, but there may be some among scholars or civilians who know about that. However...Regarding you two, I wonder whether there’s enough *incentive* to accommodate you to that extent.

“In the letter, it says some outrageous things, like you ‘eradicated the bandit gang with a tremendous fire spell.....’ If it’s true that you were instrumental in exterminating a den of thieves in our kingdom, then you ought to have my gratitude. But if you ask me whether that will be enough to convince scholars and civilians to lend you their wisdom, well, it might fall a bit short. So...to that end—



“As your abilities have already been tested, how about lending us your strength? As a matter of fact, several days from now, there’s an *eradication* mission we’re preparing for. Although it’s a joint operation with the Knights of the Silver Lances, because of an issue of manpower, it seems as though our garrison has drawn the short straw. If you truly possess such talent as described in this letter of introduction, then I think this is the perfect opportunity for you to participate.”

“.....If it’s a war with some other kingdom, then I’m afraid we will have to decline. If we become obligated to you, we won’t be able to leave this place.”

“You can rest assured about that. The opponent is not human.” Morgan showed a thin smile, “The Demon King of the North—is what we call it.”

“.....”

“Ehhhhhhhhhhhh!?” My loud outburst echoed around the tiny room...

...So, in short, some stuff happened. I defeated “the Demon King of the North,” but after that...

“Wha.....!?”

“Wai-!?”

“What.....!?”

Those behind us raising astonished shouts were Morgan and the higher-ups of the Knights of the Silver Lances, as well as everyone else. I ignored those overreactions for the time being, and while I was investigating around the room, Gourry diligently stayed alert to our surroundings...

Alright, let me start from the top. About two days from the royal capital, Parvassos, there was a dilapidated fort in the forest. It seemed an unlikely location for the stronghold of this Demon King of the North. Although I probably should have suspected it, the thing Morgan and the others called “the Demon King of the North” was not the same “Demon King of the North” that we were familiar with.

.....When I’d first heard that name from Morgan’s mouth, sure enough, I was really surprised... But I soon realized it was a misunderstanding. The Demon King of the North to whom people from “over there” refer was a fragment of the Dark Lord Shabranigdo. A thousand years ago during the War of the Demon’s Fall, having defeated the Water Dragon King, he was then himself sealed in ice in the Kataart Mountains. However, before or during the War of the

Demon's Fall, the people from "over there" were separated by a barrier from those "over here," so there's no way they'd be aware of the existence of the "Demon King of the North" that was born out of the War of the Demon's Fall. Therefore, the thing Morgan and the others were calling the "Demon King of the North" that was just north of the royal capital? My guess was that it was something that had been conjured up by a sorcerer. To get straight to the point—

"—Probably, some sorcerer failed a summoning ritual. It looks like they tried periodically to summon all sorts of things," I said this as I was investigating a magic circle drawn over the whole floor of a large room in the interior of the fort.

The technique of drawing the circle had clearly been incorrect, collecting magical power little by little from its surroundings. The summoning circle had become operational when it reached a specified amount of power. Consequently, in the corner of the room, what appeared to be the robes and bones of the caster were scattered about. He might have lost his life in some kind of accident...or, if he had been careless, he might have been killed without ever being able to control that which he summoned.

All you good boys and girls, please don't do stupid stuff like summoning Mazoku just for the fun of it!!

A single summoned brass demon. That was it. That was the thing Morgan and the others had been calling The Demon King of the North. Compared to pure Mazoku, they're a much easier opponent...even calling them 'small fry' might be a bit of an overstatement. Even though they're able to be defeated by ordinary weapons, their physique is sturdy and they're very strong. They can also unleash magical attacks.

As a bonus, what you might call stragglers —the failed summons of about ten lesser demons— were also in the fort. You could think of these guys as kind of like brass demons that were about a level or two weaker overall. As long as you knew what kind of attack was being unleashed, they were an opponent even normal warriors should have been able to deal with... Unfortunately, the people of "over here" weren't familiar with attack magic at all. Being unfamiliar with the demons' black magic, they had plunged in headlong, and that act alone would have been damaging to them. As a result of all of that, the brass demon had been coined with the big bad name of 'Demon King of the North.'

Along the way here, from listening to the conversation between the Knights and those from the garrison, I'd gathered that the Knights of the Silver Lances were under command to eradicate the demon, and the fourth Garrison had been dragged out unwillingly to be used as a shield. So that jerk Morgan had nothing to lose by using Gourry and me as his disposable pawns. We'd had a target painted on our backs by him, it seemed...

On our end, it was only a matter of not letting our guard down around familiar opponents. It was such a piece of cake to defeat so many of those suckers that there's really no need to explain how we handled each one. It so happened that the brass demon in the deepest area of

the fort was also destroyed along with the still-functioning summoning circle, and that was that. But this, in the eyes of the Knights and Morgan, looked as though it was a battle fit to become a legend. With the Knights surrounding the fort from afar, as they were carefully calculating the timing of an opportune moment to launch an attack, the two of us “disposable pawns” had instead sauntered right up and turned the whole batch into crispy fritters.

“Wh..... Who the hell are you.....!?” Now that things had at last settled down, Morgan raised a hoarse voice, “Those accursed demons..... The Demon King of the North.....entirely in one stroke.....!”

“What are you talking about?” I nonchalantly shrugged my shoulders, “Probably the sorceress referred to in your letter!”

Okay, maybe I shouldn't have blown up the *entire fort and everything around it* in one overblown spectacle, but I believed this was still plenty of self-control...you know, for me. From the view of people “over here” who aren't all that familiar with spells in the first place, all the kinds of attack spells I command probably seemed very unusual.

...To tell the truth, Gourry had put more effort into defeating the buggers than I had, but because everyone had all their attention on all my cool, flashy spells, nobody had paid any attention to him whatsoever, pretty much.

Morgan remarked dumbfoundedly, “.....Well To be honest, I was taking that letter of introduction with a grain of salt, but.....regardless of what it said, aren't you more ‘*terrifying*’ than ‘*amazing*!’?”

“Thank you very much~♪ Then, I'm counting on that information you'll give me~” I was joking around and threw them a wink— However, all of them were only standing around with jaws agape.

A colorful tapestry. A stately wooden table with elaborate engraving. A soft and fluffy sofa with carefully tanned leather.

“Now then—First, Ms. Lina and Mr. Gourry, for your assistance in eradicating the Demon King of the North the other day, thank you once again,” taking a seat opposite us, Morgan began speaking.

Two days after returning to Parvassos, Gourry and I had been invited over by Morgan to a garrison office in the city—or rather, it was a building within the royal castle. The city was surrounded entirely by a wall, but the royal castle near the city center was surrounded by an even higher one. A soldier had come to pick us up at the inn, who then accompanied us all the way here. Going through one of the side doors of the castle rampart, we crossed a small plaza

that I'd speculated was possibly the military's training grounds. We'd entered a small building, and proceeded to a room at the end of a not-so-long corridor.

Unlike the interrogation-like room we'd been led to before, this was a proper, elegant parlor. At that moment, we and Morgan were not the only ones in the room. In the rear right corner from our perspective, on Morgan's left rear side, was a middle aged man adorned in deep blue robes with gold embroidery. On either side of him were soldiers armed to the teeth. The door we'd entered from was behind us, and there was another in the back of the room. In front of each were two more soldiers.

With no introductions as to who those other men were, Morgan said, "All the members of Knights of the Silver Lances were highly appreciative of your abilities."

"Thank you very much." I showed a friendly smile, "If you keep our agreement about providing us with information about the kingdom, it was no problem,"

Having made the first move, I watched Morgan's expression become a little tight.

"...About that—" His gaze dropped to the table, "We've looked into various things, but there have been no good results thus far... Of course, further investigation is ongoing. However, we couldn't look at some of the older books, so it seems that it will take some time to reach a conclusion. But in the meantime, it might be inconvenient for you to stay at an inn for an extended period of time, so we've prepared a house for you to live in. I'd prefer for you to stay there."

"Thank you for your concern..." When I got up from my seat to bow, Gourry also stood up. "However...I don't want us to become a nuisance for you, so I think we shall be leaving."

"Wait...!?" At my words, immediately Morgan's expression soured and he rose to his feet, "Please wait!? Is something to your dissatisfaction!?"

"No, no, absolutely not. But I think I'd be *sorry* if I troubled you any more than this. Also, I don't know if it's a good idea for us to be taking it easy while we're travelling all over the place searching for a way to go home. If that's all—" Having said my peace, I abruptly turned on my heel, toward the entrance door...but at the same time, two soldiers moved to block our way at the door.

...*Ah. I knew it.* I stopped and turned around to look behind me, "Mr. Morgan, that soldier moved without an order, which means..." I smiled broadly as I said this, **"That's the way this is gonna be?"**

At the same time, there was a groan, and the sound of two things toppling over.

"Lina!"

“Yup!”

At the sound of my name, I swung around, and there in front of me was Gourry, two fallen soldiers, and a wide open door. Naturally, Gourry had handled it. **The way we had planned in advance.** With everyone’s attention focused on me, Gourry had flown under the radar and eliminated the soldiers blocking the way. And because no one had paid his abilities any attention, it hadn’t even been all that difficult.

“*Wha.....!?*” Everyone in the room raised alarmed voices.

“Now then—” Leaving them with these few words, Gourry and I rushed out together!

“...D—don’t let them escape!” From the room came an unknown man’s voice, just a breath too late. I wondered briefly if it belonged to the robed man in the corner.

“Is this really going to be okay!?” Gourry asked while tearing down the hallway.

“It’s fine!” I said.

I was expecting this to happen..... Of course, I hadn’t *wanted* it to. But essentially, this was Morgan-- well, actually, this was *the Kingdom of Luzilte* having decided not to let me leave the city. When I’d subdued the brass demon, Morgan and the other Knights all saw the various kinds of attack magic that I used. A report had made its way up...and a big shot behind the scenes in the kingdom probably thought that if they could somehow retain me, I would want to collaborate in the development of magic around here. If by chance I might teach a hundred—a *thousand* soldiers how to defeat a lesser demon in one shot with attack magic, the military power of this kingdom would be drastically increased. On the other hand, if I could not be retained...

—*Pweeeeeeeeeeee!*

The sound of a high-pitched whistle echoed down the hall. Two soldiers up ahead responded to that sound, showing themselves when they recognized us and drawing their swords without hesitation! At the same time, Gourry sped up and charged into them! Leaving that to Gourry, I glanced over my shoulder to look behind me, and saw the soldiers from before were rushing out to pursue us. But I had anticipated as much.

Soon after entering the hallway, I had started chanting a spell, so I was already prepared to finish the incantation! I extended my right hand and pressed it against the wall, and invoked the *Power Words!*

“*Van Rail!*”

Originating from that hand, vines of ice crawled from the ceiling to the floor! The moment that the soldiers approaching from behind touched it —*Shiing!*— With just that brief sound, they were frozen over all at once! The soldiers' movement was blocked, as was the hallway. Seeing as they were wearing armor, I ascertained that there was probably no threat to their lives, though they may be getting some nasty frostbite. By the time I looked back around, Gourry had already defeated the two soldiers. Because our attention had been divided, I didn't know how he'd done it, but because I didn't see any blood, their lives had likely been spared. We continued on our way to the outside.

"How unfortunate..."

Between the building and the rampart, in the training grounds, a group of armed figures were waiting. The one who had spoken up was a man in the center— and his face was familiar. I was certain he was the commander of the Knights of the Silver Lances.

"If you had lent your power to this kingdom, we could have become trusted allies. However, your power is too terrible, Ms. Lina. If that power were to fall into the hands of a foreign kingdom, it would then become a threat to ours... We must prevent that at all costs."

.../ see.

The kingdom had already decided. If by some means they weren't able to detain me here— If there was even a small possibility that my magical abilities would be shared with foreign kingdoms, they were to kill me. As a matter of fact, I had expected this to happen, which is why I had made cursory arrangements with Gourry in advance.

Of course, if the other party had kept its promise, we would have peacefully departed on our journey with the information they'd given us. That would have been the ideal development, but..... The moment we'd been led into the parlor near the royal castle, I'd sensed that possibility had vanished. No matter how I think about it, that particular venue had been chosen either to capture us or to 'take care of us' without allowing our escape. And the aura that everyone in that room had given off? Even if not quite *bloodlust*, it had definitely been electric with tension.

Even so, there'd been the possibility that I was overthinking things or being too cautious, so I'd more or less listened to their offer..... But upon hearing things like "it will take some time" and "we've prepared a house" - well, those remarks really gave off the vibe of "we're detaining you." It'd sealed the deal when, as we tried to leave, a soldier blocked our way without an order. The soldier was probably given this order along the lines of "Absolutely do not let them get away," in advance.

If we were to never know whether we could go home and thus give up on our homeland, then just quietly living in this kingdom and becoming their lackeys... Well, that was not even an option. If for some reason that were to happen, probably very early on I'd have been separated

from Gourry, and we'd be cut off from any way to contact each other in order to influence me to give up on going home.

But, were I to start spreading knowledge about magic, then by the time it was over and done with, understanding I might double-cross and flee the kingdom, and having finished their business with someone like me, who's just an outsider to them, they'd most likely have me deliberately murdered. If whoever had planned to manipulate me was truly that fearsome an individual, then it was almost entirely certain my life had already been set on this course. The only thing to do under these circumstances was to bust out of here and escape.

The knight's commander was standing in our way and his sword made a cold metallic sound as he drew it upright. "It really is unfortunate—forgive me."

When the sunlight hit the blade, it shone with a slightly greenish-silver color.

"Ms. Lina, I saw everything about your skill before. I realized if I manage to close the distance, I will be in control of the battle. And it shall be with this sword —my family's treasure—the magical sword, *Hielguilem!*"

.....*Uh.....Uuhhhhhhgg.....* The annoyance in my mind almost leaked out reflexively as a groan, though I somehow managed to stifle it and started chanting a spell.

"Now," the commander stood ready— Gourry began to casually approach him; "don't underestimate me, greenhorn!" He bellowed while dashing along the ground, the sword in his hand flashing!

At the same time, Gourry stepped into his path and drew his own sword—and without a sound, the sword in the commander's hand was severed in two near the grip. Its blade spun through the air before falling to the ground, resounding in a crystalline tone. It hadn't broken. It had been *cut*.

"—Wha—!?"

Aiming at the base of the neck of the commander, who was visibly trembling—

"Gah!"

Gourry struck him with the hilt of his sword! He struck at an opening in his armored helmet, and with a metallic clank, the commander was knocked out still standing.

.....*Well.....That's how it goes, pal.*

It wasn't because the commander was unskilled; rather, that fellow was probably quite certain of his skill with a sword, however... In addition to the fact that Gourry was a superior

class of swordsman, the interaction of their weapons' respective powers could not have been less fortunate.

The weapon in Gourry's hand was the Blast Sword. As an item that absorbs magical power from its surroundings and converts it into sharpness, it's even sufficiently effective against a Mazoku opponent. Compare that to the head knight's weapon, which, if his words were true, was a sword containing magical power. What that means is that at the moment of contact, the Blast Sword replenished its sharpness with the magical power from the opposing sword. This guy's sword had basically been begging to be cut in two from the very beginning. The only chance he might have had to win would be to defeat Gourry without ever crossing blades, but.....considering Gourry's skill, that still wouldn't have been possible.

Their luck had really run out the moment they brought us here without having ordered our weapons be taken from us. For a magic user like me, I guess they decided that demand would not only be meaningless, but would also just put me on guard. Although, if we'd been told to hand over our weapons, I'd have immediately turned us around.

Witnessing the head knight's instant defeat, the rest of the Knights began running around in a commotion. Nevertheless, they still didn't flee, and instead focused on reinforcing the rampart that continued around the castle wall's side entrance.

Directly ahead, I faced a wall without any soldiers in the way, and Gourry moved to follow. Naturally, there was no door there—I placed my hand on the rampart wall, and...

“Blast Wave.”

Crash! The rampart wall around my hand loudly blew to pieces! *Blast Wave* is a spell that crushes things that are touched with both hands. The effect depends on the substance, but if your target is a stone wall like this one, it'll open a hole of sufficient size that at least a single person can pass through. Through that opening, Gourry and I jumped out into the city.

“Let's run away until we're outside the city, Gourry!”

“Outside..... Which way are we going!?”

“For now, north!” I said as Gourry and I broke into a frantic run.

As things stood, it made sense to assume that more soldiers had already assembled at the inn, so we would have to leave the city without stopping there. I'd have to leave my bag at the inn, but as a precaution in case of something like this, I had already taken out our travelling funds and some valuables.

—*Pweeeeeeeeeee! Pweeeeeeeeeee!*

The sound of a whistle rang out from somewhere nearby. If I wanted to entrap our pursuers, I could just fire off an explosion or something behind me and block the road, but I seriously didn't want to get uninvolved townspeople wrapped up in this. *In that case...* I recited a spell as I ran down the street—

“Swightflang!”

Pwoof! And with a concussive burst, a dense fog spread around.

“Eh!?” “What’s th-” “Wah!?”

A passerby near me cried out in surprise, but the fog was merely a smokescreen. It was just the break I wanted. This way, the pursuing knights would be on guard for a trap, and this would slow them up. In the meantime, we’d make our getaway!

“Lina!”

“What!?”

“Do you even know the way!?”

“It’ll be fine if we keep running without thinking about it!”

—It wasn’t fine. Before I knew it, Gourry and I, as the result of wandering aimlessly down some street we didn’t know, had hit a dead end.

That’s right. This is a castle city! Because they were designed for the possibility of a foreign enemy invasion, the roads were not made to be genuinely straight.

“Lina!”

“Don’t even say it!”

“No, I’m not objecting, but can’t you use your spell to make us go through the sky?”

“.....Hm, uhh.....”

I *had* thought about that, but if we were to go flying over the rooftops in broad daylight, it would really stand out. Far from shaking off the soldiers, we’d likely become the center of attention.

“For now, just *run!*”

“I don’t really get it, but, got it!”

We did an about-face and followed the street to the right. At a fork along the way, we went down a path we hadn't gone yet. This was a city built with foreign invaders in mind, but ... it shouldn't be so confusing that even the residents were confused. So for the time being, I followed my intuition, and ran past the point I'd seen some residents moving about. But then a group of seven or eight soldiers jumped out from some alley into the street!

"Damn you! And in such a place!" Screamed one, "They're here!" Another knight yelled, drawing his sword!

I was under no obligation to take it easy on opponents who intended to kill us like this, but still, they were only soldiers in the service of their kingdom, they may have had no choice but to follow orders. If possible, I didn't want to take any lives, but with so many surrounding us, I couldn't say that it was out of the question.

One of the soldiers in the back of the group produced a whistle from his chest pocket and put it to his mouth, but faster than he was able to blow it— A shadow fell!

Whack!

The head of the soldier with the flute in his mouth cocked unnaturally, and he fell face down on the spot. Having jumped off a nearby roof like a cat, the one who'd defeated the soldier by inflicting a blow to his helmet was—

"Ran!?"

"Yahoo-hoo, Lina-nyo~n~♪"

The soldiers ran in turmoil from this intrusion outside of their calculations. Reflexively, everyone's gaze turned to Ran's direction, and in that moment, Gourry dashed! Several of the soldiers went to guard against Ran, and the rest against Gourry—

"Blast Ash!"

At the moment I yelled out, all of the soldiers shuddered slightly and looked towards me...but I hadn't cast a spell. I had merely said "Blast Ash." However, because the soldiers were aware that I was a sorceress who controlled attack magic... Perhaps when I had taken down the Demon King of the North, they'd heard me using this spell and saw that it had defeated the lesser and brass demons. They couldn't help but be wary.

At the moment, all attention was on me. So then for Gourry —and also possibly for Ran— it was more than enough of an opportunity. Before long, all the soldiers had collapsed onto their knees: it didn't take much time. Gourry used a martial technique with the hilt of his

sword, and Ran used the staff—no, the *root* in her hand. I don't think I'd known Ran could fight before that, but it seemed she was quite skilled.

...Although, right now I couldn't admire it at my leisure. Even though the soldiers were all passed out before me, it was broad daylight in the middle of the city. There was an awful lot of public attention around us. And to law-abiding citizens, no matter how you looked at it, this was *villainy*. Getting reported was only a matter of time. There was no point in staying here any longer!

I broke into a run together with Gourry—and also, for some reason, Ran.

While running next to me, in a tone tinged with admonishment, I said, “What are you doing!?”

“I should ask y'all the same!”

“That may be true, but they're the ones who got all worked up about me using my spells for the military, so I ran and this is what happened! So how did you end up with us, Ran!?”

We had gone off on our own during the daytime, but our inn was the same, and we'd been eating together in the mornings and evenings. Presently, she should have been sightseeing in the city.....

“I was just happenin' to pass by and realized, 'Lina-nyon and Gouryos are bein' attacked by bad people!' And then I got really peev'd that they were soldiers!”

“That's too vague!”

“That's my way of life!”

“You should rethink your way of life!”

“Eheheh~ I'm often told that.”

“So rethink it, already!”

I didn't want her to get involved, but I could no longer say something like ‘This isn't your business, so get out of here!’ She'd stayed at an inn with us, eaten meals with us, and helped defeat the soldiers. I couldn't pretend that she was unrelated. If we weren't able to escape the city, I just knew that some really bad things would go down.

“.....We're going to need to run away like this for a while!”

“Yeah~♪”

"Why are you so happy!? You were just casually strolling around the city, right!? Can you at least guide us to the city's outer wall!? Even a place without a gate is fine!

"A place without a gate?"

"Because I'll bust down the wall!"

"Gotcha!"

.....Pardon the expression, but to respond immediately to my announcement that I was going to bust down the wall with a "Gotcha!" was pretty *freaking weird*..... In any case—this was how Gourry and I...and Ran, who ended up tagging along, began to make our getaway from the city.

Chapter 3

Escape: I Can See the Shadow of Approaching Pursuers

The sun sank behind the mountains in the distance. By the time the world had been painted orange, the three of us had finished an early dinner.

“My... I didn’t reckon’ Lina-nyon was so good at fishin’~♪” Ran was sitting upon a conveniently located stone along the riverbank. Having completely devoured the three trout I had caught, she proclaimed this with a satisfied smile.

“Nah. To be honest, this isn’t the result of my skill at fishing. It’s just a spell I’m using, that’s all,” I uttered.

With my own hair, some twigs found in the area, and a fishhook I carry on my person for just such an occasion, I had fashioned an improvised fishing rod upon which I cast a Fish Bite on Every Cast spell (name pending) and pulled them in. I had constructed this little number during a time I was dabbling in a bit of magical theory. It’s my own original spell that, hypothetically, when cast upon a fishhook, creates an illusion of “something unbelievably tasty-looking” to fish.

Its intended purpose had been for use by any person who’d found themselves camping or somesuch. If at that time, all they had to eat was some iffy-looking meal, it could be transformed into something tasty-looking. I aimed for that kind of effect, but in the end, it didn’t come to fruition. Even though I got as far as creating unbelievably “tasty-looking” stuff, in reality, I discovered when I put it in my mouth, it wasn’t possible to fake the taste. As a result, though I had created a fishing spell out of nowhere, the truth of the matter is it was a *total failure*.

If this technique were carelessly spread, all the fish would disappear from the rivers because too many would be caught. Also, the simple enjoyment of fishing would be lost, so I don’t normally make use of it. But right then, such was life. We were being pursued, after all. In order to secure food for three people without taking a bunch of time, I had good reason to use this spell.

After escaping Parvassos, and taking the main road out of the city for a little bit, the three of us left the road and entered the forest, heading east along the pathless earth. We knew the kingdom would most likely pursue us. Seeing as we’d asked Morgan for information about countries that are in the north, he would have realized that we were headed that direction. He would likely be sending troops along the main road and conducting a search of the villages and towns with his swiftest horses.

However—there's a valley cutting vertically through the land east of the royal capital, and there's no direct road to get there. That was the story I'd heard, and that's why we'd headed this way. And on the way east through the forest, though I wouldn't exactly call it a sheer cliff, there actually was a pretty big valley with a river flowing through it. And so, using a Levitation spell to float across in the air, I took us all to the opposite side. That way, even ifamthey were to use a dog to track our scent, it'd be okay.

That is how we continued eastward, until eventually evening was near. We came across another river and decided to camp there for the night. Finishing the fish I'd caught for dinner, I fashioned more or less what could be considered a bed from some nearby foliage and grass.

“—But, you know...” Twilight was pressing into the trees. I sat upon a stone by the riverbank and turned towards Ran, “First of all...sorry. For dragging you into fishy things.”

“S'alright~♪”

“That mellow!? No, hey, Ran!? Do you understand the situation!?”

“The gist of it...”

Mellow. However you slice it, she was all sorts of mellow. Did it feel that way because of her dialect, or perhaps because of her personality?

“.....Um.....to be precise, what I'm saying is: the Kingdom of Luzilite itself will probably be coming after even you from now on, Ran.”

“I know...”

“.....And so.....” I placed a finger on my temple... but in the end, I gave up on all sorts of things. “Well, whatever..... So where we go from here, I don't know what to say, but Ran, I want to confirm your intentions. For the time being at least, are you planning to act together with us, or part ways somewhere?”

“Together...”

When she smiled with a face full of energy and raised her left hand, I turned my palm towards her.

“No, wait and listen properly, and quit answering off the cuff. First of all, if you come with us, we'll do our best to escort you safely as far as outside the kingdom... But if you get caught by a pursuer while we're running away, they're going to regard you as totally allied with us.

“On the flip side, if you separate from us at a suitable location, it should be much easier to avoid the eyes of the search if you’re on your own, since their aim would be solely focused on me.

“But if perhaps you were to be recognized as ‘that girl who was with them,’ and you weren’t able to pull the wool over their eyes, you’d have no choice but to get out of that mess yourself somehow. So the most important question is.....what is it that *you* want to do?”

“Together...”

.....*Is she reaaaaally thinking about this.....?* I wondered, considering the way Ran’s smile was unchanged.

“Y’know, goin’ together, and later goin’ our separate ways...we’d be able to do that, but splittin’ up from the start, and later gettin’ together, y’know...we *wouldn’t* be able to do that...”

“You really did give it a lot of thought!?”

“I get that a lot—”

“.....Then, I guess that means we’ll be acting together for a while. We could leave this kingdom and cross into another one— that way our pursuers will no longer be able to move freely. Until then, Gourry and I will back you up to the best of our abilities. But if you should want to go off on your own along the way, don’t hold back in saying so.”

“Thank you~♪ But, Lina-nyon...” said Ran, giving an impish grin as though she were joking, “Lina-nyon, you say you want to go home, but if you use such amazin’ spells that the kingdom is after them, wouldn’t it be even better if you just started your very own Lina-nyon Kingdom over here?”

“*Ahaha*. No way,” I waved my hand dismissively. “In the first place, it’s impossible, and even if I could, it would probably be a giant pain in the ass. Fundamentally, my personality is such that, when they say ‘you should brush off falling sparks before you catch fire,’ I’m the type that would beat the jerk who spilled the sparks in the first place until they don’t move anymore instead. So myself, I’d really rather not intentionally cause an uproar.

“Eh.” Gourry, who was sitting opposite Ran for some reason, let out a doubtful grunt at my words.

I turned around veeeeeeeery slowly to face him. “*Eh?*”

However, even under the pressure I applied, Gourry showed no uneasiness——

“.....Haaaaaaa.....” Rather, he only sighed, “I see...from your perspective, Lina, none of this has been intentional...that's why all sorts of things step past you.”

“Don't say 'step paaaaast!'”

“Step past?” Ran tilted her head without understanding.

“.....W.....Well, anyway.....” I cleared my throat with a small cough, “For the time being, let's spend the night here and head east again tomorrow. I say that if we find a village or town, if there's a route north from there, we head that way, but.....By the time we reach a village or town, there's something we absolutely must have prepared in advance.”

“What's that?”

At Ran's question, I gave a serious nod and declared, “Disguises.”

On the other side of mountains, along a road that stretched northward, there were a number of residences in tidy rows. Behind those rows, long and narrow fields were cut into the gentle slope of the mountain, further behind which were neatly planted groves of trees. We arrived at this village the next day after leaving Parvassos, somewhere between morning and noon. We made a quick loop around to the north end of the road that ran through the village, and then entered as though we were headed south.

“Good day~” I called out cheerfully to some folks doing farmwork out in the fields.

The villagers looked our way—Momentarily, they flashed us suspicious expressions. Well, I guess that's how it goes. Probably because we were wearing ridiculous getups right then.

.....In not too long, even all the way out here, wanted posters for us were sure to get passed around. Ordinarily, these wanted posters would have at least a portrait on them, but in many circumstances identifying features are only included by itemization. Therefore, in the latter case, if you recognize those of your features that would be most likely to get listed, it might be possible to deceive people by removing said features via the use of merely a very basic disguise.

The result was thus: I had taken off my shoulder guards and wrapped them up in my cape, which was removed with its lining faced outward, and completely swapped clothes with Ran. Gourry had also removed his conspicuous armor, stashed it away, and hung it as luggage from the end of the staff Ran carried.

And, well...everyone had their hair braided in back and wrapped around their necks. By all together having the same manner of hairstyle, and impressing that feature, we could dilute any other impressions.

“——Ah. Good day.” After a pause, one of the villagers, an older man that was nearby, had replied.

And then, in an overly loud voice, I exclaimed, “This is the village of Midalka. It’s nice, isn’t it?”

When he heard me, another pause went by, and then, “.....Huh?”

“Like I said, Midalka. It’s nice, isn’t it?”

This time, the old man paused for a much longer time. “.....Um.....But this is Moss Village.....”

“.....Eh.....?” I idiotically drawled, taking out a parchment from somewhere on my person. I huddled in close with Gourry and Ran and we began whispering collectively.



.....Needless to say, thus far, I'd been *acting* lost. The name Midalka had been chosen on a whim. Naturally, I'd had a briefing session beforehand with both Gourry and Ran about this.

After pretending to converse together about something or another, I scratched my head and said, "Moss Village' - is that it? Really?"

"Well, I wouldn't lie about that."

In response, I glanced back down at the blank parchment in my hand, ".....Eh? That's funny.....Where.....? Eh.....?" Then after I pretended to be confused for a bit, "Well then.....Good sir, would you happen to know which way to go to get to Midalka?"

"No.....sorry, but I've never heard of such a place."

"Huh.....?" I tilted my head—and finally turned toward the road leading south, "Um.....Pardon me then, the names of villages or towns before this one.....?"

"If you go for a little ways, Danaroff Village. Next is Lanasey Village. Beyond that is Radamount. From there, if you go southwest to the three-way intersection, go right there and cross the bridge, and I believe you'll join up with the main road that goes towards the royal capital of Parvassos."

So there's no route going east from Parvassos, and this road turns around and wraps around to the south for a long ways, then joins up with the main road to the royal capital. That's what I was extrapolating from this, anyway.

"Hm....." I groaned, this time pointing to the north, "Then, *this* way is?"

"There's Anarov, then Alibarro. Beyond that, I suppose, is the decently large city of Ranoma," he answered honestly, without any particular suspicions.

After another (pretend) huddle with Gourry and Ran to consult about this and that, ".....I understand....." I announced, directed towards the old man. "For now, this 'Parvassos', you say? I'm going to try going that way!Ah. But before that, in this village, is it possible for us to purchase some food and clothing? If we go all the way to the royal capital for them, won't the prices be higher?"

Obviously, I didn't actually intend to go anywhere *near* Parvassos. But since I said all this out loud, when our pursuers came crawling around here later to investigate, they were bound to hear tales of "an unfamiliar trio, who showed up and said they were headed toward the royal capital." If I played my part well enough, they might even think it was totally unrelated. Naturally, when we left this village, after going south on the road for a little bit, at a suitable place, we'd leave the road and take a roundabout way to go north as originally planned.

At my words, the old man burst out laughing, “Well, I’ve also been to the royal capital. Everything really was expensive, you know. Alright. I’ll show you to the general store, so follow me. It’s guaranteed to have affordable prices. However.....don’t get your hopes up for good selection.”

“Thank you very much! You’ve been a great help!” I bowed my head with a nod...

And thus, for the time being, our party obtained food and even more clothes for our disguises in relative peace.....

Black beams dirtied with soot. The table too had become shiny and black with long use, but it seemed to be well-cared for because it was smooth to the touch. In the store interior that was illuminated by lamps suspended from the ceiling, eighty percent or so of the seats were filled.

“Sorry to keep you waiting...Here’s your warm vegetable salad, red duck paté, and steam-baked Torattia black chicken in wax gourd cream sauce stew~”

“Oooooooh!” As the waitress set down our dishes one by one onto the table, my own, Gourry’s, and Ran’s excited voices overlapped.

Catching fish and grilling them on the spot just as we had yesterday? Things like that aren’t so bad, but...properly-prepared cuisine is really nice, after all. I had eaten some elaborate dishes in Parvassos as well, but.....the food served at *this* establishment also had gorgeous presentation to boot. The tableware and cuisine’s matching color arrangement. The balance of colorful vegetables. Edible flower petals that had been scattered around as an accent, even under the lamp light that wasn’t quite bright enough, revealed their unfaded vividness of color.

“Well then——”

“Bon appétit.”

Knives and forks flashed, bringing the dishes to our mouths one after another.

“Uumyu. Yummy~♪”

Normally, the addition of things like colored vegetables and decorations don’t add to the taste of the dish itself. In some cases, it actually gets in the way of the texture and what not, so it’s common to leave it uneaten.In some cases, for sure, but that is not so with *these* dishes. It didn’t seem as though the edible petals were merely for presentation. Furthermore, if

you ate them together with the dish, a faint sweet aroma and a slight bitterness accented the taste.

.....This is——really good.....

Instinctively absorbed in eating with reckless abandon, the three of us finally took a breather only after completely devouring our dishes.Crap. We hadn't been able to hold the strategy meeting I'd planned at all. Each of us ordered extra drinks——

".....So, about what to do from here," I began, after taking a sip of something called natal juice. The taste was similar to peach, but with a fragrant aroma. It was pretty nice and didn't have an overly-sweet aftertaste.Anyway, setting aside my impressions of the taste, "As long as the situation remains as is, I think we can freely keep going north like this."

Today, we obtained clothing and food in Moss Village, passed south through the village as I had planned, and from there circled around through a forest with no roads and headed north. As I'd heard from the old man in the village, we came upon the city of Ranoma. As to its size, I wondered...it might have been about the same as that Marisida place we'd stopped in before. However, where we were now also seemed to have some fairly big buildings. Even the inn we were staying at was several stories tall.

Of course, we'd changed clothes before entering the city and perfected our disguises as we'd donned clothes we got from Moss Village. For hairstyles, I was rocking a pair of twintails, Gourry had a ponytail, and Ran had transformed into a bun head. The complete picture Gourry and I painted together gave the first impression of tourists from head to toe.But, well, the daughter-running-away-from-home-ish sort of style Ran had from the start? Honestly, that impression hadn't changed much at all.....

If a pursuer wasn't familiar with our faces firsthand, we'd probably be able to avoid detection.That there was nobody coming after us or anything and I was worrying completely needlessly, the possibility wasn't zero. But if that was to be the case, then that'd be perfectly fine. It was a better prospect than letting my guard down and suddenly becoming aware only when we'd been surrounded.

At any rate, it's said that the best way to hide something is in plain sight. Acting plainly should make us seem not all that suspicious. Keeping that in mind, we'd arrived at this city and plainly gotten a room at an inn, asked around for where we could find a delicious restaurant, and plainly set out towards it. Pops at the inn, thanks for the recommendation! This was a big hit.

To tell the truth, I wanted to have even more servings and conquer this place's menu from top to bottom, but—— "Of course, behavior that sticks out too much is strictly forbidden, right?" I said, mostly to admonish myself.

Getting ourselves found out by our pursuers because we were careless and stood out too much by overeating would spell disaster. Naturally, using magic with reckless abandon was also out of the question. But conversely, as long as we were careful about those sorts of things, if we kept changing our clothes and impression from time to time, I thought everything would work out somehow. We still had no clue how to get home, but for the time being, until we got out of this kingdom, the situation appeared to be going favorably. That's what I really thought.

.....At that moment, anyway.

By the time we'd finished our meal and gone outside, the stars and a round moon were in the sky.I had read in some tome long ago that the orientation of the stars in far off places is different. How substantial the difference is, or if it's possible to calculate something like one's current location from the orientation of the stars - it didn't tell me anything useful like that, but... The orientation of the stars here *was* different. *If I could understand that starry sky, I wonder if it would be a clue.....*

In the main street of the city of Ranoma, although the sun had set, there was still a moderate amount of foot traffic. Probably, all sorts of people were headed out for a night of food and drink. There weren't any street lanterns, so instead there were a number of shops side-by-side, each with five or six lamps or torches at its front—at some stores there were more than ten, hung up in rows. Maybe it's possible they were for the purpose of attracting customers, but I was a little worried they could start a fire or something. I wondered if the lamp oil was bad, because there was a lot of black smoke and the like coming out of some of the shops.

Thanks to all the light, there was no need to worry about our footing while traveling the main road, but.....as brightly as the lamps were burning, the depth of the wall-to-wall darkness in the back alleys was all the more conspicuous.

The inn that we'd gotten today faced this same main street. It hadn't been that far away from the restaurant where we'd eaten dinner, either. We returned to the inn after walking for a bit, and passed through the entrance. I spoke to pops at the reception desk, and got each of our room keys——

"Oh, pops. Can you lend me a lamp so I can use it in my room later?"

".....Ah. Sure."

At my request, he took out a lamp from behind the shelves, transferred the flame from the lamp at the desk's edge and handed it over to me.

I said to Gourry and Ran, “——You two. There’s something we need to discuss, so can you come to my room a bit later?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay~♪”

Thus, everyone headed to the third floor.

There were a number of glowing lamps suspended in the hallways and stairs. But as a precaution against fire, there were no lamps in any of the rooms. So the system was that anyone who needs one has to borrow it at the reception desk. I unlocked the door of my own room, setting the lamp down when I entered, and immediately exited into the hallway with my baggage. Gourry came out from next door, and from across the way Ran saw me carrying my bags out. I pointed toward her room without a word. The two of them silently nodded, Gourry and I shutting our doors, and the three of us went into Ran’s room.

After waiting a bit for my eyes to adjust to the dark, “.....Well then, shall we run away?” I said, with a lowered voice, and in the darkness, both of their silhouettes nodded.

——The cavalry had come.

Along the way back to the inn from the restaurant, lurking around, there were signs that attention had been pointed our way. All of these signs indicated the presence of our pursuers. Setting aside how accustomed Gourry and I were to this sort of situation, even Ran, who seemed to be careless in all sorts of ways, appeared to have instantly understood the situation and acted. I was a little astonished.

How we’d been discovered by them in the first place was unclear, but rather than investigating that, the first priority was getting away from there. Since they were most likely outside the inn, if they were monitoring my room, they should be seeing just a little lamp light leaking out from a gap in the window. It’d be best if *that* was attracting their attention, but.....

While chanting a spell under my breath, I opened the window out into the night sky. I grasped hands with Gourry and Ran, and whispered,

“.....Levitation.”

We floated away from the window and into the night air. In the heavens, the light of the moon and stars. Underneath, the light of everyone’s activity. Above the roofs all in a row around us, we gently drifted along.....

“——!?”

And then we realized, probably all three of us simultaneously:

Atop the roof of a nearby house, standing so as to block our way, was a figure in a hooded robe. It was too dark outside to make out the exact color, but it was definitely a darkly-colored robe. Underneath the hood pulled low over their eyes, a mask further covered their face from the nose down. Unknown age and gender, but there was absolutely no way they coincidentally happened to be here, unrelated to us. As long as I kept this spell up, I couldn't deal with it at the moment. I cancelled the Levitation——

It was instantaneous. The robed figure created a spear of light and shot it towards me. Because I'd interrupted my spell and descended onto the roof, the attack flew just overhead——

Crash!

—And slammed into the rear wall of the inn behind us, smashing it to pieces with a thunderous sound and scattering rubble everywhere! That just now was.....an attack spell!? *Isn't magic supposed to not be popular "over here!?"*

If there was any curiosity about the identity of our opponent, now was not the time to be prying into it! While muttering another incantation under my breath, I turned directly toward the robed figure and dashed along the top of the roof! Gourry, who had also taken off running along my right side, increased his speed to take the lead——

“.....!”

An unknown man's voice blended in with the night air. It was probably because the robed figure was casting some spell or another. A globe of light resembling the glow of a lamp then appeared in front of him, and from that globe emerged a beam of light that split into five, and shot forward aimed at Gourry! The spell had a wide attack range, and it was difficult to dodge with the poor footing on top of the roof. However, as if passing through an open field, Gourry easily dodged the attack, and dashed up to the attacker! He had drawn his sword just before that instant.....

But! The man in the robe jum——no, **flew** directly overhead with a huge leap, and was still ascending at the same speed. He rose until he was at a height out of the sword's reach, at which point he suddenly came to a standstill in mid-air. *Using a flight spell immediately after an attack spell!?* The spell incantation, however you looked at it, was way too fast! Perhaps he had some friends nearby? If there was anyone else, did they use a spell!? The unmoving figure looked down at Gourry, who had stopped in his tracks——

“Well that's a fine how d'ya do!” Ran dashed towards him! “But the range of a staff is——”



She rushed in underneath the robe guy..... “Longer than a sword’s——” Thrust the staff towards him..... “Much longer!”

But it didn’t reach.

The moment the robed man let out a “*pfft*” and sneered.....*Bam!* His body was rocketed directly upwards! “*Guah!?*” He let out a cry of pain as he was knocked away.

I didn’t know if Ran had done something, but—— “While we can, we’re running away!” I called out while running down the roof and jumped down from a suitable place, after which Gourry and Ran descended.

Robe guy remained elevated high in the air, “.....”

Is he seriously chanting his next spell!? While still controlling the flight spell!?

The next moment, robe guy summoned tongues of bright crimson that undulated around him in the night sky, and five fireballs appeared!

Is this guy serious!? Inside a populated city like this!? Whether he was serious or just threatening us, the response was the same! I released the spell I had been chanting toward the robed man!

“Freeze Arrow!”

A dozen cold arrows that had been called into existence flew towards the unmoving figure at full speed! A moment too late, the robed man also released his fireball! One of the fireballs and one of the cold arrows collided in mid-air——

Whoosh!

A thunderous roar of hot wind swent up, and flowers of flame bloomed into the night sky! A momentary pause, and then another fireball impacted the area!

KA-BOOOOOM!

Tops of roofs and building walls were set ablaze without discrimination. Rather than a ball of light bursting and scattering high-powered flames, I think it had been something like a spell that shot a sphere of actual flame. It hadn’t had enough firepower to instantly carbonize the places it hit directly, but nevertheless, the wood of the residences that had been hit were adorned with flickering flames.

At any rate.....probably, in that instant he flung that fireball, he did so intending to intercept my Freeze Arrow. However, his aim was quite sloppy. While I continued to dash through the alleyways, Gourry and Ran followed behind me. There was.....no pursuit from the robed man.

Just as I thought, huh. From his high elevation, because the spreading fire from his own flames made our silhouettes sink into the darkness of the alleyways we were traversing, we were unable to be seen. The three of us kept on running through the city all night.....

In the end, as we safely exited the city, there was no further pursuit.

Dawn broke across an unfamiliar land. The birds—er, rather, things one could possibly assume were birds—began to sing along with the morning sun, the same as they might back "over there." But if you listened to each bird, the sounds that could be heard were completely unique.....Mixed among them, something could be heard that sounded sort of like "Geh-geh-geh".....*What kind of creature is that, anyway?*

.....After that fiasco yesterday, the three of us managed to escape from Ranoma city, and ended up sleeping outdoors in a forest. Nevermind finding a tasty dinner; the hotel fees we paid in advance were a total loss. As a result, today's breakfast was also the portable preserved food we obtained together with our clothes in Moss Village.

Biscuits—although these were something sold calling themselves such, in regards to the impression of the taste imparted by that name, well... They were about twice the toughness and half the flavor. Though, in accordance with those qualities, they had been dirt cheap, so I couldn't exactly complain. If put into one's mouth along with water from a nearby stream that had been boiled until it was hot, they wouldn't get stuck in one's throat. Rather than an enjoyable meal, they're more of an immediate nutritional supply, but that's the way the stupidly-hard biscuit crumbles. *Well, it can't be helped.*

".....But....."

After finishing breakfast, we took a bit of a breather.

Addressing the place Gourry and Ran were sitting, I speculated, "Wearing disguises and moving through places with no roads..... how did our pursuers discover our whereabouts, even though we did all that? It's a mystery, huh.....?"

We'd taken a variety of measures, and yet we had been found comparatively easily. As long as the reason remained unknown, there was the possibility the outcome would be the same from here on out, too.

“How, huh.....” Gourry, who had been straining with the pretext of thinking for a little while, looked up; “What do you think, Lina?”

“Am I your senior executive manager!? I mean, just now you were only pretending to think, weren’t you, Gourry!?”

“That’s not it at all. I earnestly thought, ‘if I think it over, will I understand the answer?’ and the answer I came up with was ‘that’s impossible,’ so I’ll just ask Lina——”

“But that’s not really thinking!”

“Okay-okay-okay-okay-okaaa—y!”

And then, still holding her precious-seeming staff in her left hand, Ran, energetically as ever, raised her right hand. “Then, Ran?”

When I pointed at her, “Yes!” She stood up on the spot, and vigorously posed to stand at attention, “I think I’m suspicious!”

“Ehhhhhhh!?” At her novel opinion, Gourry and I unconsciously shouted out! “Why!?”

When I (also unconsciously) asked her that, Ran seemed very happy, “Because, Lina-nyon and Gouryos, y’all have known each other for a long time. Only one of us stands out. Aren’t I too suspicious?” She said, with a triumphant expression for some reason.

“Ah. Yes.”

“Furthermoooooore!”

“There’s still more?”

“Someone bringin’ up, on their own, something like, ‘I’m the one who seems suspicious to other people,’ is *also* suspicious! I’d say that’s a clever plan to make y’think, ‘someone wouldn’t say that if they were actually up to somethin’! Cunnin’! Crafty!”

“That’s true, I suppose.”

As she was speaking, she puffed up her cheeks and pouted, “Lina-nyon isn’t payin’ attention.....!”

“Eh.....” I let out a tired groan.

.....As a matter of fact, it was actually just as Ran said. Declaring “I’m the one who seems suspicious to other people” is certainly an approach to be contrary and diminish

suspicion. Because of the way she spoke, it was easy for me to see Ran as nothing but a terribly idiotic child. But she wasn't actually all that stupid.....I don't think, anyway.

Nevertheless, I decided the possibility of Ran being an informant was low. If she was acting as a minion of the Luzilite Kingdom, she would have been instructed to appear to be travelling together with Gourry and me by someone from the kingdom who she'd met previously—for instance, someone like Bronco and his companions in Marisida city. But if that were the case, then when Bronco headed out on his What Wiped Out the Bandits Investigation-slash-Eradication, he would have brought a magic-user like her along with him.

Furthermore, supposing that Ran was an informant, how she could even make contact with our pursuers was an issue.Of course, it is also true that it wasn't my *modus operandi* to trust her unconditionally.

I exhaled quietly, ".....Then I'll say from now on, in the very depths of my heart, I will be suspicious of Ran."

"And I reckon that's for the best!"

Whatever the hell "reckon" meant, seemingly satisfied, Ran nodded her head in agreement.Well, setting aside the matter of Ran.....

Back "over there" where magical technology exists, it is possible to mark a magical item with a symbol or something and then search for its location from the Astral Side. But it was hard to imagine that there was anyone "over here" who possessed that kind of magic. It was hard to imagine, but.....realistically, it wasn't impossible that there was someone who knew magic that was unknown to me, either. Or perhaps, the "unknown magic" I had in mind was——

"By the way, Ran. Last night you were able to get a hit on our pursuer while he was outside of your range; what was that?"

When I asked her, she gave me a blank stare, "~? That? I didn't tell you? I said the Elf people taught me that."

"Huh? You mean that long distance jump thing you were doing, right?"

Certainly, because of that, she had managed to hop upon the bass boat, but——

"Jump?Ahh," Finally appearing to understand, she smiled, "It's the same technique."

"The same?" This time my brows furrowed.

Probably, I thought, she had to be using the wind: Directing it to accelerate herself, or using a special armament with wind applied to it that blasts out. Although, to declare these two kinds of spells “the same” was, as was expected of Ran, entirely too simplified.

“It’s the same~ Ah. Then, startin’ now, I’ll try doin’ it for you again, okay—?” Ran began casting a spell.

The use of Chaos Words for the purpose of borrowing power from a supernatural existence——only that part seemed to be identical between “over there” and “over here,” and when I listened to her incantation, there didn’t seem to be any accent or anything.....Then——*Hm?*

While she was chanting, she ripped up nearby weeds with her right hand——*Whoosh!* Then flung them up over her head. At the same time.....

“Winbreath!”

When Ran released the *Power Words*, simultaneously, the weeds she’d flung up a moment ago, without being carried away by the wind or falling to the ground, began to drift around her very slowly.

“Like this,” Ran casually took my hand, and draped her arm over my shoulders. I couldn’t feel a shift in the wind, or anything else in particular, but the weeds drifting around her kept changing their course.....

“But y’know.....” Ran, who had separated from me, with the staff in her hand at the ready, faced toward the trunk of a tree in a distant location——and thrust.

The target wasn’t exactly in range, but that instant, the weeds floating around her all at once accelerated. The protruding staff at their core rushed towards the trunk of the tree in its way, and.....*Bam!* The trunk of the tree shook with a crash and, its foliage stirred by the impact, scattered fallen leaves everywhere.

“Just like this, the wind will happily help you out in all sorts of ways.”

“Wait-wait-nowait, wait a sec,” I broke in hurriedly.

I had been listening to the Chaos Words. I also understood the basics of magical theory. For these reasons, I could appreciate *very well* the absurdity of this spell.

“Help you in ‘all sorts of ways’.....you say.....



“That spell.....you used it to wrap the wind around yourself, and in some situations, used it for acceleration or for attack, so.....it’s possible to use it for defense, is what that means, huh.....?”

“It does—”

“No-no-no-no-no.”

One spell that is altogether responsible for attack, defense, and movement, at the convenience of the person who’s wrapped in it!? *Is such a thing possible!?* Ordinary spells are power that is brought forth to do a simple thing. Or perhaps, at best, combining two or three of those simple things together. For example, an easy to understand one is Flare Arrow. Makes flames appear. Sends them flying. That’s all. Easy to understand.

As for combining together a power or effect, the high-speed flight spell I use——Ray Wing, for example, is a technique materialized by combining the effects for “expanding a wind barrier, and causing it to become a power that streams forward from front to back,” and “producing a power that repels against the ground.” But using this logic, if I think about trying to actualize something that “helps out in all sorts of ways,” how many elements would I have to combine in how many ways.....?

Of course, if you brought every spell into those detailed instructions, the incantation would become excessively long. But what she’d recited hadn’t been that long. In some incantations, the long portions can be abbreviated, but——

“Ran! That spell just now - you said, ‘Dragon of the sky, divided from the body of the True Dragon, the divine protection you possess——’ but, then that means.....You used a spell that draws upon the power of the Air Lord!?”

Airlord Vaalwin.....one of the four Dragon Kings to whom Ceifeed divided his power. “Over there,” where the intervention of the Earth, Fire, and Sky Dragon Kings is obstructed, I wouldn’t be able to use a spell that draws upon their power at all, but considering the fact that I am “over here,” I should be able to use something like that!

“That’s right~” Ran easily admitted.

This is.....something I must study as a mage!

“Ran! That spell - teach it to me!” I yelled excitedly, spurred on by intellectual curiosity.

“.....Uh.....” But with a somber disposition, she said, “Okay, but.....the Elf person who taught it to me said that there’s a knack to being able to use this spell.....also, even if you *can* use it, at first you’ll get all bent out of shape?”

“Get all bent out of shape?”

When I asked without really understanding the meaning, she nodded, “You will~ When starting the spell, you’ll think, ‘I want to run really fast,’ an’ the wind will push your feet.”

“I see, I see.”

“Even if y’don’t move your feet in time or y’fall down, it’ll still push forcefully.”

“Um——!?”

“So, you’ll get all bent out of shape.”

“Isn’t getting bent out of shape the least of your worries!?”

“Maybe~ It was really hard for me at first too~”

.....Isn’t that.....kind of a broken spell.....? Hey, Elf who recklessly taught Ran these kinds of spells? I’d like a word with you.

It was no small thing that Ran had mastered the use of this spell, but.....after hearing something like that, I understood very well that this wasn’t something about which you could just say ‘let’s test it out a little.’

“.....Ah.....then, for now, can you just teach me the composition of the spell? I don’t want to *get all bent out of shape*...so, I won’t be using it, but I’d like to do an analysis.”

“Alright. Um, then——”

“Ah. No. Not now. After things have calmed down a bit. For the time being.....shall we be off?”

Even though I said that, “Yes-yes-yes-yes!” Ran shot her hand into the air again.

“Yes, Ran?”

“The reason why our pursuers found us isn’t clear yet.”

“That’s true, huh? I was going to bring this up later, but.....Unless you’ve thought about it and understand the reasons.....then you should give precedence to making a move. You’ll get your priorities backwards if you waste time because you’re overthinking the reasons.”

The thing is, we may have been found by chance. For example, the soldiers that participated in the (*lame*) subjugation of the Dark Lord of the North: most of them had worn

helmets. The soldiers would remember my face, but I wouldn't remember the faces of the soldiers under their helmets. That we'd passed by just such a person in Ranoma city.....I couldn't say it wasn't a possibility.

"Which way are we goin'?" Ran asked me while I was thinking things over.

"Heading east or west for a bit.....that could be a strategy. But just like this time, we might get found again despite doing all that, so at any rate, I think it would be better to try just heading straight north. I didn't want to make too big of a thing about it, but nevertheless, I'm going to get out of this kingdom - forcibly, if I need to."

".....A brute-force approach in the end, huh....." Gourry said, mixed with a sigh.

"What are you talking about? In this world, it isn't a matter of there being only power or only wisdom. We should discuss how to use each for their purpose in balance; am I wrong?"

".....Yeah. There's no difference.....probably," Gourry shrunk back from my prodding.

"Using power and wisdom for each of their purposes in an *appropriate* balance is *also* wisdom. Only after thinking about it, if you've judged a brute-force approach to be best, you should execute it."

"I see. In other words, what you're saying is that a brute-force approach is ingenuity!"

".....I think that summation is wrong, but.....in any case, AGAIN, we're off!"

"*Yeah—!*" To my call, Gourry and Ran both replied vigorously.

The sky was blue. The clouds were white. The biscuits were just as undisputedly *hard*.

"These are hard."

"They're really hard, huh?"

"They're kind of tough, y'know."

Sitting down in a wind-swept meadow, Gourry, Ran, and I were crunching down on our undisputedly hard biscuits. Four days after the attack at Ranoma, and this was rather surprising considering us, but.....our pursuers hadn't readily made an appearance. If we were to go directly north along the main road, they would surely and immediately catch up with us—that's what I had thought at first, anyway.

We would give them just enough of a counterattack to constitute a proper ass-kicking without actually *killing* them. That way, when the guys who had the tables turned on them returned and reported back, even if they were to organize additional backup to chase us, it would take them quite a lot of time to catch up.

In the meantime, we could go north straightaway, or we could go via a different route without any roads that would take us that direction - either is a good option. Rinse and repeat while aiming for the border. That was roughly my intention, but up until now, no pursuers had come.

I even thought that perhaps we hadn't noticed that we were being followed, and they were just waiting to look for a chink in our armor, so last night I'd thought to try doing something careless like staying at an inn. But even then, there had been nothing so far. All things considered, the journey seemed to be progressing favorably enough, and our present location just then was a small village called Renihorn (or something along those lines.)

.....In the city just before this one, I had spotted some restaurants that looked promising, but it had been a bit too early for lunch. It's not like we could afford to hang around taking it easy and just waste time sightseeing until noon, so I thought we'd set off to this village that was ahead instead, but..... Well, when we arrived around noon, there were no places to eat at all. We had no choice but to obtain preserved food at the only general store, and soon we were shoveling down the flavorless stuff in the grasslands on the outskirts of the village.

"Lina, try eating this jerky, too. It's tough."

"You're right. I don't know about this filling up my stomach, but somehow, it's filling up my chest."

"Lina-nyon, that's probably heartburn."

Like that, we harmoniously—or rather, brutally, passed the time.....

"——?" Gourry silently stood up on the spot.

"What's wrong? Did the toughness piss you off after all?" After asking such a question, I also noticed it. The sound - it was coming closer to here.

.....*Dum.....Da-dum.....Da-dum-da-dum-da-dum.....*

A familiar sound was approaching from the south. A number of them together: the rhythmic drumming of hooves against the earth!

"This way!" I leapt to my feet, and dashed towards some woods that were near the grassland!

"Are we running away!?"

I yelled toward Gourry who was dashing alongside me, "We'll engage them over there!" And then, to Ran who had also taken off together with us, "Ran, don't get involved and stay hidden in the shade of the trees!"

"Eh—but....."

"You've already been dragged so far into this to say this now, but I still don't want you interfering any further!"

The kingdom's disposition towards me was completely unwelcoming, but I still couldn't consider it an evil kingdom just because of that. Apart from whether or not it was a wise approach, it must have been a judgement taking into account the security of the kingdom. And that's to say nothing of the soldiers and Knights merely obeying orders from above who have become our opponents. I, myself, was not going to hesitate to *brush off these falling sparks*, but I really didn't think it was a good idea to allow Ran to kick their asses just out of fellowship.

".....Then, I'll wait an' see for a bit....." She muttered reluctantly.

When she reached the nearby trees, Ran obediently hid herself in the shade. Gourry and I turned around and took position to intercept. Over there——

Da-dum-da-dum-da-dum-da-dum-da-dum-da-dum!

From beyond the last of the residences, showing themselves were approximately twenty Knights on horseback! When he set sights this way upon our figures, the horseman at the vanguard raised one hand,

"Haaaaalt!"

.....Uh oh. I've heard that voice somewhere.

The cavalry was confronting us while leaving some distance. It would be fine if they were on foot, but if they were to gallop on horseback, that distance would immediately be closed——

"Found you! You insurgents!" The one at the vanguard.....I didn't know his name, but the commander of the Knights of the Silver Lances hollered out towards us. Was that it? In the end, we were treated as insurgents?

"What was the meaning of the other day? It seems you raised quite an uproar even in the city of Ranoma! The virtuous people of the city were frightened! The sin of bestowing terror upon innocent people is never a light one!"

“——Your assassin was the one picking a fight in Ranoma, wasn't he!?” I yelled back at the barking knight commander.

“*Our* assassin? Let's not get carried away with playing the fool, now!”

Which one of us is playing the fool?No, perhaps the assassins and the Knights had different chains of command and really didn't know. Either way, it was impossible to have a discussion under these circumstances. Then would it come to this after all? I chanted a spell under my breath.....

“Though it would be an agreeable thing to quietly submit to your arrest, using a barefaced lie to try to talk your way out of this is exceedingly unscrupulous! I can no longer forgive you! All horses, surround!”

At his command, the Knights on horseback began to spread out—but, too slow! While the commander was shouting orders, the spell I was chanting over here was ready! I dropped in place to one knee, pressed my right hand against the ground, and released the *Power Words*!

“Vu Vraimer!”

The soil was shaken up by a massive rumble in the ground! The small patch of grassland on which the pair of us had been holding position until just a moment ago swelled, swayed, bulged, and proceeded to take on a gigantic human shape!

Calling on Bephimos: this was a spell to create a golem. A golem's power is strong but its movement sluggish, and it can't accept anything but monotonous commands, so its effectiveness depends entirely on how you make use of those commands. Actually...this earth giant created from distorted soil...Probably seeing this kind of thing before their eyes for the first time in their lives, all of the Knights appeared to have fallen into overt panic.

“What is this!?”

“A giant!?”

“It's weird!?”

“Something like this.....!”

Due to the chaos, they had lost control of their reins so the horses also ran around wild with surprised neighing. Eventually, because of the grassland soil used for its construction, the golem had begun sprouting grass all over its body. The slightly fluffy-looking golem was complete!

“Golem!” At that point, I decided upon what command to give it! *“Dance!”*

.....Shoo-bam-bam-ba-bam.....

According to the command, the golem began to randomly move its arms and legs and whatnot, causing the ground to creak under its weight. What it looked like, well—it didn’t *NOT* look like a dance, but.....rather than blaming whatever this was on Bephimos’ sense of rhythm, this might be where I ought to have reflected on my own unreasonable request. However, to the Knights, it appeared to be a source of nothing but incomprehensible terror.

“Don’t lose your nerve! Keep ranks!” The commander was frantically shouting orders, but I didn’t know how many Knights were actually listening to him.

Taking advantage of that confusion.....

“Freeze Arrow!”

I created dozens of cold arrows with my spell, and released them right in the midst of the panicking Knights! *If I hit a horse, sorry!* As shouts rose up and mayhem spread, I recited another spell in succession——

“D.....Damn yo-ou!” The commander scowled at me, but it wasn’t possible for him to approach under the circumstances. Furthermore, Gourry was beside me——

“——Lina-a!”

It was during that moment it happened. Gourry shouted. Bloodlust flashed. Gourry jumped sideways holding me——

Crash!

Bright crimson flames exploded! Someone off to the side had taken advantage of the chaos and released a fire spell at me, and Gourry, who’d sensed it an instant sooner than I had, had saved me. The flames incinerated the trunks of the trees, and the searing wind that rushed out brushed my cheeks and caused my hair to flutter around my face, but it wasn’t enough to cause any serious wounds.

“Thanks, Gourry!”

Crouching to the ground, when I glanced towards where the attack had come from, standing in a cluster of trees was a figure in a red robe and hood.*The one.....from Ranoma City!?* Had it been his intention to draw our focus to the Knights and then suddenly ambush us unawares!?

“——Curse you! You still had more companions!?” Upon seeing the figure, the knight commander angrily exclaimed in a hoarse voice.

No, that attack just now was completely aimed at us, wasn't it!? However, although I may have been mistaken in my assessment of the circumstances, given that the commander asked something like that, it seemed that the Knights really didn't know about this robed man. If that's the case.....then the aim was friendly fire!

“Gourry! First, towards the robe guy!”

“Got it!” The two of us took off, aiming for where we'd seen the robed man's figure in a cluster of trees!

“Fleeing, cowards!?” Thinking our movements would join us up with our “ally,” the Knights' commander barked while attempting to steer his horse. But the horse was recoiling in terror of the dancing golem and the flames and didn't obey anything that was said. The commander ran out of patience and jumped off his horse, “You lot! Dismount and follow me!”

Following the order, several Knights by his side descended from their horses. In front of us was the red robed man. Behind us, the Knights were chasing us. Following that straight line, Gourry and I rushed towards the robed man! If Robe shoots an attack spell, and we evade, it will hit the Knights behind us. There's no way he would carelessly shoot..... *He fired iiiiiiit!?*

From globes of light summoned by the robed man, five, six rays of light were created and propelled in our direction! It was the spell that'd made an appearance during the attack on Ranoma! It really was the same guy as before! But, that had taken place on top of a roof. Compared to that, it was a little crazy just then because of the golem I created, but at least the terrain around here was normal, so it shouldn't be very hard to avoid! Gourry and I evaded right and left—and the screams of the Knights rose up behind us. *This guy...so it's no trouble at all to involve allies, huh!?*

Just then, bloodlust flashed again. When I evaded instinctively, in the grove a little ways away I saw a second robed figure! Already, dozens of spears of light had been summoned in front of them! *Aiming for the moment when we've evaded a frontal attack, huh!?* Robe Number Two's spears of light——*Whack!*

“Gah!?”

Just before firing, their body was bent back unnaturally with a strike Ran unleashed from the side with her root, and they let out a cry of pain. Judging from the voice, this was a woman. In that instant, the spears of light were fired off in the wrong direction, and the ground and a bunch of trees smashed to pieces and scattered where they impacted. Even though I told her not to get involved, I was saved anyway! Gourry and I made eye contact for a moment, then

changed the direction of our charge from the first robed figure to the one near Ran! And then——

“Elmekia Lance!”

I released the spell I’d been casting that was intended for the first robe guy towards the robe woman instead, as her stance had been thrown off by the blow from Ran! By using a spell that causes damage to the spirit of an opponent, if a human is hit with it, they will inevitably be stunned!

The woman noticed——“Guh!” and she slashed her left hand at it, cursing!

Ba-shoom!

With just that sound as it impacted, my spell was scattered!

.....*Huh.....!*? There’s no way you’d be safe by just swatting it with your arm. If a normal person tried to imitate that, they would be knocked unconscious. However, she was only stumbling a bit. Was she wearing a protective magic item on her arm, or was there another reason? But just then, Gourry sped up and rushed towards her!

“You!”

The woman went on guard, but——she was still underestimating Gourry! Accelerating further from there, and getting up close and personal to look for an opening, he drove the hilt of his sword into his opponent’s solar plexus!

And then, “——Huh!?” The one who called out in alarm and jumped away was Gourry!? I couldn’t see what had happened from my location, but.....

“Lina!” Gourry called out, “These guys——” But before he could tell everyone-

.....*Da-dum-da-dum-da-dum!*

The sound of heavy footfalls approached! When I glanced over there——*Waah!?*

When I glanced near where the robed guy was, in the gaps between a cluster of trees, there was a *wolf* heading towards me!? *Can I even call it that!?* Although it kind of looked like a wolf, it was larger than a horse, after all! I mean, where did this huge thing come from!? Even though my field of vision was obstructed by all the trees, if it was just hanging around, I should have realized it sooner! In any case, its target was definitely me! Its eyes, full of thirst for blood, rooted me to the spot!

“Lina!?”

Gourry turned on his heel, but he was unlikely to make it back in time! With its size and my skill, it was impossible to engage with a sword! In that case——! The moment **that** thing approached me, baring its fangs.....I wasn't going to run away. Without hesitation, I dove down and slid, aimed beneath the wolf!

Chomp!

And, from just behind my head, the sound of fangs gnashing together! Enormous limbs quaked the earth, and the wolf passed directly above my flattened form! In the next beat when I had hastily risen, Gourry was charging in, holding his sword aloft. The enormous wolf nimbly rounded and changed course, darting between the trees. When it faced our way once more——

“Flare Arrow!”

Aiming for that moment carefully, I released the spell I had been casting! With the gaps in the trees around the wolf, because of its physique, it could not evade!

Raooooooooowr!

The wolf faced me and snarled.....Just then, a barrier of red light appeared in front of the huge beast, catching and scattering my spell entirely! *A defensive spell!?* Had it come from somewhere around the robed guy? Or rather.....it seemed to me that the wolf's voice had invoked it, but.....

From nearby, “.....Wha——What is that!?” someone from the Knights shouted out.

Somehow the Knights, probably realizing the golem wouldn't attack, had escaped the chaos a ways back, but now they seemed to be frozen with astonishment at the impossible size of the wolf.

“Where did it come from!?” Someone voiced the same suspicions as me.

“That magician! There's no doubt she summoned it with some spell!” Someone else looked my way and voiced incorrectly-placed blame.



Just then. The wolf laughed.....I got a feeling like that. Turning itself around, it raced towards the Knights!

“It’s coming!?”

“Don’t falter!”

“Engage!”

The Knights who were still safe, some on horseback, others off their horses, attempted to form ranks in spite of being flustered. But, before either side could make contact-

Awooo! The wolf howled! Dozens of fire arrows appeared and were released, aimed at the Knights!

“*Waaaaaaaaaah!?*” The screams of the Knights rose up and overlapped.

The wolf jumped into the midst of that chaos, chomped down on the arm of one of the Knights above his armor, and flung him just like that into the next kingdom over! The others looked at one another.....

“Regennel!” Robe guy’s call reverberated, and the wolf’s movement stopped completely. “.....Don’t play!”

Scolded, Regennel——this huge beast was so called——kept a little distance from the Knights, and resumed facing our way.....

But at that time, “You flee-e-e!?” One of the Knights who had collapsed beside it bellowed and pushed himself up, plunging his sword into the wolf’s flank!

Raowr!? The wolf yelped and jumped away. It didn’t look like it had been seriously injured, but it might have been a little painful. It turned a furious gaze to the knight——

Gaaah!

With a single swipe of an arm, the cyclops sent the knight flying away!

“——*Wha.....!?*” The Knights who witnessed it cried out. It was only natural they would.

Because the enormous wolf had instantly **transformed into a cyclops**. Of course, something like this couldn’t possibly be an ordinary wolf or cyclops. This thing called Regennel must have transformed into those forms by means of some spell or another.

In the meantime, Gourry, Ran, and I should have coordinated and defeated the robe woman first. That was probably the correct thing to do. But...

"Blast Ash!"

Blam!

Something black I created with a spell appeared in the proximity of the cyclops. Ordinarily, that black thing would have swallowed the target, but—it was **evaded**. He had twisted himself as if he knew the exact location I was targeting and the timing for the spell. It definitely wasn't a coincidence, but instead the movement of clearly avoiding something.

".....Why.....?" Witnessing this for himself, it was the Knights' commander who groaned. It seemed he'd suffered a serious blow from the robe guy's attack; he was still staggering as he stood up, "You all.....aren't you fellow allies.....?"

"They're the group that initiated the attack on Ranoma that night. I thought they were *your* allies, though," I said, while keeping an eye on the cyclops and the robed figures.

"Don't jump to such absurd conclusions..... But if you're not allies, you're under no obligation to keep us from crushing each other....."

Certainly, the Knights were pursuing us, and the robed guys were also enemies. I want to say that it would be very convenient if the two parties were to oppose each other, but.....

"I can tell from *that* guy's attitude." I said, glancing sidelong at the robed figure, "It's something like: 'Ah. We're going to annihilate the Knights and let Lina take the blame,' isn't it? Letting that game play out just as he pleases would only serve to piss me off, though. So I'm going to jam a wrench into the works, is all I'm saying."

".....You think.....we would be defeated.....?" The commander was putting on a brave front, but most of the Knights had injuries all over their bodies. How many of them could even still properly fight?

Without touching it, I pointed towards the cyclops with an outstretched finger; "In the first place, you guys don't have the equipment and organization to be fighting something like *that*, do you?"

".....Do you intend to indebt us to you.....?"

"Of course not."

".....No matter what, our position on Miss Lina will not change....."

"I figured as much."

The immediate response of the commander was silence.

".....Well, it doesn't suit our nature to stay silent and watch them do as they please," said Gourry, standing by my side.

"Um, um. Then——" Ran was also tapping her root on her right shoulder while walking towards us, and she turned around to face the robed figures. "I'm interferin'. Is it alright if I manage just the ones over there?"

"I reckon," I said with a thumbs up.

".....You saw right through our aims, huh. Regennel." Robe guy sneered at the cyclops with a mocking voice, "Even when you become a wolf, you express too much with your face."

"*Shut up,*" the cyclops—no, now taking the form of a cyclops, the thing called Regennel oozed dissatisfaction at the other's words.

A talking cyclops would normally be an astonishing thing, but our opponent had already transformed from a giant wolf into a cyclops. At this point doing as much as talking wasn't really a surprise. Maybe because it was starting to get on his nerves, but the golem that was still dancing around? Regennel sauntered up to it and punched it into smithereens.

"That's fine. After all, we can do what we want to do, it doesn't change anything. Am I wrong, Gardova?"

"You *are* wrong. It isn't playtime yet...after all, we still haven't done what we *have* to do." Said the robed guy—Gardova.

"Damn. You're so uptight," Regennel spat out in disappointment.

".....And?" I glared daggers at them and yelled, "What the hell are you guys after, anyway!? I sure hope that after causing such a massive uproar, this isn't the part where you go, 'I'm terribly sorry, we've mistaken you for someone else,' right!?" I thought I would be disregarded, but——

".....Mistake.....?" Gardova replied. "There is no mistake. Because it was handed it down. The oracle..."

".....Oracle.....?" I frowned.

There are basically two meanings of the word 'oracle' back "over there." One is a type of prophecy genuinely bestowed upon a priestess or the like. With this, the necessary information

doesn't always come about at the necessary time, but the truth that is revealed is absolutely without error. The other you'd use to describe "an insight with no mistakes." This is merely intuition, so there are circumstances where one could actually make huge mistakes. So what *they* were calling an "oracle" was.....?

"That's right! An oracle!" Gardova——loudly and triumphantly——said, "Know this: 'From the land sealed by evil, the one who summons chaos into their own body will appear in this land, and bring about calamity'...it states."

Chapter 4

Aiming for the Border, What Awaits Us Ahead Is——

Once, while I was confronting one of the high-ranking mazoku, Hellmaster Phibrizzo, I failed to control my spell and temporarily gave myself up to chaos. Chaos: in other words, the source of all existence, Lord of Nightmares.

Eventually the chaos returned to somewhere, and I was returned to myself, but.....

So, that oracle Gardova was speaking of was dead-on about me. Although it did contain some easy-to-misunderstand expressions, there were no untruths to speak of. It would be a simple thing to play dumb and say, “No, it’s a different person, I don’t know anything,” but I can’t imagine the robed guy’s little gang would buy it.

Just a little.....I was beginning to understand. Gardova and these others were a different group from those who pursued us from the kingdom of Luzilite. Their affiliation was still unknown, but..... If they’ve taken some kind of oracle as the truth, then for the sake of society, or mankind, or the world, they’ve come to kill me.

The first time was the attack on the city at night.....and because they underestimated us too much, that was a failure. When they became aware we were being chased by the Luzilite Kingdom, they thought to utilize that. If that group of Knights pursuing us defeated me, then that’s all well and good——counting on that and observing us for a while, the hopes they had placed on Knights were stomped on in a hurry by my dancing golem. After that, they must have reached the limits of their patience and decided to take measures into their own hands.

I say all that, but really these guys didn’t have to resort to such extreme measures!

“——They seem to have some idea of what’s going on,” Seeming to gauge our reactions, Gardova spoke up after being silent for a while.

“.....Lina-nyon bringin’ about calamity, y’say?” Ran asked while keeping a vigilant eye focused on our opponents.

I would love to be able to say “no” to that but——

“.....With the Knights of Luzilite and the unidentified robed guys after me, I can’t exactly deny that it’s already become a reality.....” Because, in that sense, the oracle has already been fulfilled. “This is simply my picking up a gauntlet that had already been thrown. But how about, rather than everyone trying to get their hands on a piece of me.....instead, you *lend* a

hand in returning us to our homeland, then everything would be wrapped up nice and peacefully with a bow on top!"

"Don't make me laugh," Gardova spat, rejecting my proposal outright. "The oracle is absolute. With all the calamity in your wake, it can be said that the oracle has already been fulfilled, so can you really say it will simply end with that? Is there any guarantee that no further calamity will occur.....? There is none at all. Underestimate the matter and then it will be too late for regrets when that calamity spreads. If we are to take the utmost care, then the elimination of your wretched life is the most logical measure."

".....On the contrary, doesn't it kind of feel just like you guys are the ones spreading calamity by interpreting that oracle in such a melodramatic way?"

"Whether or not that is the case, if you disappear, the calamity will also disappear."

"——*Hey. Isn't that enough Gardova?*" Perhaps running out of patience, Regennel interjected from the side.

As for me, I wanted to draw out a bit more of this conversation, but——

"Nothing you do will change things."

"Logical, huh.....?"

The one who spoke up this time was the robed woman. While acquiescing to Gardova's viewpoint, she removed her own robe and mask. What appeared from underneath was long black hair, and a woman approximately 20 years old and well-featured——*too* well-featured, actually. More than what you'd call beautiful, she appeared to have an *artificial* face.

"Discuss pointless topics after you accomplish what must be accomplished."

"How is the oracle a pointless topic!? That's disrespectful, Nelphik!"

"I'm not saying the oracle is a pointless topic," The woman, Nelphik, kept glancing my way, "I'm saying it's pointless to discuss whatever the hell with opponents we're about to dispose of!" She snapped, advancing along the ground towards us!

"No kidding!" Regennel also stepped forward.

Gourry and Ran moved to the forefront as I began to cast——Actually, I'd completed the incantation from the get go! I pointed my finger towards the sky, and released the *Power Words* in a whisper! A ball of light erupted forth from my fingertip.....and burst!

What I used was a Lighting spell. Normally used for illuminating things at night, I've adapted the spell to where the duration is practically zero, but with the level of brightness cranked up to maximum! In a nutshell: a distraction! From their position, Gourry and Ran weren't looking at it directly, whereas the robed guys were on guard and were more than likely observing us carefully!

"——Ku!" *"Guh!?"* Nelphik and Regennel both cried out!

At night, this effect is tremendous. It would rob vision from your opponent for quite a while, but even to eyes attuned to daylight, it should still be enough to bedazzle temporarily. But that's just time enough!

In that moment that our enemy faltered, Gourry moved to engage Regennel, and Ran to Nelphik!

In an instant, Ran had closed the distance with Nelphik, who had stopped moving momentarily due to the flash of light, and unleashed a series of thrusts with the stick in her hand.

Wham!

A blow struck Nelphik directly in the center of her chest!

"Gu!?"

Nelphik, who earlier hadn't cried out even when struck in the solar plexus with the hilt of Gourry's sword, this time let out a groan and stumbled backwards a few steps. I don't think that was just an ordinary thrust. Probably, the moment it struck, Ran used her wind ability to augment the power and impact.

"You vermin.....! What is that broken stick——!?" From the agitation bleeding through Nelphik's features, it looked like that attack had some effect.

"Nyufun~♪" At being asked, Ran burst into a self-satisfied grin, and while spinning her root around exclaimed, "That which is one with the livin' tree, born from the core, which was nourished by absorbin' magical power over one thousand and five hundred years——"

Hearing her monologue, I was reminded of something. "Over there" there once existed a huge tree that absorbed miasma, and from that core was born a single sword. Although there's quite the difference between a sword and a root, to think that what Ran wields in her hand might be of a similar nature to that!?

She brandished the stick in her right hand high up into the air...

“——The Awesome Rod...!”

“What is that stupid name!?” The scathing words uttered instinctually by Nelpik reflexively were in perfect alignment with the voice of my heart.

Give something like that a cool name. Seriously.

“Don’t make fun of Awesome Rod!” When Ran yelled and rushed towards her—

“What I was making fun of wasn’t the weapon but your shitty taste!” —Nelpik also took off towards Ran.

When it comes to matters of taste, I have to admit I agree with Nelpik way too much, but.....

Ran struck out with another thrust. However, Nelpik was able to evade it. Evaded.....no, the moment it seemed that was the case, just like that, Ran's thrust shifted into a sweep. But even that...

Black claws appeared from underneath her red robe, repelling the onslaught. Were those claws attached to a gauntlet or something? Probably, this is the move that caused Gourry to retreat a while ago. Before being caught in those claws, Ran took her root (I don’t want to call it a rod, so it’s a root) and thrust, reverse-swept, and launched it upwards, continuing to assault her opponent with a series of high-speed attacks one after another.

It assumed she was using the spell that wraps the wind around herself to add to the speed and power, but I still can’t help but be amazed she’s controlling the spell at such a speed that she would likely destroy herself with a single mistake... Nelpik, on the other hand, while she managed to hold her off at the start, was slowly, but surely, beginning to become overwhelmed——

“Ooooooh!”

At the same time that Nelpik growled out, a sphere of light appeared behind Ran! An attack on her blind spot!? Or perhaps it was going to bypass Ran and head this way!? But before I knew the answer, as though she could see what was behind her, Ran carelessly gave the root a swing, and the sphere of light smashed into tiny pieces!

Nelpik rushed forward without caring. Her claws and Ran’s root rattled together stiffly with a dry sound.....Just then, Nelpik’s long black hair hardened in an instant, transforming into a giant claw that raked at Ran from the side!

—*She won't be able to dodge it.....!*

Though it seemed in that moment that was the case—

Wham!

Without wavering, Ran had rushed in —quite literally headfirst— and headbutted her, the force of which caused Nelphik to be bent completely over backwards.

Regennel, who had since transformed into a cyclops, had enough height to be able to peep into the window on the second story of a house. The disparity in body size with Gourry was basically like the one between an adult and a young child. So, from Regennel's perspective, the level of comprehension he had regarding his circumstances was merely that some pipsqueak was attacking him while he was blinded.

He swung his arm up carelessly—

"Out of the way, Regennel!"

Perhaps he sensed something when Gardova's voice rang out in that moment.

"Oooh!?" Regennel jumped.

With a jumping power unreasonable for a cyclops, he sprang extremely high into the air. At the apex of that jump, he transformed into an enormous four-winged bird, and continued that jump into flight without missing a beat! Far from it being a creature I don't recognize, does such a thing even exist "over here?" He dexterously manipulated his four wings to circle one little point in the sky.

".....Wha.....What was that about?"

Although Regennel had immediately followed instructions, he didn't seem to understand the situation well..... If he had kept on underestimating us and swinging his arms around like that, in all likelihood, he probably would have been cleaved in two by Gourry just a moment ago. Gardova understood Gourry as an opponent not to be taken lightly just from that one time he faced off with him earlier, so perhaps he warned Regennel.

Damn! What did ya have to that for!?

—However! I released the next spell I had recited!

“Fireball!”

The ball of light that I produced hurtled toward Regennel in the sky! If it makes contact, it should explode and burst into flames, but.....

“Will it hit?” Maybe because he’d already recovered from the first distraction, he easily dodged it with a scoff.

Well, that’s the general idea. It’s possible I had already calculated on circumstances along the lines of him transforming to run away into the sky. Ergo, it’s not a normal Fireball. I’ve made various modifications to it. When the ball of light was out of the view of Regennel, from behind my back, I altered the trajectory of the spell——

“Behind you!”

I’d already taken into consideration a warning from Gardova, too!

“Break!”

Snap! And the moment I snapped my fingers,

Ka-boom!

Very close to where Regennel was trying to swerve his body to, the light exploded and burst into flames! The modifications I made weren’t just limited to controlling the trajectory of the spell! I am also at liberty to decide where it explodes, too!

“Gwoaaah!?” What Regennel let out wasn’t a spell incantation but a scream of pain.

It was really rather unfortunate he’d decided to transform into a bird. Flames crawled along the easily burned feathers, and with that, soon he began falling to the ground. However——

“Roooar!”

Just as he was about to crash, he changed his form into that of a giant spider and landed on the ground, only barely remaining upright. Gourry was there in a heartbeat, but just before he could cut into him.....countless fire lances filled the sky!

.....What’s this...!? This huge attack range!?

“Celestial Flare...”

The voice reverberating over the battlefield was Gardova’s!

“Fall.”

In accordance with his command, the innumerable pillars of fire began to descend from the heavens toward the earth. With this scope of attack range, he plans to hit everyone but himself!? The jerk! Even including his allies!?

The flames—

Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom!

—fell.

The leaves burned, the branches burned, the grass burned, the ground burned, and the area all around us filled to the brim with heat. Gourry bailed out of his attack and dodged them. Ran and Nephik still continued to fight, but luckily they were managing to not get hit by a single one. And Regennel—

“Rooooaaar!”

Transformed into a gigantic beetle as he let out a roar! Although the flames fell and pierced his back, they didn’t seem to leave any noticeable wounds on that huge body.

It didn’t seem as though each and every lance was very hot, but the downpouring flames were scorching the air, and so my skin felt as though it was blistering, and it hurt to breathe. Nevermind that, wasn’t this an opportunity now that Regennel’s movement has completely stopped!? While somehow managing to dodge the lances myself, I started chanting a spell in spite of the pain in my lungs!

.....Darkness beyond twilight, Crimson beyond blood that flows—

“That’s the Dark Lord’s spell!?” Gardova exclaimed in astonishment.

Even though we should be quite far away, did he hear the incantation all the way over here!? *That’s right!* What I’m chanting borrows the power of Ruby Eye Shabranigdu who exists in this world, a spell to vanquish even a large dragon! It’s an indiscriminate, wide range spell, but as long as I don’t make a mistake in how I use it, it’s no problem!

The target is.....

—Let all the fools who stand in our way be destroyed, by the power you and I possess.....

...Turned-into-a-beetle Regennel!

And with one *“Clap!”* of his hands, probably sensing my intentions, Gourry leapt behind me and put some distance between us——

“Dragon Slave!”

In response to the *Power Words* I commanded, red light converged on Regennel and——There, in addition to that, a white light was drawing a formation, overlapping my own several times!? I remembered there being red light, but this white light formation is.....!?

Sha-koouoom!

The roar of the explosion vibrated the atmosphere and swayed the trees. This is a spell that could blow away a small castle, after all. Even back “over there,” for countries with sorcerers who are able to use this spell, one might go so far as to say it can put them on their high horse. Not to mention, I thought that demonstrating this kind of thing “over here” would be terrible.....so I didn’t use it. But...well, things have already become plenty terrible, so I guess the lid is off that can of worms.

The explosion that Regennel was at the origin of also enveloped Gardova even though he was standing far behind him..... It was my intention to hit them both with one blow, but——

“.....Ooh.....ooOOOOOoohhh.....” Blended in with the reverberation from the explosion was a deep——deep groan. *“OOOOOOOOHH!”* What was eventually revealed from within the fading smoke was the shadow of Regennel writhing and groaning on the ground.

He withstood my Dragon Slave just now!?No, he defended against it!?

“Regennel!? Gardova!” Running far away from Ran, Nelphik called out.....

“.....As expected.....it seems.....we cannot completely..... defend against the Dark Lord’s curse.....” I couldn’t see his form yet, but the voice sounding as though it were enduring pain was Gardova’s. *“.....For now, just this once.....we’re retreating.....”*

“.....Can’t be helped.....”

“Got it!” Following Regennel’s reply, Nelphik also answered and continued on, running into the cloud of dust.

.....as if I’ll let you go!

I tried to cast the spell again but——suddenly, the shadow of Regennel rising up from inside the dust and sand disappeared.....

Roaar!

A whirlwind of dust kicked up as the ground split apart, and a huge pair of black wings unfurled!

—That's—!

While creating even more whirlwinds just by the flapping of its wings, its huge body soared into the air!

“A dragon!?” The voice I heard was the astonished cry of the Knights' captain.

Yes—That's a single black dragon! I've seen countless dragons in my time, but.....even among them, this one was particularly massive. And clinging to its leg were two robed figures!

Faster than I could cast the spell—

“RU-Groaaaaaaaar!”

—With a great bellowing voice, he accelerated all at once, and continued flying away at an impossible speed!Probably, what I heard just now was a magical incantation. Some spell he probably used to increase his flight speed.

They were able to escape, huh.....

For the time being, it seemed as though the battle here with the robed guys was over, but.....

I turned around and faced the Knights' captain, “I'm more or less confirming, but...do you happen to know what exactly those robed guys are?”

“.....” At my inquiry, the captain was silent. Did he not know, or did he just have no intention of talking?

“Roger that. Then, we'll just be going now.”

I turned my heel, and as we left, behind us the Knights were all just standing around silently.

It might seem obvious, but the world is vast. If you're only living in one place, you won't have many chances to really understand that. However, if you leave to travel to far-off places, you'll come to understand that vastness well.

We headed north on foot, at times hitchhiking on a wagon. By the time our party had reached a city by the name of Tortas, roughly ten days had passed since the fight with the Knights and the robed guys in the village of Renihorn. Since then, there had been no further attack from either of them.It's possible it might just be my wishful thinking that we may have managed to shake off the Knights, but it would be pointless to expect the same of the robed ones.

As we walked down the streets of Tortas, I gazed towards the far end of the horizon, a little lost in my thoughts.

".....Lina?"

Maybe because he'd noticed the state of my affairs, Gourry, who was walking along my right side, called out to me.

"—Hm?"

"What are you thinking about?"

.....He saw through me after all. This guy.

"You know.....Gourry....." I smiled a little, "If.....if we were able to go back safe and sound—"

"Oh, um—"

"—I was thinking about just how I should make Norst's life a living hell....."

"*That's* what that far-off look was for!?"

Naturally! I don't know how far the other side is calculating things, but we are having an absolute hell of a time here. The butterflies in my stomach won't settle down while we're having to make do with nothing,

"I'll pound him into a pump! ...Is what I want to say here, but..... Remember, if we should happen to pass by each other again in some city in the future, he'd pretend not to know us, and perhaps we could just look the other way too. In exchange, he wouldn't lay a hand on any humans for a while—aren't those the conditions that were set by that guy?"

“Accordingly, if we started screwing with him, he'd proclaim that Lina Inverse broke her promise, so that he'd be able to mess with humans again, right? Therefore, if those conditions hold true to the fine print, even all the way over here..... If we discovered each other crossing paths on the road, what would happen if I whispered into his ear, 'You know what this means, yeah?'”

“Scary!”

I nodded deeply at Gourry's reaction, “Mhmm. The results would be immediate, huh?”

“Norst?” Said Ran, walking on my left side.

“Ah...He's the guy who caused Gourry and I to be stranded out here.”

“Payback?”

“Hm...to call it payback, or rather, or merely harassment.....” I scratched my head and——

.....*Noisy*.....

The atmosphere around us had become rather noisy. By chance, the three of us stopped at the same time, and turned our gazes **over there**. A crowd of people on the street was being divided as though they were avoiding something.

At the center was a silver-haired man. He had a perceptive gaze, loose-fitting clothing, and even though it wasn't that cold, a muffler covering his nose and ears. The man casually raised his right hand, and pulled down that muffler.....

Shrieks and gasps of shock both large and small rose up from the crowd of people around him. The silver-haired man's crooked and grotesque mouth tore apart into a wide grin.

“I'm not very good at pretending to be a human.....”

That voice was——

The silver-haired man inhaled a breath with a muffled “*woosh*.....”

——Not good!

“Run away!” I yelled as I dashed towards an alleyway off to the side!

Gourry and Ran immediately darted in after me! Among the people around us, there were a few who caught my warning and ran for it.....but just at that moment...!

Bzzap-bzzap-bzzap-bzzap-bzzap!

Fired from the gaping mouth of the silver-haired man, *Thunder Breath* danced wildly down the city streets! Some of the passers-by who were hit by the bolts collapsed and fell over without even being able to put up a fight. The cobblestones struck by lightning glowed and exploded the wooden slats of nearby fruit stands, igniting them and sending up billows of smoke!

That we barely avoided being directly hit by diving into the shadow of a building was nothing but sheer luck. I didn't know it at the time, but the gates of a nearby building were made of iron. If the lightning hadn't been drawn to that, one of the three of us might have been struck. We continued dashing down the alleyway for now.

"What was that he breathed out!?"

"That was an ordinary dragon's breath!" I yelled back at Gourry's question.

I had been wondering if this was the case or not, but after what happened just now, I am definitely convinced. The robed guys were not human at all. They're dragons. Casting speed that's unlikely for a human. Using flight spells combined with other spells. At this point, it would be folly to assume they were anything remotely human.

And previously, when they were retreating.....they transformed into dragons—well, not really, because they reverted to back their original forms. But being able to rise into the sky without a magical incantation and those breath attacks were probably because they already had those abilities to begin with.

Those guys were still punch shy over my Dragon Slave, so they frivolously picked a fight in the middle of the city where I can't fight back with my full power. Moreover, they seemingly have no misgivings about involving the other humans around here. There was a massive panic on the main streets, and the screaming and angry shouts of everyone blended together with the clamor. The voice of the instigator? That was Gardova. It stands to reason the other two had come along as well.

"Um, um... that means that guy wasn't a person, but a dragon!?" exclaimed Ran.

"Probably! We need to keep going and distance ourselves from the city!"

While a Dragon Slave is deserved here, I can't afford to go firing off with the flashiest spells in my arsenal while we're in a town with a lot of people. Although, whether or not the other side will follow along with that line of reasoning.....

We passed through the alleyway, exiting onto a back road. The panic on the main street had spread out even this far. All around us were a swarm of people running every which way. Among them... After sensing an inkling of something in my line of sight, I swung back around...and standing there was a long black-haired woman wearing loose-fitting clothes.

——*Nelphik!?*

As soon as our eyes met, she took off at a sprint towards us! While both her hands appeared white at first, they soon became black and swollen, transforming into distorted claws. At the same time she mowed down some people in her way with her arms, a number of small black objects appeared and took off flying towards us so quickly I could only make out the afterimages!

Gourry immediately drew his sword, and Ran waved her root, knocking down whatever those things were that flew at them. At the same time, they also hit the passers-by around us, causing them to cry out in pain, which spread panic around this street as well. Of the objects that had been knocked down that I was able to get a fleeting glimpse of, it looked something like a small piece of black metal——no, is this a *scale!?*

I started chanting a spell in order to intercept Nelphik's advancement! Gourry and Ran also squared off beside me—— Just then, a shadow spread out from Nelphik's left shoulder.

.....No! That's not a shadow! It's an enormous black wing!

When the wing came into contact with a nearby house, the force of it easily broke the walls, unseated the roof, and scattered rubble around! And naturally, of course, it was falling this way too!

Uhg! A bothersome attack! But——

"Break through!" Instead of avoiding the rubble, Ran shrieked out an order and stepped forward!

.....OK, understood!

Guessing what she was up to, I moved forward as well. Gourry also followed suit! Knocked away with a sweeping slash of the root in Ran's hand, it was as though all the falling rubble was swept clean away! Of course it wasn't just her technique with the root itself, but it would be impossible to say how much of the rubble was blown away by the wind spell infused into her strike.

"——!?"

Maybe she hadn't expected us to come right at her, but on the artificial-looking face of Nelphik, for the first time, she sported a look of astonishment almost like a living creature. And then, I released the spell I had chanted!

"Howl Freeze!"

This is a spell to conjure a powerful blizzard and blast it at your opponent. Due to the nature of the whirlwind of ice and snow, it's difficult to dodge. Even if a human is hit with it, it shouldn't cause fatal wounds, but the extreme coldness should make one unable to move properly.

"Guh!?"

Nelphik staggered as she was enveloped in the blast. If she was in the form of a huge dragon, it may have only been enough to gently caress her skin with a cool breeze, but at human size, it should be quite effective!

Gourry rushed to where she faltered——

".....Damn!"

Nelphik lifted her body up off the ground using the huge wing that had ripped up the building as a support, and escaped into the sky, outside of the reach of the sword! Damn you! It was like this before too, but it seems she's become strangely cautious of Gourry.....

Nelphik unfolded her other wing in the empty sky. She contracted her giant wings once and then flapped both wings heavily in order to stay aloft in mid-air.

——*Whoosh*——

She inhaled an enormous breath...

...A dragon breath from the sky!? Bad news!

Just then——

"This way!"

When I glanced towards where I'd heard the voice call out, the door of a nearby house opened, and who should come out of there but.....the royal capital Parvossos' commander of the guard: Morgan!? *What the hell are you doing here!?*..... I want to say that, but this was no time to be asking questions!

The three of us hastily plunged into the house, and slammed the door behind us as quickly as possible——

A howl like a tornado roared around us!

Inside the house——correction. At second glance, the *eatery* that the three of us had run into, erupting from a fissure in the wall that was torn by Nephik's wings, and then blasting apart the window, massive flames rushed in! The four of us, including Morgan, jumped out of the door on the opposite side of the shop into the main street.....and the flames——

Whoosh!

——poured all the way from the back alley, through the windows and the door of the building!

.....That was really dangerous, but everyone seemed to be OK. Thinking that Gardova must be waiting for us on the main street, I hurriedly glanced around, but.....the main street was in the middle of a panic.

A child was crying.

Perhaps because of the disorder that ran rampant after all the lightning, there were things scattered about in every direction, smashed and smoking. There were those who were crying, screaming, and moaning but...there's no sign of Gardova now. Did he move on somewhere else looking for us?

Adults going every which way. An old man crouched down on the roadside. Across the road, a seven or eight year old girl was crying, and when her eyes met mine, she said,

"Help me...Sis~" Extending both her arms, she rushed over to me.

On the face of such a young girl——

"Put a sock in iiiiiiiit!"

Slam!

Inserting a half-twist, I countered with a roundhouse and felt my foot sink in!

"Gwaaahhh!?"

The girl let out a strange growl and flew away, violently slamming into a nearby wall!

“What the—!?” Morgan yelled out in surprise, but I didn't take my eyes off the girl.

After impacting the wall, all of a sudden she righted herself on the spot!

“——*Screw you! What'd you do that for!?*”

Even though the girl was howling in rage, I pinned them with a frigid gaze and declared, “Your act is crap! **Regennel!**”

That's right, the child in front of me was *not* some innocent girl caught up in turmoil. In order to eliminate me in the midst of all this confusion, Regennel changed his form into that of a human child with a transformation spell!

Of course, if he had pulled it off better, I probably would have been caught off guard. However, while disguised as a scared child, he completely disregarded the other adults who were closer by and dashed straight towards me, not to mention his bloodlust had sprung a leakage. Once before, I had been successfully cheated by a high-ranking mazoku who took the form of a child. I won't be deceived by the likes of that lousy level of acting!

“*Damn yoooooooo!*” Regennel transformed again while howling!

When he changed this time, the form was a green dragon about the size of a house——

“.....Ah.....?”

“——Regennel.....” I stared evenly at my opponent and said, “Next time, you ought to try to properly understand exactly why you get the sort of advice you got from your companions..... Well, it's too late now, though.”

With a small “*shing*” ringing from the guard, Gourry returned his sword to its scabbard. Judging by the slight movement I noticed at Regennel's side——Regennel's body slipped apart diagonally, and crumpled onto the street just where he'd stood.

The moment he understood the thing pretending to be a child was an enemy to be defeated, Gourry had immediately made his move, and cut down the dragon in the middle of his transformation. If Regennel hadn't been cursing at us and instead had escaped into the sky without delay, like before when he'd transformed from a cyclops to a giant bird on Gardova's advice, he might have been able to dodge it.

There was no longer any light in the eyes of the fallen dragon. Nephik and Gardova must still be around though. For the time being, it would probably be bad to stay in this spot. I

set out towards the opposite side of the street where Nelphik was just a bit ago. Together with Gourry, Ran, and Morgan——

“——speaking of, Morgan, what are you doing here anyway!?”

“Nothing in particular,” said Morgan. “It's quite obviously because I received an order from the kingdom to go after Miss Lina, isn't it?”

.....I see. Come to think of it, it would make sense for Morgan in particular to be mobilized since he knows our faces firsthand. Even though I stopped in my tracks after he said this, he didn't seem to be concerned.

"Although.....once we managed to catch up, things were like *this*. It was no longer an appropriate time to deal with you. I've been hearing reports that the Knights of the Silver Lances were dealt a serious blow, but..... Those guys, they're some group called Neosfeed that we heard rumors about."

I hurriedly started walking forward again, “Neosfeed?”

“It's a religious sect that believes in Ceifeed. What I know of them, as I said, is only from rumors, though. That said, it's something different from the usual sort of Ceifeed doctrines that are in other towns. We don't care if they advocate for things along the lines of worshiping Ceifeed or needing to defeat Mazoku, but.....”

We passed through a side street onto a different road. Although things were in an uproar on this side as well, there was no noticeable damage.

“They are made up of non-human races, such as dragons and elves.”

“Dragons and elves!?” I blurted out involuntarily.

It was a little surprising but.....if I think about it, if humans worship the gods, dragons and elves would probably worship them too.

Morgan nodded. “They call themselves Neosfeed, the true Ceifeed doctrine. However, since humans don't often have enough power to oppose Mazoku and generally produce a large amount of negative emotions, they are deemed a pointless existence that only gives power to the mazoku. So without letting them join their religion, they have no qualms about sacrificing humans for their ends, either.”

“Wha——!?”

“A long time ago, when a greater demon appeared in Marisida city, a group turned up and appeared to defeat the greater demon, but at some point, it’s said that they also remorselessly burned the city and its troops to the ground.”

“Hey.....!?”

When Regennel had been messing around with the Knights for his own entertainment during that battle in the village of Renihorn, was that also a facet of that.....? The mentality of that kind of group.....I have a bad feeling about this. Just what exactly was that oracle that was handed down to them!? Sure enough, this.....wasn’t something I should be taking lightly.....

But if Morgan was aware of something like this Neosfeed thing, he probably also knew about the Knights’ captain we had a run-in with from before..... Although, it’s not like he has any obligation to be informing the target of his pursuit.

“Those guys.....about how many of them are there altogether.....?”

“I don't know. After all, there are no more than rumors.”

"So you're saying that around 'here', you just leave groups like that to their own devices?"

“Apart from that group, it’s not as though they’re proactively trying to murder humans. However, it seems they don’t shy away from embroiling them in their affairs when accomplishing their goals. In addition, if you think about their base and the scope——”

OooooooooooooOOOOOH!!

A roar that could be heard in the direction of the main street cut off his words. It seemed there was something going on over there.....

“.....What will you do?”

To Morgan’s question,

“There’s no choice but to deal with it!” I answered immediately.

Naturally since I said that myself, I should have expected it, but... Even in this remote city of Tortas, they must have had a vigilante corps or something, for when we returned to the main street, it had become a battlefield with Gardova and Nelpik and an armed group of the citizens of Tortas. But was it okay to call something this disproportionate a battle?

Even though the members of the vigilante corps surrounded that group from a distance and began shooting arrows at them, Nelpik's flame breath burned up the arrows in mid-air, and only the unburned arrowheads were scattered around. Nelpik stretched her black wings, smashing through houses, and rushed in one great charge over to where the corps members were cowering from the falling debris. Either with her claws, or with her hair transformed into blades, she proceeded to mow down and cut them to pieces. There were those that managed to defend against her attack with their armor and counterattack with swords, but the slashes that should have struck her torso were being stopped just before they connected, and they instead received a counterattack from Nelpik's claws and hair.

.....Even though she looked similar to a human right now, Nelpik was essentially a dragon. Even the areas that looked like bare skin probably retained the strength of dragon scales. If that was the case, it would be difficult to pierce her if all you had was average skills and swords. The figure Nelpik struck with her black talons, black hair that moved at will, and black wings that matched her human size folded on her back, it looked to me as though she were a devil woman.

Gardova, on the other hand, was haphazardly tossing around a continuous stream of attack spells, taking down the vigilante corps around him. When he removed his hood and mask, he had the previous appearance of a silver-haired man with a warped mouth, but maybe he had decided it was no longer necessary to pretend to be human. For now he sported silver scales covering a beast-like body and backwards protruding horns. He'd turned into something that I would refer to as a dragon-man.

As with Nelpik, the fact that he hadn't returned to his original dragon form was probably because he was being extra cautious about my Dragon Slave. Of course, I had no intention of obliterating the city by firing off a spell like *that*. But on the other hand, using it in a situation where the town *wouldn't* get obliterated.....if your gigantic target is circling around in the sky, for example. So, I couldn't entirely rule out firing it off towards the sky from below.

But at this rate, it seemed unlikely that they're reveal a chink in their armor of that magnitude. Whether or not the vigilante corps members could manage to go so far as actually defeating Nelpik or Gardova, if they were at least able to draw them nearer to us, that would make things much easier for me, but..... Unfortunately, the vigilantes in visible range now were either fallen or hiding from view, and no one appeared to be attempting to counterattack at the moment.

Taking in this situation, I took off running while starting to chant a spell! The target this time was Nelpik, who is the closer of the two!

“——Over here!”

Spotting us, Nelpik growled loudly, her voice was brimming with loathing.

I noticed Gardova looking this way too. Gourry, Ran, and I sprinted over the ruined cobblestones, heading toward Nelpik. For a moment, Nelpik hesitated just a bit, and then started some kind of spell incantation! But it was too late for that, as I released the spell I finished casting!

“Dynast Breath!”

Simultaneously.....

KuooohRUUOooooooooo!

Nelpik and Gardova roared together!

The spell I was using freezes the target over with magical ice and then smashes them to bits! It could defeat a mazoku at the level of a brass demon, piece of cake! Although, I think I also used it to defeat that weird fish from a while back!

Kssh!

With an icy sound, Nelpik’s whole body froze over! At the same time.....a formation of white light wrapped itself twice around Nelpik!

—That light formation is.....!

Kiiin!

The magical ice shattered, scattering into countless tiny bits of frost!

Any opponent who’d been trapped in the ice would shatter along with it—at least, they should have. However, after the ice dispersed, there stood the form of Nelpik without so much as a scratch!

...../ see. That light formation I keep seeing, it must be a defensive spell that Nelpik and Gardova use simultaneously. It’s probably the same thing that reduced the power manifested by the Dragon Slave I fired off before. When Nelpik hesitated just a moment ago, that was likely because she realized that I was starting a spell incantation, but couldn’t decide whether to ignore it and attack, or to prioritize defense.

“You scum!” Nelpik roared. “How dare you do that to Regenne!”

“If you’re going to be mad I picked up the gauntlet, don’t throw down the damn thing in the first plaaaaace!” I brazenly screamed back.

Nelphik readied herself as Gourry and Ran approached.....

—Then, her body swayed a little.

“Nelphik!?” Gardova’s voice was nearly a shriek.

Without understanding what was happening to her, Nelphik stopped in her tracks as she was impaled and stuck in place, coughed, and spit up a little blood.....

“.....It really should be you youngsters doing these kind of acrobatic maneuvers, should it not.....?” Morgan griped as he pulled out the Blast Sword that was skewering Nelphik to the ground.



...Once you know the trick, it really wasn't anything special. We just took advantage of the fact that these guys were paying extra close attention to Gourry and turned that against them. Gourry exchanged the Blast Sword in his possession with Morgan's sword, and while we were drawing their attention, Morgan climbed the roof of a nearby house and landed the blow by jumping off of it. I was wondering if he might refuse to help us, but perhaps because he thought he had no choice but to do so under these circumstances, he went ahead and accepted this plan.

Even Nelphik's skin, which couldn't be penetrated by average swords and skills, could be penetrated by a sword that converts magical power into sharpness! Cooperating like this, we can take down Gardova in a flash, too! I began casting a spell! Gourry ran towards Morgan and they exchanged their swords with each other.

"Mere humaaans—!" Gardova took in a deep breath...

Bzzap-bzzap!

...and released his lightning breath!

Perhaps he had predicted it, for Morgan casually flung his sword.....and the lightning was attracted to the iron of the blade and coiled around it. Then Gourry approached from the left, and Ran from the right. When I followed suit and moved forward to the center just a bit behind the other two, Gardova still did not retreat. The reason was obvious. Their purpose is to dispose of me after all. Since I'm offering myself up as bait, whether doing so attracts or repels him, the opponent's behavior would definitely cause him to show some hesitation!

Roar!

A whirlwind sprung into being from Gardova's roar!

"——Guh!?"

The powerful wind acted as a wall, forcibly containing Gourry where he stood. However, Ran dashed in without a care in the world! The wind she commanded that was wrapped around her and Gardova's whirlwind were cancelling each other out! I leaped into action, following the flow of that wind to narrow the distance to the enemy, but——at that moment!

Bzzap!

A ball of lightning bloomed in Gardova's open mouth! Another Thunder Breath!? And he was aiming at me! It's possible that by omitting the action of sucking in his breath, he was able to attack faster at the cost of the power being slightly reduced. But regardless, for a human such as myself.....

The length of that moment felt like an eternity. Seeing the ball of lightning in Gardova's mouth swell bigger and bigger——

“Hoi.”

In what seemed like slow-motion what came into view, together with Ran's voice that was lacking any sense of tension, was a bunch of little——

—*Arrowheads!?*

...The tiny metal things flew through the air.....and while wrapping around and absorbing the electricity from the lightning ball, they also fell onto Gardova himself! At some point, Ran had gathered up the arrowheads that had fallen around, then tossed them all out at just this moment.

Whether because his own lightning was effective against himself, or perhaps merely because he was bewildered by Ran's attack, Gardova stopped moving for a time——and I jumped into that opening! When the enemy noticed me, he swung his claws, but I had already completed casting my spell! While pressing both palms against Gardova's chest...the claws approached me——

“Blast Wave!”

Whoosh!

A blast that could smash through even castle walls...completely pulverized the silver dragon-man.

“.....Good work.” While speaking with a boss-like attitude for some reason, Morgan walked over to us.

“Good work to you, too,” I replied. “But, well, I know we asked a favor of you and all, but it worked out great, didn't it? I was a bit worried that when the time came that you'd be so scared you wouldn't be able to jump off, or something.”

“I was certainly scared. Haven't jumped off roofs like that since I was a kid.” He said with a complacent smile.

Incidentally, I only just thought about it but.....

This guy, isn't it likely that he's way more capable beyond what I had been thinking? Come to think of it, during the extermination of "The Dark Lord of the North," it's kind of weird that an entire garrison of guards had to be mobilized for that at all. But, if I bear in mind that his station was such that he was highly regarded by the kingdom, then I guess it's not really all that unnatural.

That also helps me understand how his request to bring along two strangers like us to that subjugation was also granted. If my assumptions about Morgan were correct.....then, really, it would have been better if we'd made him help out a bit more! Don't let me do crazy things like offering myself up as bait on a gamble.

Whether or not he guessed my inner thoughts, he directed a roguish look at me.

"But I'm amazed you decided to trust me as well. I might have made off with that what's-it-called magical sword, then used it to defeat Miss Lina with a surprise attack, killing two birds with one stone by carrying out my orders and currying favor with Neosfeed."

"No way," I waved my hand dismissively, "If that were the case, you wouldn't have helped us out at all from the beginning, right?"

If *that* had been his intention, when we were about to get roasted alive by Nelphik, if he hadn't opened the door for us and just locked it instead, that would truly have been the end of it.

"Well.....," he muttered, looking out over the crumbling townscape, "On an emotional level, letting those guys go unchecked with this kind of behavior—"

——*Shwoop!*

Everyone was startled by the sudden flapping of wings, and when we looked to where it had come from. In the middle of the street where Nelphik should have been, she wasn't there, having launched into the sky with a spell. Despite faltering mid-air, she was flying away on her massive black wings!

".....She was alive!?"

Even though Nelphik was an enemy, it's generally good to know when to quit. If it had been her intention to go after me with a surprise attack and not an escape, I would have sensed that bloodlust and noticed that she was still alive.

"Were her vital points different from a human's?....." Morgan murmured while he gazed at her retreating figure.

Considering the distance and speed, it's already too late to give chase.

.....She got away. This.....is probably going to be all sorts of trouble from here on out.....

“Now then.....” Morgan looked distantly toward the north, “If you head that way for about five days, you’ll arrive at the kingdom’s border. Beyond that is the Principality of Belhide. I wasn’t able to obtain information about the country facing the desert.

I’ll return to the royal capital, and shall report that the town of Tortas was attacked by a faction appearing to be Neosfeed, and at that time Miss Lina was believed to have lost her life as well.....”

Well that sure helps us out but.....

“Why would you report it like that?”

“Oh, what the heck, I just want to slack off..... Oh yes. Maybe it does also have a slight implication of being a thank you for subduing the Demon King of the North?”

“Understood. Then.....take care, Okay?”

I almost said “see you again,” but managed to change my words halfway through. Seeing as the situation is what it is, we probably won’t meet again.

Thus, the three of us and Morgan went our separate ways.....

It might seem obvious, but the world is vast. It’s vast, but.....obviously, it’s not infinite.

“Hnn—” In the refreshing shade of the trees on a small hill, Ran stretched her body noisily, “Sure is nice weather...”

It was a beautiful afternoon. I plopped down on the grass next to Ran.

“Sure is...” I murmured in a relaxed voice.

Gazing ahead of where the gently sloping green hills continue, fencing that looked like it belonged to a ranch stretched out.

“We’ve finally arrived, huh?” Staring in the same direction, Gourry muttered with deep emotion as he sat next to me.

“That we have...” My own voice matched Gourry’s.

That lax-looking fence, as a matter of fact, serves as the border between the Kingdom of Luzillite and the Principality of Belhide. So, even though I talk about it with this peaceful sort of narration, the truth is that I was planning to smuggle us across the border with a Levitation spell in the middle of the night! It's not as though we were exactly having a picnic right now, because we're scouting the border security situation. It seemed that soldiers from both kingdoms make patrols around the fence intermittently, but to be honest, not all that frequently.

Because of what I was seeing, I was beginning to feel somewhat relaxed about our circumstances. To be able to have this kind of relaxation time is necessary, you see. After all.....if I think about what awaits us from here on out even a little bit seriously, there's plenty of factors to worry about. Just because we cross the border doesn't mean that Neosfeed will give up. As far as they're concerned, things like the borders that humans decide on were probably meaningless from the start.

It would be nice if the punchline of this joke was that those guys are actually an organization of only about five people.....but there's no way that's the case. If Nelpnik goes telling the rest of them that two of their comrades were defeated, and what we have in our bag of tricks, then probably the next time our opponents show up will be only after having made the appropriate preparations. I've also lost the talismans I once had that amplified my magical power before coming "over here", not to mention the number of spells I'm able to use is less than before.

That being the case, the story should change to some degree if I can gain knowledge about spells that borrow the power of the dragon lords, which should be usable since we're "over here," but..... It's not necessarily as simple or easy a thing as changing one part of a spell just a little bit and being able to create a brand new one. There are various things, such as understanding the content of a spell, and magical control during the incantation, and the compatibility with the caster, and so forth...

I was able to get Ran to teach me the words to the wind spell that she commands, but when I tested it out earlier, it didn't even activate. There are too many essential parts that need research and adjustment. Of course, if I have the opportunity, I would like to kill two birds with one stone. That is to say, satisfy my intellectual curiosity *and* oppose Neosfeed by learning about the spells in that vein, but.....

".....By the way Ran, what do you want to do after crossing the border?" I asked after the question suddenly popped into my mind.

"Do? Like what?"

"No. I mean. Even if you go with us, you'll just get caught up in all our troubles....."

"That's true..." Ran's eyes followed a butterfly fluttering nearby, "If ever don't wanna, I'll say g'bye. But until then, I'm stickin' with ya."

"Are you sure?"

"It's fine. So long as I'm not gettin' in the way of y'all's *together time*."

"Hey——!?"

Is that something you just say out of the blue.....? As for Gourry, he was spacing out and apparently wasn't listening.....

".....Putting that aside. Ran, there's something I wanted to bring up....." I hastily changed the subject. "That root you have——"

"Awesome Rod?"

"Yes. *That*. Don't you want to, oh, I don't know, give it a cooler name?"

"Huh...? 'Awesome Rod' *is* cool, isn't it? It makes ya feel like '*awesome!*' doesn't it?"

"It does. But. *No*. Ran, it's not that I have anything against your homeland's sense of taste, but...I feel like there could be a better name to give it. Something that's, how should I say this, suits the taste around here better, maybe?"

"Hm..." She thought about it for a while. "Ah! Y'know, y'know, the body of the tree this rod is from, actually has a name of ancient an' honorable origin! How about I give it that name!?"

"Ancient and honorable origin.....?"

"Yeah! In my homeland there's a legend from long ago, a story about heroes who were twins named Dimokaine and Lamokeil who lived a reaaaally long time. Because the body of the tree has a reaaaally long life, we gave it a meanin' that around these parts means somethin' like 'Eternally Eternal Tree' by taking its name from those heroes!" She declared with a self-satisfied smile.

"Heh... That sounds okay. What is it named?"

"The Mokamoke Tree"

"*Why!?*" I involuntarily shrieked.

"Don'cha see? Because it's made up from Di '*moka*' ine and La "*moke*" il——"

“Why did they choose *those* bits!?”

.....A thought occurred to me just then. What if Flagoon back “over there” was the same as that.....that apparently *real* name, the Mokamoke tree?..... A thought like that is just way too demoralizing to consider.

“——Yeah! A name granted from the tree, Mokamoke Rod! It’s amazin’, Lina-nyon!” Nodding her head vigorously, Ran prattled on and on with excitement.

“Wait, Ran, stop, *Ran, calm down*. Let’s think it over a little more?” I hurriedly tried to pull the brakes, but—

“Why!? Mokamoke Rod! To somebody from my homeland, it feels like ‘*Uwaa, super cool!*’ Gouryos, you think it’s cool too, right!?”

No, it wouldn’t do any good to bring that up with the poster boy for *not paying attention to a word you say*—is what I thought, but surprisingly, this time perhaps he just happened to be listening, and so he replied with an uncomfortable smile.

“I think it’s not bad either, but for me, I would name it something like Elder Rod, or Ancient Staff or something.”

Woah. Surprisingly ordinarily cool.

.....Then again, I had heard it called the Mokamoke Rod, so I may just feel that way in comparison.

Ran puffed out her chest with another self-satisfied look when she heard that, “See! Even Gouryos said ‘it’s not bad!’”

“Like I said, why are you just choosing *those bits!*?”

I still had no clue how to get home, and the road ahead of us was still long. However.....

I felt that the day when Ran and I agreed on what constitutes “cool” was incomparably further away.....

Afterword

Author: Hajime Kanzaka + L

L: Well, it came out..... Part three that you declared “absolutely would never come out” or something like that.....

A: In this world, there are no such thing as absolute, the universe is full of infinite possibilities——

L: Shut the hell up!

So then, *You!* The previous volume was fairly promising and so you're getting carried away!

A: I apologize, I got carried away. In any case, Slayers 17 “The Long Road Home” is finally getting sent off!

L: Well, all is well because I was able to revive along with the afterword! However, I thought that surely, for some reason or another, after all this time your existence would have been spent as a lazy good-for-nothing slacker but.....

A: What do you think people are?..... Is what I would like to say, but I intended to be just as you said approximately by half.

L: What was it that changed your mind again?

A: Various things calmed down a little, I poked around at games and books and such, some I had lying around, some new ones, and tried out all sorts of other various things..... So kind of like charging a battery, after a looong period of getting input, sometimes you suddenly want to create something, you know?

L: Like Gundam models?

A: Gundam models, and assembly kit-type crafting genre stuff as well. But then, mankind's natural enemy: farsightedness, began to invade, so I couldn't really.....

I was struck by the desire to write something, or however you say it. I had a vague idea about another story that wasn't Slayers, but while I was absent-mindedly thinking about it, another person announced a more interesting story with an idea that had similar roots, and so I was like “well, that's okay, nevermind.”

L: So ultimately, it's "we've come back down to this?"

A: I guess. I've kept thinking that it would be nice to repay everyone who has still been supporting the story of Slayers to this day, even if only a little.....

L: Far from repaying them, if you write it badly, they'll form a grudge, you know...

A: Gwah! Don't say that!

L: Ah. He hemorrhaged a lung.

A: I'm fine! A lung hemorrhage that's less than 200ccs doesn't count!

L: No, isn't 200cc quite a lot?

A: It's not that much in battle manga! Not that I'm actually in a battle manga, though!

L: But up until now, excluding the light novel, there were already stories that were kind of like a third arc this series, right? Like the anime version of TRY or the manga version of Knight of Aqualord. Given that, what exactly is the placement of *this* third arc? Is the light novel the last official word on canon, or something?

A: Hm..... To be honest, I don't want to say which of them is correct or negate the others, so it kind of feels like a parallel third part, huh...?

L:But, well..... "kind of feels like" is fine I guess, but.....can you properly follow through with that until the end? Looking at the content of the story, no matter how I think about it, it looks like it's going to be really long.

A: Uhg.....! But, well.....there's the length of the whole story, but there's also the question of the length of Lina and company's whole journey, too. In Slayers, I deliberately didn't precisely define the units or anything, so that's a portion of it, but..... While I was writing, I would suddenly get an idea and try to look up various things, I often think to myself that in a story about traveling, if you think about distance in exact terms, you end up with a bunch of parts that become obstacles, right?

L: Did you think it over properly? *Mr. Author.*

A: Of course I did! I thought about various kinds of one thing or another, I thought about reason and setting! At the end of all that, because the exposition became too lengthy, I completely cut it, or because it wasn't interesting, I decided it didn't happen, but doing that kind of thing is normal!

L: *Is that normal!?*

A: Yeah! This time too, at the beginning there were going to be travel papers and a time to use them..... Even just by describing it that way, it doesn't add to the fun at all! At the crucial moment, would Lina come flying in with a spell, and say "Even though there's a checkpoint, I have no papers! What'll I do!?" I can't develop anything with something like that!

L:Ah. Certainly.

A:Flying spells are kind of like cheating, huh.....?

L: Isn't it too late to say that of your own writing!? Certainly, there are points where I would say flying spells are a bit questionable in society from a crime prevention perspective.

A: In any case, I kept ending up with a sentence that didn't make much sense in the end with that sort of feeling, whether it was a depiction or a comment, such as them having travel papers, so I completely erased everything.

L: So,you're saying there's no travel papers in that world?

A: No, I just get the sense that Lina hasn't said anything in particular about it. Even if that had worked out, if you consider the distance to travel, it's kind of..... A quick net search shows that people in the past walked the roughly 500 kilometers of the fifty-three stations on the Edo-Kyoto highway in just under 15 days, you know. I wondered about things like how long it would take someone to wander all over the world on that premise. Thus, the answer I got was that I really appreciate airplanes, trains, and cars.

L: *That's it!?*

A: Well, of course! If 500 kilometers is about 15 days, that's about 33 kilometers per day. And that's a calculation based on considering a walking speed of about 4 km/hr, and walking for eight hours a day! I don't like it if I walk for even five minutes!

L: That's just..... All the same, you should push yourself a little more.

A: Setting aside my lack of willpower, people of the past pushed themselves way too hard! It's not like they could just say "I'm a little tired, guess I'll slip into a cafe. Oh, there's one!" like (we can) in today's urban areas. It was nice if there were convenient places to rest for times when they got tired, but that was not always the case. That's how some folks ended up falling down dead in the street! And even so, people who walked just kept on walking, huh...

L: Well, that's where you'd say 'that's all they had,' wouldn't you? The next best thing would be a horse? But the thing is, there would only be a limited number of people who could make use of such a thing, right?

A: After thinking it over, the result is: viva modern era! As with transportation facilities, air conditioners are also especially magnificent! Please note that this afterword was written in the summer.

L: No, thanking modern civilization is fine, but. What about the part about the distance and number of days that Lina and company are travelling?

A: I've decided not to think about it.

L: *You gave up!?*

A: Because the road isn't completely straight and they're not continuously walking, so even if I set the scene strictly, just like with the travelling papers thing from earlier, I think it's meaningless because it won't be reflected that much within the story.

L: Then setting aside the length of travel distance within the story, what about the author's writing speed relative to the length of the story?

A: That's.....

L: It appears as though all these various ideas still haven't appeared in this volume at all, but if we put them all in at once, how many volumes would it become? If it came to that, you'd have no choice but to write at about the pace of one volume a month!

A: No, to reverse that idea, if instead I could live a long and healthy life until I'm about 170 years old, even if I publish at a pace of say, one volume every ten years, I'll reach the end!

L: Are you a Galapagos tortoise!? Just how determined are you to slack off!? That's it. For the sake of the author doing his best, until one volume has been written, the air conditioner will be kept on heating in the summer and on cooling in the winter and so forth!

A: Uhg.....!I tried whining about it on instinct, but the temperature these days is higher than the maximum possible setting on an air conditioner. Even in winter, the outside temperature is lower than the minimum temperature of the air conditioner, too.

L:It's true! Ah. Then, the regular use of an air conditioner is prohibited.

A: I'm terribly sorry. I will do my best as much as possible, so please forgive me just for that.

L: Mhm! Do your best! And, I just forcibly renewed the author's determination. So then everyone, if you don't mind, see you next volume~

Afterword: The End