











# Seign SEVEN SPELLBLADES

Bokuto Uno

ILLUSTRATION BY
Ruria Miyuki



# Copyright

### Reign of the Seven Spellblades, Vol. 11

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# Contents

Cover

<u>Insert</u>

Title Page

Copyright

**Prologue** 

**Chapter 1: Departure** 

Chapter 2: Farnland, Nation of Lakes

**Chapter 3: Portents** 

**Afterword** 

Yen Newsletter

## Characters

Nanao Hibiya A boy from a family of

Guy Greenwood

magical farmers. Honest

and friendly. Has a knack for magical flora.

#### [Seventh-Years]

#### Fourth-Years



The story's protagonist. Jack-of-all-trades, master of none. Swore revenge on the seven instructors who killed his mother.

Oliver Horn

nation belonging to the Union. Has a soft spot for the civil rights of



Katie Aalto A studious boy born to nonmagicals. Capable of

**Pete Reston** 



switching between male and female bodies.

5000

Eldest daughter of the prolific McFarlane family A master of the pen and sword, she looks out for her friends.

A samurai girl from Azia. Believes that Oliver is her destined sword partner.

Michela McFarlane

A lone wolf who taught himself the sword by ignoring the fundamentals. Determined to beat Oliver in a rematch.





Has served Stacy since they were kids and is dedicated to her. Half human, half werewolf.

Michela's paternal half sister. Stubborn and headstrong, she has a competitive streak where Chela is concerned.

Stacy Cornwallis

#### Third-Years



Oliver's closest vassal, aiding his revenge as a covert operative. Moves on her own terms and shows few emotions.

Teresa Carste

#### Graduates



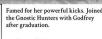
A gentle girl and Oliver's cousin. Supports Oliver's secret activities as his vassal.

Shannon Sherwood



Shannon's older brother and Oliver's cousin. Supports Oliver's secret activities as his vassal.

#### Gwyn Sherwood



Lesedi Ingwe

Former student council president. Nicknamed Purgatory by his peers. Joined the Gnostic Hunters after graduation.

Alvin Godfrey



Student council president known and feared as the Toxic Gasser. Wears women clothes as the whim strikes him.



A hedonistic, degenerate elf. Her immoral nature and appetites resulted in her being driven from her homeland.

#### Khiirgi Albschuch 👡



An alchemist specializing in lique Treats friend and foe alike as customers and serves as their bartender.

#### Gino Beltrami



Leader of the previous student council's faction. Once battled Godfrey for the presidency and received burns to the right side of his face, which he refuses to heal.

Leoncio Echevalria...

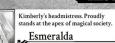
Magical biology instructor. Feared by her students for her wild personality.

Chela's father and the man who sent Nanao to Kimberly.

Theodore McFarlane

Vanessa Aldiss

#### Instructors



Magical engineering instructor. Prone to outrageous lessons designed to maim

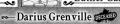
Enrico Forghieri

Astronomy instructor. Driven to protect the world from tir incursi

**Demitrio Aristides** 

-Frances Gilchrist **~** Dustin Hedges

A sword arts practitioner renowned as the Blade Master. Friends and rivals with Darius since their student days. Luther Garland



Prologue

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

# **Prologue**

It was almost unheard of for the entire student body to assemble at Kimberly.

The reason was quite simple—no one saw the need. Most decrees were handled via the campus broadcast system, and the faculty were reluctant to distract students from their pursuit of sorcery. Students holed up in their labyrinth workshops to conduct research would have to interrupt that to attend such an assembly. Kimberly consensus held that one should not waste their time with trifles.

"Your attendance is appreciated."

That custom had been turned on its head. Nearly all students were in the great hall that day.

This feat had not been accomplished overnight. Word had gone out a week in advance, with severe penalties outlined if one failed to attend. All the students knew *something* bad had gone down.

"No one moves until I say you can."

This icy voice echoed through the silent hall. A witch descended from the podium, moving through the rows of students, her eyes gleaming.

*u\_\_\_\_\_\_n* 

Her gaze flitted over him for a fraction of a second, yet it took all of Oliver's willpower to remain impassive.

When she completed her review, the witch's lips fluttered: ".....Six."

Moments after that assembly, the headmistress ordered a faculty meeting on the third floor.

"As you're all aware, Aristides has vanished."

Esmeralda sat at the head of the elliptical table, as if upon the throne of the

school itself. Everyone present looked tense.

"...That is *quite* some news..."

"...Someone got past his primal incantations? Even in this room, only a handful of us could manage that solo."

"Kya-ha-ha-ha! I would not fancy a try even if I still lived!"

The Enrico dummy's peal of laughter echoed through the room as all eyes turned to the same woman.

Vanessa Aldiss had her hands folded behind her head, leaning back in her chair.

"...Shoulda known," she said with a snort. "I'm the prime suspect, yeah? Me and the geezer had a li'l spat not too long ago."

"...If you're aware, then defend yourself, Aldiss," the magiflora instructor, David Holzwirt, growled. "Save me the headache of figuring out how to return you to the soil."

"Defend myself?" Vanessa spat. "For what? You wanna stick this on me, help yourselves. Ain't no use discussing shit."

She flashed a grin, her right hand transforming—and clenching tight.

"I mean...if y'all wanna throw down right here and now, then I'm game. I'll take ya on."

"...You're an animal," David said, a vein popping on his temple.

Their mutual hostility swelled.

"Stop that this instant!"

A new voice cut through the tension. Not an instructor, but the school librarian, Isko Liikanen.

"This is not the time for silly bickering! Instructor Demitrio is gone. A great mage who kept this school—this world—safe! This isn't just Kimberly's problem. Do you not understand? This is a threat to our whole planet!"

Her clenched hands shook, and not entirely from fear of the superior mages whose company she kept. She was a librarian, curator of Kimberly's knowledge,

and she'd had infinite admiration for the late philosopher. Working at the same institute had been an endless source of pride, and she knew for a fact much of what she'd learned had come from the trails he'd blazed.

Thus, she grieved for him. Grieved for the loss of a great mage more than any other faculty member present.

"Deep breath, Isko. Don't worry—everyone here is well aware."

The man next to her put a hand on hers. Ted Williams, the alchemy instructor who'd replaced Darius. The newest hire here, it took a lot of guts for him to speak at all. But he could not afford to hesitate. Not after Isko had found her courage first.

"I gotta agree with Isko here," he said. "Given the gravity of the situation, this line of inquiry is flippant at best. I highly doubt we're here to bicker among ourselves. Or do we want Instructor Demitrio spinning in his grave?"

Harsh words, chastising the tone of the meeting.

"Right you are," Frances Gilchrist, spellology instructor, said with a nod. "Darius, Enrico, and now Demitrio—their losses are incalculable. Demitrio's inclusion affects me personally—I had deemed him worthy of carrying the *next* thousand years."

Unprecedented praise from a witch who'd lived exactly that long already. Vanessa snorted but did not attempt to argue. Emotional reactions might have varied, but all present grasped the gravity of what they'd lost.

"Aristides went missing shortly after the election," Esmeralda said, filling the silence. All eyes turned to her. "The scene was almost certainly the field around the fourth layer—where he went to meditate. I paid a visit there shortly after we lost contact with him and found only scorch marks. Not the residue of a magic battle, but work done to cover all signs of what went down. We had the Deus Ex Machina that had been left behind in Enrico's case; this time, far less evidence remained."

Everyone's brows creased. They all knew—that location was Demitrio's home turf, even more so than his own workshop. No one had imagined he could lose a battle there. In other words: They had underestimated their enemy's power.

"Meanwhile, the combat league final was a no-holds-barred brawl. Godfrey's and Leoncio's teams used every resource they had and required considerable time to recover. Linton's Poison Hands were lopped clean off, and Beltrami grappled with those head-on—he was in no better shape. Ingwe ran until her legs shattered, and Albschuch altered her very body with forbidden arts. Both leaders expended massive reserves of mana and were in no condition to tackle an instructor afterward."

This was a plain truth. The strongest fighters among the students had been incapacitated—and that had implications.

"We were monitoring other upperclassmen above a certain power threshold. We could not trace every action taken within the labyrinth—but what matters here is whether they had the opportunity for a large-scale assembly during the period when we believe Aristides was lost. Our conclusion—that was not feasible. The maximum number they could have slipped through our net was not a force sufficient to take out an instructor."

Here, the witch fell silent.

Digesting this information, David asked, "...Aristides would not have gone down without a fight; they'd have lost several as well. Anyone unaccounted for in the assembly?"

"Six students failed to show themselves. Despite the penalty that would incur."

That number made the part-time instructor, Theodore, fold his arms.

"...Not enough," he said. "Instructor Demitrio should have taken out far more than that. That number would make more sense if they'd been holed up in their workshops and never heard about the assembly or lost their lives to some unrelated cause. Even if all six have perished, that's well within the margin of error for our annual fatality rate."

"You mean the culprits are unlikely to be students? Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The Enrico dummy put into words what the others would not.

Well aware the odds were tipping that way, Esmeralda added, "We can't rule it out entirely. The absent students include Janet Dowling, editor of the third

paper, and Carmen Agnelli, a promising necromancer."

Theodore frowned. Those names didn't seem to connect.

"That is odd," he said. "Ms. Dowling's paper has been running wild with the missing-teacher story, and Ms. Agnelli should have been desperately curious about the results of Mr. Rivermoore's research. I see no good reason why either would fail to appear."

"We can assume Dowling's efforts were an attempt to manipulate conflict between faculty members, but we lack even the circumstantial evidence to narrow things down. Should we at least raid the third paper's office?"

"Already on it," said Esmeralda. "I'll be interviewing their staff after this."

With that, she glanced around the room again.

"Nonetheless, with Godfrey, Echevalria, and the upper forms' elites eliminated, I cannot deny we lack evidence to focus our suspicions on the student body. While it may not be feasible for the students alone to gather a sufficient strike team, the involvement of even a single instructor shakes up that premise," Esmeralda told her colleagues. "Only three of you have a strong alibi during the time of Aristides's disappearance: Gisela Zonneveld, Isko Liikanen, and Ted Williams. The first two are always on duty in the infirmary and library respectively, and I'm aware of their movements. Williams—you largely refrain from entering the labyrinth and make frequent contact with other instructors, diminishing the time you're unaccounted for. Hard to imagine you managed to slip down to the fourth layer and go after Aristides."

Ted furrowed his brow, a mix of emotions on his face. He'd certainly done the things Esmeralda just mentioned out of precaution, but he didn't exactly welcome them paying off.

"Which means," Esmeralda added, "the rest of you are all suspects. Not just Vanessa. My subsequent investigation will be in light of that fact."

Baldia Muwezicamili, the curse instructor, shot Vanessa a shit-eating grin.

"You're gonna get grilled, Vana!"

"Ooh, you gonna rip off my nails? I got plenty of spares." Vanessa cackled,

growing several sharp claws on each hand.

Esmeralda point-blank ignored this.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," she said. "As I was formulating plans, outside interests got involved."

This bombshell changed the tone immediately. They'd all seen this coming. The loss of three great mages was no longer a matter for Kimberly alone to deal with.

"Aristides was in frequent contact with the Gnostic Hunter HQ. When that petered out, they suspected foul play. With Kimberly down three instructors, they proposed an on-site investigation. Refusal was an option—"

"But you already did that with Darius and Instructor Enrico." Theodore sighed, interrupting Esmeralda. "A third rejection would certainly infuriate them. For the sake of future relations, best to accept it here."

Kimberly had the clout to ignore most outside influences, but that was partially built upon the reputations of the mages they had lost. Three pillars fallen in succession had cast a shadow over them. Coordination with the Gnostic Hunter headquarters was not something the school could afford to lose, so they were forced to allow the intervention.

"Specifically, a staff adjustment. We accept a few outside mages as substitute teachers and send a couple of ours out to the Gnostic front. Vanessa, Baldia, that's you. Go out and wreak havoc for the next year."

"Woo! Just the two of us, Vana!"

"Ha! Makes sense. Fine, I'll just call it a vacay."

Ted failed to conceal his relief at the headmistress's selection. Vanessa's poor rapport with Demitrio had certainly made her the prime suspect, but Baldia had been close with Vanessa since they were both students, which moved her up the list as well. Worse, Vanessa's own behavior antagonized the rest of the faculty. It seemed wise to remove them for a while before tensions spilled over. That said...this would diminish the faculty's strength substantially, a fact that could not be ignored.

"We'd need to fill the gap Aristides left either way. It irks me, but I've elected to turn it to our advantage. We're getting three new mages. Two of them are my choices and known quantities. Ensure the last one does not stir the pot unduly."

Esmeralda's warning made all faculty members nod. Spying an opening, Ted chose this moment to get a word in.

"...Headmistress, if you'll forgive me for speaking out of turn, I have a question."

"Speak, Williams."

Her glance alone nearly made him wither, but Ted summoned his mettle and voiced his concern.

"Darius Grenville, Enrico Forghieri, and Demitrio Aristides. Three disappearances in a row. Headmistress, are you aware of any reason they'd be targeted beyond that 'Kimberly instructor' bracket?"

The tension in the room grew thick enough to cut with a blade.

"...Why do you ask?" Esmeralda said, eyes narrowing.

"I cannot believe this is indiscriminate. I'm the weakest fighter here, and yet I'm safe and sound—and that clinches it. We have to assume the culprit is intentionally tackling powerful foes. In which case—there must be a suitable motive."

Ted felt a bead of sweat roll down his back. Well aware he was in dangerous waters, he forged on.

"To that end, there's a sinister rumor going around campus. One I'd normally dismiss out of hand, yet—"

"Say it."

The gleam in her eyes was enough to kill. Ted paused to take a deep breath.

"—they claim Chloe Halford still lives. That she faked her own death and has returned to Kimberly, slaying Darius, Enrico, and Demitrio in turn. A wild theory, to be sure—yet on some level, it does add up. In life, Two-Blade could have vanquished all three, and it's not that hard to imagine why she'd want to."

He chose not to speak further, gauging the instructors' reactions. Esmeralda was already speaking.

"You imply they went after Chloe Halford once, failed to finish the deed, and their successive disappearances are the result of Two-Blade coming back for revenge?"

"I'm merely reporting what the rumor mill says."

Ted wiped the sweat from his brow.

There was no end of speculation about how Chloe Halford had met her demise, but the truth remained a mystery. It wasn't even certain that she was really dead. People wanted to believe she was still out there—and many stories clung to that wishful thinking. Yet the current rumor was of an altogether different character.

"I'm sure it's a bunch of hot air," Ted said. "But even if it's the longest shot in town, if there's even a chance we're up against Two-Blade—we've got to be prepared for that. I'm sure you all know why."

A grim silence. Everyone knew Chloe could well topple this edifice. She could have taken out all three missing instructors—and claimed more. Chloe had the strength and the means and had been feared as much as she was admired. She'd been one of a kind, capable of rocking the balance of power in the magical world.

"I'm not trying to confuse the investigation with a remote possibility. I'd rather eliminate this possibility right away. That's why I feel the need to dig into the past and how she came to die," Ted explained. "Can you tell us if our missing teachers killed—or attempted to kill—Chloe Halford?"

Beating around the bush further would be futile—he went for the direct question.

Here, Theodore spoke before the headmistress did.

"Chloe's death was the result of a Gnostic ambush. I inspected the scene myself and must insist upon that fact. We discovered several traces on the scene that could only have come from Gnostic hands. If what you say is true, that would mean Instructor Demitrio teamed up with Gnostic followers to attack her."

"...I agree that's out of the question. But could that evidence have been faked? Or could he have betrayed them after helping with their attack?"

"Aha, there is always the possibility I'm a blind idiot. Still, even if this was Chloe's doing, the mess we find ourselves in feels entirely out of character. Two-Blade would never have hidden in darkness, acting like an assassin. If she wanted revenge, she would roll up in broad daylight and punch everyone in the face. No matter who she was up against."

That silenced Ted. He'd brought this up but could not deny it felt wrong. It was true Chloe Halford was *capable* of assassinating all three missing instructors. Yet at the same time...she would never choose that approach. Even if she held a powerful grudge. Her character alone engendered a nigh-ironic degree of faith.

"And...I *also* think if she were still alive, our world would be a much brighter place."

Theodore managed a sad little smile. When Ted pursed his lips, Theodore continued.

"I will bear the 'Chloe's alive' theory in mind. But the facts of the case suggest it does not merit attention over any other possibility. The ongoing campus monitoring will help determine the truth. Or is that not enough?"

"...It is. Just—once again, if we can determine the common motive behind these disappearances, I think that will be invaluable in our investigation. Knowing why they were targeted casts the whole thing in a new light...and tells us who's likely to be next."

With that final statement, Ted rested his case. He'd made his point and need not pursue it further. Thus far, they'd been on the receiving end—their first order of business must be determining what their enemy's goal truly was.

"A-are you sure you should talk like that, Teddy? Maybe I went first, but one false word with that lineup..."

The meeting had ended as grim as it had begun, and Isko caught up with Ted in the hall. It took him a few seconds to respond.

"...They killed Chloe," he muttered.

"Huh?"

"Too little interest in the survival theory. They know better than anyone it's not true. I'm betting it wasn't just the missing trio—the whole cabal was in on it. That's why she sent Vanessa and Baldia away. Isolating suspects and narrowing down the next target."

Ted's speculation was turning to conviction. He'd been aware of this cabal before: a select group of faculty who regularly met in private. An opportunity to direct the darker side of Kimberly—things they did not want new hires like himself involved in. It was easy enough to surmise that Darius, Enrico, and Demitrio had all been members—and that their association had begun with the murder of Chloe Halford.

Isko could not believe her ears. Ted shot her a look.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Isko. Whatever the truth is, I'm not about to rebuke anyone. I imagine the choice did not come lightly. I don't know the full picture, and part of me can never be on board—but I am a Kimberly instructor. Which means I've gotta back their decisions."

With that, he turned and walked away. Isko hustled after him. Soon they spotted a colleague up ahead—one who'd taken a different route, until Ted called out to him.

"Instructor Hedges!"

The man stopped and turned to face them. Small of stature, the broomstick flying instructor, Dustin Hedges.

"Ted?" He frowned. "You're awfully aggressive today. Get too eager, and you won't live long. You're surrounded by monsters here..."

"I'm aware. And it's true I'm the weakest instructor at Kimberly."

Ted wasn't a fan of that fact. He'd never imagined he'd be called on to fill the hole Darius left behind. He might be a passable instructor, but as a researcher, he could not begin to compete. Still—he had a job to do. A job only the weak could pull off.

"That's why I want a monster on my side. Care to join us?"

Isko gasped, gaping at him. "Teddy!"

"You're in, right, Isko? We all want to protect Kimberly."

Ted sounded sure of himself. Dustin glanced around. They were in an open corridor, without even a sound dampening spell cast. Ted clearly didn't care who heard him, and so Dustin verbalized that.

"You *chose* to bring this up here, huh? Okay, I'll hear you out. Whatcha after?"

"I want us leading a search with an eye to putting a stop to things. The headmistress and her cabal are hiding too much. That itself is fine, but they're also so busy suspecting each other that the investigation might well grind to a halt."

Deep down, Dustin agreed. If their suspicions were focusing on the faculty, then they'd be spending the bulk of their time watching each other. And those same suspicions would make them wary of taking action. Which meant it was time for the exceptions to shine.

"I wanna narrow it down to those I can trust and search the campus on our terms. Isko and I are pretty much entirely unconnected to the faculty power struggles. You aren't quite in the same position but like to stay out of things, so the result in the same. Instructor Hedges, I think you've got the character required to be part of our alliance."

Dustin made a face. "Of all the words to use here... Allied against what? The headmistress?"

"Not at all. Quite the opposite, in fact: I'm convinced this is what she needs most right now. If she proposed it herself, then we'd be under her thumb. Starting this of my own accord is the point," Ted replied. "And there's one other factor the three of us have in common. We aren't placing much emphasis on our own research. The rest of the faculty *have* to isolate themselves to dig into their respective disciplines. We don't. You and I focus on teaching, and Isko's primarily a librarian. We're in a position to carry out those duties while keeping an eye on each other and the other staff."

Dustin nodded and took it one step further. "You don't think that'll solve anything, though. You're making yourself bait."

Isko gulped. There was a weighty silence.

"My actions will be a thorn in the side of the culprit here. Why would they not come after me? After all, I'm way less of a challenge than anyone they've killed," Ted said. "I'm done losing the irreplaceable. If our enemies come after me instead, won't that be better?"

*"…"* 

"If you tell me to suit myself, so be it. But against anyone capable of burying three of our finest—well, I'll just end up dead in a ditch somewhere. Isko alone won't change that. But if we've got an aerial combat hero in our camp—that would make a difference."

Meeting Ted's gaze, Dustin spoke slowly.

"What's in it for me? Why would I agree to this?"

Ted flashed a grin. "I figured you're about ready to shake off the funk you've been in since you lost Ms. Ashbury."

Dustin's frown deepened. He said nothing. Ted clenched his fist and piled on.

"I'm doing this with or without you. Darius recommended me—I owe him that much."

The man was resolute, and Dustin heaved a very long sigh. He didn't like letting colleagues go to their deaths.

"You got me there. Okay, fine. I was getting tired of moping around, staring up at a sky she's not in."

Dustin rolled his shoulders, refocusing. Then he thumped Ted on the chest with a grin.

"Let me in this alliance. If I got a good broom, a balmung, and a sky to fly in—I'll be liable to cut down *God*."

"I did not expect Ted to hold his ground like that."

"The man's got mettle. He acts all mild-mannered, but he was like this as a

student, too."

Theodore and Garland were walking down a different hall, discussing Ted's behavior in the meeting. Their colleague was soft-spoken, so having him kick up a fuss had made quite the impression—and the specifics of it were not something anyone could laugh off.

With that in mind, Garland said, "Losing Instructor Demitrio puts us in crisis mode. Think I'll be invited to this cabal anytime soon?"

"Good question. Instructor Gilchrist may well propose it, but I imagine the headmistress will reject the notion. She's got very particular ideas about you. And frankly...I don't think it suits you." Theodore shrugged, then put a hand to his chin. "Still, the idea that Chloe's alive? Given my position, I had to argue him down, but in truth, I'm not nearly so dismissive. Naturally, I don't think that's the *actual* truth."

"Meaning?"

"She had as many sympathizers as she had enemies. Even among the current student body—and I can't rule out there being some among the faculty. If someone like that's behind this, then their choice of targets adds up. Though that would make you our chief suspect—you were her student."

He made that sound like a joke, but Garland folded his arms, taking it seriously.

"Trying to avenge Chloe by mowing down the teachers here? Yeah, you might have a point. That *does* sound like something I'd do."

"Please don't get any ideas. If you joined the fray, it would make things rather difficult for me."

"I won't; don't worry. But lemme turn this back on you: If we're talking vengeance for Chloe, surely you're ahead of me in line."

Garland's question provoked a long silence. No emotion showed on Theodore's profile.

"We won't be inviting you to the cabal," Theodore said at length. "But we likely will be calling on your skills. Our foes are good enough to take out

Instructor Demitrio. I can only speculate as to the means—but odds are high they overcame the fifth."

That shut Garland up.

Eyeing the man's lips, Theodore muttered, "Best to hide *that* smile, Luther." Garland clasped a hand to his mouth, then winced.

"...Hate to admit it, but no matter how old I get—I just can't control myself."

CHAPTER 1

Departure

#### **CHAPTER 1**

## **Departure**

Instructors went missing, students were consumed by the spell—yet despite the chaos, time at Kimberly flowed ever onward.

A new spring arrived. To bid farewell to the departing seventh years, a crowd of students gathered in the same hall used for the full student body assembly. Not on orders, but of their own free will.

"Thanks for coming. I know every one of you has a lot on your plates."

Godfrey was at the podium, speaking on behalf of the graduates. He started out with a solemn look, but that soon gave way to a smirk.

"Don't worry, I won't keep you long. Kimberly graduations are notoriously slapdash," he assured his audience. "Still—if I could take this moment to *brag*. We are about to venture forth into the free world once more, with only a few oddballs choosing to remain within these bloodstained corridors. Are you not jealous?!"

This, from the former student body president. Everyone winced.

"You can say that again."

"You're going to a fresh hell!"

Exactly the response he'd expected. Godfrey shrugged it off.

"I'm afraid so. The paths of our spells don't end here—they are only just beginning. Some of us will face even greater hardships. And of course, some will not survive them," he said. "But I know this: No matter what we face, we are not *helpless*. No matter how unreasonable the predicament, we will not quail, we will not lose hope. We will take wand in hand and do battle. We have long since been forged into that manner of beast."

Godfrey held his white wand high—and as he lowered it, he dropped his gaze.

"Counting from my first day at Kimberly, the death toll in my year was approximately twenty-three percent. Actually *above* average. Some of those deaths are on me. There were those I could not save, those I could not protect. If I had been a better man, perhaps they would be standing with us today." He continued, "You will undoubtedly face similar regrets. No one leaves Kimberly unscathed. We all lose something precious and emerge with a piece of ourselves missing. Nothing can ever fill that gap. We will never find a replacement, no matter what results we achieve otherwise."

The younger students found themselves straightening up. These were not words that could be ignored. A man who'd faced the turmoil of this hellscape head-on was trying to *teach* them something.

"So remember this. If you've already lost something: Trace your finger around that emptiness. If you've yet to lose anything: Hold on tight. That will form the core of your humanity. Do not take this loss for granted. Do not meet what fate snatches from you with a nod of resignation. Each time you *give up*, it takes a piece of your soul. And when you stand at the edge of the spell's abyss—the discoveries awaiting you will be naught but hollow falsehoods."

With that fervent plea, Godfrey cast his eyes toward the ceiling and sighed.

"That's all I've got to say. Our time is done." He then whispered, "Good-bye, Kimberly. I've always hated you."

He left the podium. Not to applause, but to a respectful silence.

"Wahhhhhhhh...!"

After the ceremony, most students filed out, leaving room for individual farewells. Tim's face was a fright, and Godfrey was busy patting his shoulders.

"C'mon, Tim, enough tears. You're the president now. Be cool."

"I don't wanna! I was only acting cool for your benefit!" Tim wailed, heedless of who saw him.

Yet his behavior was hardly out of place here. Any number of students were shedding tears, reluctant to part. Who could blame them? Time at Kimberly was just that potent, and relationships forged here were just that powerful.

"That was a good speech, Mr. Godfrey," Chela said once Tim had calmed down a bit.

The rest of the Sword Roses were right on her heels, and Godfrey and Lesedi met them with smiles.

"You all came? I appreciate the kind words, but it was nothing that fancy. I merely spoke my mind."

"And we're speaking ours," Katie said, sounding grateful.

Beside her, Pete looked right at Godfrey and asked, "You and Ms. Ingwe are both bound for the Gnostic Hunters?"

"You're not scared?" Katie said. "I hear that work gets gnarly..."

"I'm nothing but scared," Godfrey told them. "But I know what I've done here will serve me well. I've got a thicker skin than most."

"And I've got his back. Been covering for him since he still burned his arm with every spell cast."

Lesedi's grin was reassuring and brought smiles to their lips. Here, three more graduates approached: the members of Team Leoncio, fresh off their defeat in the combat league.

"A stray dog will howl no matter where it goes. Just try not to die in a ditch somewhere."

"I certainly have no plans to do so, Leoncio. I've promised you that much."

"Hmph. At least you remember."

Leoncio snorted and turned away. Glancing at the elf beside him, Chela voiced a concern.

"...Ms. Albschuch, are you really leaving Kimberly? My father was worried about you."

"Worried about me, too, Ms. McFarlane? I could have stayed, but I've given Percy enough headaches. Following Leo seemed a better option. I may have more elves on my heels out there, but that's what adds spice to life."

"That said, we may have occasion to beg your father's assistance, Ms.

McFarlane." The alchemist, Gino Beltrami, bowed obsequiously. "I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive what conflicts may have transpired before."

Chela glanced at the friends beside her. She'd faced only indirect threats during the Rivermoore incident, but Nanao's and Oliver's clashes with Khiirgi had been far more intense.

"May I ask your thoughts, Nanao?" said Chela.

"I would be thrilled to duel her again here and now!"

"You don't say! I'm not one to refuse an offer—shall we move away from prying eyes?"

"Do I have to carry you bodily out the gates, Khiirgi?" Gino said, grabbing her collar. Then he shot Tim a mischievous glance. "No tears for my departure, Tim?"

"H-hell no! Get outta here! Go on, scram!"

Tim hid behind Godfrey, hissing like an angry cat. To Oliver, this registered less as anger than confusion; Tim no longer knew how to behave around Gino.

Meanwhile, Lesedi and Khiirgi exchanged a single glance, speaking not a word. It seemed that more than sufficed for both of them.

Having observed the shift in the graduates' relationships firsthand, Oliver stepped up toward one in particular.

"Mr. Godfrey, if I may ask one last favor."

"Ask away, Mr. Horn. If it is within my power, I'd be happy to help."

Godfrey's gentle gaze landed on Oliver, who had to take a deep breath.

"Can I try my blade against yours? No holds barred?"

Murmurs broke out around them. Godfrey took this challenge seriously.

"Very well," he said. "People..."

"Give 'em room!" Lesedi yelled, already directing the crowds.

In the clearing provided, Godfrey and Oliver took their athames in hand.



"...You're far stronger now. Would hardly recognize you as that one first-year boy."

"I'm aware—which is why I want to measure the gulf between us."

Oliver struck a midstance at one-step, one-spell range, and Godfrey gestured for him to make the first move. Oliver took that offer.

A thrust as he stepped in. Leaving his torso open—standard-issue bait, intended to draw a kick. Even Lanoff-style had tricks to deal with footwork, one of which was cut their leg as they kicked. Using one's feet at sword range carried considerable risk, and it was not uncommon for the kick to whiff and for the attacker to receive a gash on the ankle in the bargain.

But Godfrey was well aware of that. He did not take that bait easily. He stepped forward himself, deflecting the thrust, the pressure of his return intended to unbalance his foe.

An impact hard enough to blow away everything past the elbow. Not foolish enough to soak that directly, Oliver matched the swing, redirecting the momentum. Don't panic, he told himself. This is fine. He's got more mana, more output, and more experience than you. But you've got one advantage—the degree to which you've honed Lanoff-style arts.

Godfrey had developed his own fighting style, mixing in blunt strikes—it was well suited for brawls. Yet only a part of that sum applied in a pure one-on-one duel at sword range. If Oliver had a shot at victory, it lay there.

What he needed to avoid most was crumbling under the pressure and backing away. Quite literally, the moment he did, the fight would be over. No spells Oliver could cast would ever match Godfrey's output. Nor could he play this like he had in his first battle with Albright and go for grappling moves—techniques outside the core of sword arts were Godfrey's domain. He'd proven that much in the combat league.

Oliver had to win as a fencer. He steeled himself, enduring the disadvantage —a fact that impressed Godfrey to no end. The discrepancy in arm strength alone was greater than that between the average adult and child. Oliver was essentially fending off a giant's frenzied attack armed with only a tree branch—a feat made possibly entirely by the degree to which he'd honed his Lanoff knowledge. What training and obsession had made that possible at this boy's age? In his time at Kimberly, Godfrey had seen how many a mage lived, yet this was still beyond his imagining.

He'd have loved to let Oliver win, to let that suffering pay dividends. He did not wish to show him the cruel reality that would drive him to still greater hardships.

Godfrey choked back his momentary lapse. That's not what he wants.

Godfrey's leg went up, and Oliver's eyes tracked it. The target was not Oliver's torso, but the leg he'd extended with his thrust. A kick that obvious, free of any gambits, in the midst of a furious exchange? Not a good idea. Oliver could still pull back his wrist in time for a counter, raking it with his blade. No reason not to. He wouldn't likely get a chance like this again.

And yet...his arm didn't move.

Oliver gaped—and his immobilized wrist was struck by a kick from the side. He heard the snap of the bone breaking, and his athame went flying.

"Oliver!" Katie yelped.

He was still staring at his broken arm in shock, Godfrey's blade pointed at his face.

"You wanted no holds barred, you got it. Was it useful?"

"...Y-yes. Excruciatingly. Can't argue with a thing..."

Oliver nodded through the pain. Godfrey smiled and sheathed his athame while the boy assessed himself.

He felt a numbness in his broken arm, but not from the blow itself. Like he'd been hit with a lightning spell—clearly the cause of his defeat. Godfrey's athame had probably been laced with a low voltage from the get-go, and with each blow they'd exchanged, more of that had transferred and accumulated until Oliver's nerves grew numb enough for the kick to finish things.

This technique existed in Lanoff as well, under the name Hidden Snake. Oliver had thought he was narrowly deflecting Godfrey's furious assault, but he'd been too focused on that to notice the elemental attribute applied to the athame itself. Had he noticed, he could have easily countered it with the oppositional—yet no one there would call this an oversight on his part. Having a legitimate exchange with Purgatory was achievement enough.

"A very Kimberly way to end things. Thank you, Mr. Horn."

With that, Godfrey and Lesedi turned, headed for the gates. Tim wavered between chasing them and looking after his wounded junior, but Oliver shot him a glance, shaking him off. Tim ran after Godfrey, and the Sword Roses flocked to Oliver, soon followed by Gwyn and Shannon—his cousins, who'd been watching nearby.

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"Noll... I'll fix that arm."
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"Oliver—!"

"Let our elders take this one, Katie."

Katie had moved to help heal him and puffed out her cheeks when Chela stopped her. It was a clean break, and as Shannon fixed it up, Gwyn gave him a stern look.

"...That was foolhardy. You knew you had no shot at winning."

"That's why I did it. He's only going to get stronger. If I don't measure the distance now, how can I even begin to give chase?"

He glanced at Godfrey's retreating back.

Joining the Gnostic Hunters meant Godfrey was siding with the status quo, protecting the magical world much like the Kimberly faculty did. His time as a trustworthy mentor ended today. From this point on, he would not *help*. Worse: *Next time we meet, we'll be enemies*.

Oliver kept that thought to himself even as his mind vividly conjured a horrible future where he had to turn his blade on a man he was indebted to.

Shortly after the graduation ceremony, a long vacation awaited Kimberly's students.

Although the entire student body was freed from classes, this break was extra lengthy for those about to start their fourth year. Moving from the lower to the upper forms was a good time to sort out one's affairs. Many students returned home to report their progress, while others planned research expeditions. The Sword Roses were no exception.

"Everyone packed?" Katie asked. The others all nodded.

They were eating dinner in the lower forms' dining hall, the Fellowship—and would not be returning here often.

"It's tomorrow," Pete said. "I'm as ready as I can be now. Looking forward to a nice, long trip."

"Ain't been on the mainland in ages," Guy added. "Daitsch and Lantshire to Farnland, then from there to Ytalli and back to Yelgland, visiting all our homes. It's gonna be great."

Oliver had been waiting for his moment and made his move.

"About that—I have a proposal."

"Why so formal?" Chela asked. "We can easily accommodate a change of schedule."

"That's not what I mean... Rather, I'd like to invite someone else along."

This caught everyone by surprise.

"Whoa," Guy said. "Who? Not Rossi?"

"We already plan to meet him on location. I'd like to bring—"
"Me."

The voice came from right next to Oliver, and everyone jumped. There stood Teresa Carste, soon to enter her third year.

"Teresa?" Katie asked. "You wanna come with?"

Teresa nodded, expressionless.

"...It was my idea," Oliver said, his expression stiff. "This seemed like the right moment to show her the outside world. That is, if you'll permit it."

He searched his friends' faces, and they glanced at each other.

"...Why not? It's fine. Besides, Marco's coming. An underclassman plus-one doesn't bother me."

"There ya go. Wanna speak for the bashful brigade, Pete?"

"Please, Guy. I might object to a total stranger, but we've known this kid long enough."

"Then I agree as well," added Chela. "Nanao?"

"The more the merrier!"

A chorus of good cheer, and Oliver breathed a sigh of relief.

"Just you, Teresa?" Katie asked. "Won't the other three feel left out?"

"Mr. Travers is busy with makeup classes, and Mr. Cornish is helping him. Ms. Appleton is prepping for her major and can't be away for long. Teresa alone had solid grades but has yet to pick a major, and she was available to join us," Oliver explained.

"So you're slacking off with us?" Guy grinned. "We got you covered, then."

"Glad you're all on board." Oliver turned to the girl. "There you have it, Teresa. I'm sure you need to get prepped, but have your baggage ready by tomorrow."

"Will do. See you then."

With that, Teresa turned and darted out of the Fellowship.

Guy watched her go, then elbowed his friend.

"...So? Why'd you decide to wedge her in? Too cute to leave behind?"

"...Hard to deny that, but like I said: I think it's time for her to see more of the world. Given her history, she's seen far less than most."

He'd first broached the subject with his cousins a few days ago.

"A long trip? Perfect time for it. Enjoy yourself."

Gwyn had agreed readily. They were in the hidden workshop on the labyrinth's first layer, discussing Oliver's plans with his friends. Oliver found Gwyn's approval hard to believe—tensions were only rising on campus.

"...I assumed you'd reject the notion. Are you saying it's better I'm *not* at Kimberly?"

"Exactly. Demitrio Aristides's disappearance has the faculty at peak precaution. Staying put would actually arouse suspicion. The best thing you can do now is go hang out abroad with your friends."

Gwyn was working on a potion as he spoke. Oliver's frown deepened.

"... Safe to assume we made it through the student body assembly?"

"Yeah. Like with the Enrico fight, half of those who died against Demitrio were already marked as dead on the official records. They'd faked their own deaths in the labyrinth long before. There were six exceptions, but a number that low will likely be chalked up as part of...the standard death rate."

His voice trailed off in a rasp, and Oliver hung his head. This was one trick they'd used to avoid faculty detection; the school had no way to track the deaths of people already declared deceased.

But that didn't change the fact that they'd lost too many. Janet Dowling, editor of the third school paper, had worked closely with Gwyn for years—and Oliver knew her death had hit him hard. Her voice would not echo across this workshop again.

"...No need to worry about me or Shannon. We're already officially on the staff rolls, and suspicions will turn our way long after other students. Theo's group ensured we had alibis during the Demitrio fight itself. The rest of our

comrades demand even less consideration. A few may have more eyes on them now, but that's nothing new."

Gwyn was doing his best to alleviate Oliver's concerns. Seeing the boy still dithering, Shannon put her hands on his shoulders from behind.

"Go, Noll. That's what...I want you to do."

"Sister..."

If she was pushing for this, too, he could hardly refuse. *Still*, Oliver thought, this might be my last chance to step away from the war zone. Best to make it count.

"...Fine. In which case, I have one more favor to ask."

His decision made, he turned his mind to the covert operative under his command.

"...Everything about this is self-serving," Oliver said, downcast. "I really appreciate you agreeing to it."

A look of sadness crossed Katie's eyes.

"I'd pay good money to help you serve yourself for once...," she muttered.

Realizing every eye had turned her way, she hastily changed the subject.

"N-never mind! Guy, we've gotta hit up the base and get Marco ready. I've got permission to take him, but he's big and hard to move! We gotta rehearse!"

"Sure, sure. Agreed that he's a bigger problem than a tiny underclassman."

Guy let Katie pull him away, leaving the other four in the Fellowship.

He glanced at her as they walked side by side. "...Teresa don't make you jealous?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, you get all competitive with the Sherwood girl. Teresa sticks to Oliver like glue, so I wondered why she ain't bugging you."

A blunt question, and it made Katie blush and turn away.

"I-I'm not trying to compete! Just... Teresa and Oliver's thing feels different."

"Oh?"

Guy looked baffled, so Katie mustered a sad smile.

"You don't get that? The way Oliver looks at her... It's the same as when my parents worry about *me*."

Bright and early the next morning, they assembled at the school gates and departed for the first stop on their itinerary.

"Hnggggggg...!"

"Hang in there, Guy!"

"Not much farther!"

Aloft on their brooms, encouraging each other, the Sword Roses and Teresa were carrying Marco in a harness, suspended beneath them. A troll weighed quite a lot, but their magic was keeping him aloft. They reached their destination after a thirty-minute flight, and by the time they set Marco down, all fliers were panting.

"W-we made it...!"

"Hahh, hahh..." Guy was out of breath. "Sorry, Marco, but I gotta say it... You're *really* heavy..."

"Unh, sorry. I can't make myself lighter..."

"Hah, hah... Don't sweat it, Marco. We had ways to ease that burden and could've had you transported here normally. We made our choice."

"Indeed! And it was Guy's idea in the first place. He's the one who said we should be strong enough to carry you ourselves."

Pete and Chela were doing their best to cheer Marco up. Nanao wiped the sweat from her brow, beaming.

"And carry you we did! Proof of our growth and glad tidings."

"I entirely agree," said Chela. "Ms. Carste, how did you fair? I'm sure you were not expecting hard labor."

"...I...managed..."

Teresa nodded, struggling to get her breath back. Freight conveyance was hardly her forte, and it had taken a real toll on her. Oliver was gently rubbing her back.

"Good work. The rest of the voyage is by ship. Watch the scenery a while, and you'll forget to be tired."

"...Good."

She managed to straighten up and feign recovery.

A voice called down from the landing ahead—a crew member on the ships floating there.

"Ferry to Cape Hill, leaving in twenty!" she yelled. "Passengers, get your tickets ready and talk to the crew."

"Oh, right! Coming!"

Katie waved a hand, and the eight of them boarded the ship. Technically this was five midsize ships connected front and back for efficient passenger transport down a narrow waterway. Marco settled down beneath the awning on deck, and the others placed their baggage in their cabins. A vessel this size could normally carry a few dozen passengers, so the deck had plenty of room even with Marco camping out. They were the last ship in the convoy and didn't need to worry about other passengers bothering them.

"Relaxing on deck sure is grand," said Guy. "Renting out the whole ship was good idea."

"We can't exactly shove Marco in a hold. But you do remember the condition we struck to lower the fee, yes?" Chela asked.

"Yep," Katie replied. "Helping with loading and unloading in ports and in the event of an accident. We're hopping ships several times, but they all struck deals on those terms. Every boat is glad to have mages aboard."

"It's mutually beneficial, so I'm gonna make the most of it."

With that, Pete plopped down in the corner of the cabin and pulled a small golem out of his belongings. Everyone settled in somewhere, and the ship started moving.

Nanao was up on deck, watching the view with delight. "Such speed! Most unlike the vessels I saw back home."

"These waterways were made to improve transport, so they come with a guaranteed minimal speed and very little roughness. Mages don't take them often, so this is a good experience for you," Oliver explained.

Mages primarily rode their brooms around—this was nearly always the fastest way to get somewhere. But there was much that could not be seen from the sky. Chief among that were the parts of magical society that overlapped with ordinaries. This journey would go a long way to help Nanao fully understand Yelgland and the Union.

"...Are you sure we shouldn't have tried to make a visit to Yamatsu work? I knew it's a long way, but you're certainly capable of making it there now."

"Alas, that is a desire I am not permitted. Before my departure, I told my mother this—consider your daughter as good as dead."

Her tone was almost indifferent, and Oliver could say nothing more.

He remembered what she'd been like when they first met. Scouted by Theodore at the brink of death, Nanao had compared the crossing of the seas to a voyage to the afterlife.

"My home was razed to the ground in the wars. For that reason, too, I cannot lightly return. Lord McFarlane has been known to update me on the state of affairs there, so I know my clan still survives somehow. And the funds I send back are reaching them."

"... Makes sense. He's the one who arranged for your admission."

Oliver was quietly relieved to hear this. However slim the thread, she did still have a connection to her home.

Nanao leaned her cheek against his shoulder.

"Which is not to say I do not miss it. At those times, human warmth is the best medicine."

"You sure don't hesitate anymore."

Smiling, Oliver pulled her close.

Katie had been watching through the cabin window, and she jumped to her feet.

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"...Guy, knees."
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"Mm?"

"Just shut up and hug me."

Guy had been sitting next to her, but now she sat down on his lap and pulled his arms around her waist. Guy did as he was told, making a face.

"Already in pampered-princess mode? You don't usually spring this on me."

"Yeah, well. Chela would just worry. Pete's busy tinkering."

"Fair enough. And the other two look occupied."

Katie dropped her gaze. "Lately...Nanao..."

"Mm?"

"... She smells like him. Like Oliver. Every time I hug her, I know."

Her voice was a strangled squeak, and it made Guy blush and splutter.

"...Welp, that's, uh... Must be rough."

"It's a huge problem! I'm losing my mind here!"

"I know, I know. I ain't complaining. Let that bring you to me."

Guy started stroking her hair. Feeling like that wasn't enough, he glanced at the girl sitting in the cabin corner.

"Oh, there you are, Teresa. Don't just lurk—come help pamper the princess."

"I lack the social skills."

"You gonna play that card the whole trip? If we all don't get acquainted, Oliver'll start to worry."

"Teresa! C'mere!"

Katie's arms were out, beckoning. Resigned to her fate, Teresa got up and reluctantly joined them.

"Don't sweat it. Mentally, you're about the same age as the princess here.

Just pretend like she's your good-for-nothing sister and play along."

"Can it, Guy. Look, Teresa, we've brought magic chess and card games—see anything you like?"

"I know the rules for most of those. Rita makes me play sometimes."

"Oh, is it time for games?" Chela perked up. "Then let me join you!"

Nanao and Oliver returned to the cabin shortly after. Marco was feeling seasick, so they'd given him some space. For a while, they all played cards.

"...Hmm, I think we're nearing the crest. Time we hit the deck," Oliver suggested.

They put the game away and left the cabin. Marco was still under that awning, and Katie ran over to him.

"Marco, are you feeling better? Has your stomach settled?"

"Mm. You were right, Katie. Staring into the distance helps."

"Wild trolls never take to the water. Are you scared at all?" Oliver asked.

"Only a bit." Marco grinned. "I'm okay. If I fall off, you'll catch me."

"Damn straight!" Guy said, confident. "We practiced hard enough! We'll dive right in and yank you out."

"Don't forget to put a bubble around your head," Chela warned. "Dive without one, and you can't chant!"

As she spoke, the ship's prow rose. The ship was clearly headed up a slope, and Nanao ran to the front of it.

"Ohhh!" she yelped. "How bizarre! Water flowing uphill!"

"We've started the ascent. Quite a spectacle, isn't it?"

"Generally, they dig a tunnel instead, but there's a sizable town at the top here. Enough passengers that they turn a profit even with all the elemental water this requires."

"Okay, pop quiz!" Katie announced.

All eyes turned toward her.

"The magical industrial revolution required an expansion of the transportation network. How did they pull that off? Yes, Teresa!"



"The waterways we see before us. I've heard they reach all corners of the Union, facilitating trade."

"Correct! But normally, water only flows downhill. There may not be a river where you need one, and if you're stuck using existing terrain, there are hard limits on the growth of your shipping channels. How was this issue resolved? Yes, Guy!"

"They just made their own waterways. Full use of elementals."

"Not wrong, but a bit sloppy! Marco, show him how it's done!"

"Mm? Me?"

Marco reached into his memories, then began to speak, eyes on the view flowing past.

"Excavation employed tamed wyrms. They ate the soil, leaving canals in their wake. All they had to do was treat the sides and bottom and connect the waterways to each other."

"W-wow... You know all that?"

"It's nothing. I just read a book and repeated the contents."

Marco shrugged, and Katie nodded.

"Well put, Marco," she said. "But that doesn't explain how the water *flows*. Once water's flowed downward, it's not going back uphill...but we can see for ourselves that it is! How do they make it work? Can you explain that?"

"Mm. The entire international canal network forms a giant sigil, converting mana from ley lines to change the currents. The flow of the water is no longer constrained by gravity. The current flows faster in flat areas and can flow uphill as well."

"Exactly! And the history of this idea?"

"Uh... I think the concept itself has been around for over a thousand years. It was always technically possible, but international construction projects weren't practical. The founding of the Union resolved that issue."

"Got it in one! Well done! You're so great, Marco!"

Katie was jumping with joy. Oliver was suitably impressed.

"Describing how they work is one thing, but the history of their construction—Katie, did you prep him?"

"Nope! I gave him a lot of books, but Marco acquired all this knowledge on his own! He's absorbing information like crazy! He could probably teach small children."

She looked super proud of him.

"That's very impressive, Katie, Marco," Chela said, looking up at the troll. Her brow furrowed. "Almost alarming. I know of no mages who ever imagined trolls could be this intelligent."

"He's not just comprehending the words and context; he's speaking with an eye to their impact on society itself," Pete said. "No different from a well-educated adult human. Spreading recordings of Marco talking like this would likely disrupt the entire field of demi studies."

Chela nodded and turned to Katie.

"That's what concerns me, Katie. What do you plan to do with this result? It's a bit too earth-shattering to publish lightly. You must pick who you share it with."

That cooled Katie's head quickly. She moved over to Marco, throwing her arms around his oversized finger.

"I've got several ideas, including participating in the civil rights movement. But—all of those ideas have to go through Marco first. Nothing matters more than what he wants to do and who he wants to talk to."

She had her priorities straight. Guy put his hands on his hips, grinning.

"And that's all stuff to work out in the upper forms! Sounds like a plan."

"...Yeah, when it's time to make a move, we'll be prepared to offer advice. Let's not get ahead of ourselves here," said Oliver. "Agreed, Chela?"

"Naturally. I'm afraid my awe and curiosity got the better of me. I should have known your opinion mattered most, Marco. Forgive my indiscretion."

"I'm not mad. You're always nice, Chela. I know you worry about Katie."

Marco's answer clearly tickled her. This ended the serious discussion, and Oliver changed the subject.

"Speaking of curiosity, the more we talk to you, the more things I want to try. Like contact with elementals. Your species has a greater affinity for nature than ours, so you probably have a different perspective on these waterways. Can I ask what you make of them?"

"Mm. The water here is...intoxicating, scary," Marco said, peeking over the edge of the ship. "I don't even want to dip my toe in, much less drink it."

Oliver nodded gravely. "Good instincts. There's a downright unnatural concentration of elementals here, and that's toxic to living creatures. Drinking it would disrupt your blood flow—humans who fall into it often die from that alone even if they're fished out in time."

"I wonder how that affects mages. Guy, feeling thirsty?"

"I'm not your lab rat, Pete!" Guy snapped. "Ferries these days are well stocked and have concessions on board!"

Their journey was off to a lively start.

The waterways were well maintained, and the speeds guaranteed. The journey was a smooth one. The Sword Roses helped with loading and unloading at ports, and the ferry reached the last stop on the route that afternoon. This harbor faced the ocean.

"This is the southern edge of Yelgland. From here, we're at sea!"

"Then sails ahoy? What manner of construction do these ships employ?"

Nanao was eager to see their next transport, but the others just smiled, exchanging glances.

"Nanao, I'm afraid—"

"By 'at sea,' we mean—well, you'll find out."

That got a frown from Nanao, but her friends refused to elaborate. They didn't want prior knowledge ruining the surprise.

An obscenely large bridge stretched out to the horizon. That was the first thing Nanao spotted—followed shortly by the large ship convoys traveling to and fro atop it. Two waterways arcing across the ocean, one inbound, one out. Both packed with ships carrying cargo and passengers.

At the prow of one such ship, Nanao watched the land retreat in the distance behind, unable to contain her excitement.

"Waterways above the water itself! What a marvel!"

Beside her, Oliver filled her in. "Otherwise the Yelgland island would be cut off from the mainland network. The Big Bridge over the channel was the first crazy-expensive project launched following the Union's founding. There's all kinds of wild stories from the construction."

Naturally, it was possible to sail across, but ships were dependent on ocean currents and weather. Ensuring steady flow of merchandise and people required a direct link to the mainland, as massive an undertaking as that was. The bridge currents were bolstered by mana taken from the ley lines, so the ships moved far faster than they could in the open waters.

Hair streaming in the salty breeze, Chela added, "I understand dealing with marine magifauna was a real sore spot. They had to relocate entire colonies to new territories during the planning stages."

"And that caused all sorts of environmental problems! Wastewater from the bridge alone is a bad influence!"

"You never run out of things to complain about, huh? Go off, I guess," Guy groused.

Katie was soon in deep discussion with Oliver and Chela. Teresa had been absentmindedly gazing out at sea, but then Nanao joined her.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Teresa?"

"...More or less."

"Aha. I am having the time of my life. I had never imagined I would see a river flowing above the ocean."

Nanao glanced around her.

"I believe this is what Oliver wished you to see."

"The river?"

"Nay-how wide the world is."

Teresa had no answer there. She'd certainly thought about why she'd been invited. Part of her was aware her lord wanted her to see the world outside, since she knew only Kimberly. She knew Oliver well enough to get that.

"Has your perspective broadened? There is much in this world besides Oliver."

"...You're not one to talk."

"He is certainly ever on my mind. Both our eyes are on his every move," Nanao admitted. Then she smirked and whispered in the girl's ear, "Fancy a competition, Teresa?"

"On what terms?"

"Which of us can get our arms around Oliver first. Naturally, I would not dream of holding back."

A challenge issued, and Teresa's wand leaped to her hand.

## "...Impediendum."

"Hrm?!"

"I'm game—and I've already won."

Having paralyzed her opponent, Teresa took off running. This level of enthusiasm was allowed, she told herself, pouncing on Oliver's back. Her covert operative training had led her to aim for that side—and it came back to haunt her. On pure reflex, Oliver hopped sideways out of her path.

"——?!"

"Dodging ruins my plans, sir."

"Why'd you cannonball in?! Stop; we can't make a fuss on deck— Augh!"

A second projectile inbound, and again he dodged. Nanao righted herself from her failed charge, grinning.

"You evaded that? Your instincts remain formidable!"

"You too, Nanao?! Tone it down! You're gonna push me overboard!"

He turned to reprimand them further, but a bellow echoed from the far side of the deck: "Hey! No horsing around, kiddos! You wanna get your bones picked clean by the scrubber shrimp below?!"

A crew member was running their way—Oliver had been too late.

All three ended up getting chewed out for a solid five minutes.

"...Happy now? You got me mixed up in this."

"...Sorry..."

"I do regret it..."

Teresa and Nanao drooped.

"A sight for sore eyes." Chela tittered. "With our wands hidden beneath our clothes, ordinaries don't hesitate to yell at us. A rare opportunity."

"Best to pick the place and time for hard-core hugs. But you'll get no sympathy from me, Oliver."

"Why not?!"

Guy just started whistling.

The ship sailed smoothly on, and in time, they could see the far side of the channel. The ship swept them across the bridge to the mainland.

"We're entering the primary waterway," Chela said. "The biggest canal on the mainland."

The mouth alone was a solid two thousand yards wide. Even their lengthy convoy could easily turn around here. The expanse opened up before them, flanked by the port town.

"...Damn, that's big," Guy said.

"Such breadth! Is this, too, a waterway?" Nanao asked.

"Overwhelming, right? Before the network was constructed, the river here was already a major shipping lane. They'd already been expanding the width of

it. Now it's larger than some lakes."

"But that means the original ecosystems—"

"Can you not just let one thing pass?"

Katie tried to sow the seeds of further debates, but Guy mussed her hair to stop her. Soon the ship docked, and all disembarked, their feet once more on dry land. It was still early spring, but it was noticeably warmer than Yelgland. Enjoying that, Oliver reminded everyone of the plan.

"We've reached the mainland, and today we rest. We're currently at the northern end of Lantshire, a country known for fine dining, so we should be eating well."

"Mmf, mmf, dlishus."

"Holy crap, she's already eating!" Guy yelled.

"Didn't you eat a lot on board, Nanao?!" Katie cried.

Nanao's cheeks were full of something from a harbor stall. While they laughed at that, Teresa's eyes were on the surge of foot traffic around them. Oliver took a look himself.

"What's up, Teresa?"

"...Nothing. Just...so many people," she muttered.

Her whole world had been Kimberly, and this was a first for her—it really drove home how big the world was. Oliver stepped up behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"Like you and me, each person here has a life of their own. Boggles the mind, right?"

"...I feel dizzy."

"Then by all means, take one of these," Nanao said, stuffing a pastry in Teresa's mouth.

She bit down almost reflexively, and her eyes lit up.

"....!"

"That might be a good start for you. But, Nanao—we still have dinner waiting."

"Fear not! I have not used a tenth of my stomach's capacity!"

Nanao sounded eager to fix that, and Oliver laughed, leading them to their lodgings.

"The McFarlane party? We've been expecting you."

The hotel Chela had booked was not far from the port. The staff received them warmly and led them to a basement room as large as the main room of the Sword Roses' labyrinth base. The windows offered a view of the interior garden, offsetting the gloom of the underground space. The beds were flawlessly made, and Katie gasped at the couch and table lined with welcome drinks.

"Whoa, it's huge...!"

"This place covers a ton of ground."

"I asked them to prepare a room Marco could stay in, too." Chela smiled. "That said, mage hotels are accustomed to accommodating requests like this. I assure you, they were not bending over for fear of the McFarlane name, and it is not as expensive as it might look."

Traveling with a troll meant they'd had to plan ahead. Transport and lodgings had both been tricky, but they had the knowledge and skills to work things out. They'd been especially clear that he was to be treated as an equal guest, not a familiar.

After looking the room over, they kicked back—and there was a knock at the door. All eight heads swiveled.

"Hmm, hotel staff? Come in," Chela called.

The door opened, and the faces behind it made the friends' eyes pop. Both newcomers were a common enough sight at Kimberly: Stacy Cornwallis and her servant, Fay Willock, looking rather uncomfortable.

"... I thought that was you guys. I could hear the ruckus down the hall."

"Stacy?!"

"My word! You're staying here, too?!"

Pete and Chela spoke on top of each other, moving forward.

Stacy snorted, brushing her hair back.

"A research expedition with a touch of sightseeing. I imagine you heard about this place from the same source as I did. The downside of being relatives."

"Don't make it sound like a bad thing, Stace," Fay urged. "I figured we'd say hi before we bumped into each other in the hall, but we're not gonna linger. The rooms themselves are soundproof, so don't worry about us—just enjoy your stay."

Fay sounded reluctant to impose, but Guy was grinning at him.

"Like we'd let you just turn tail. Right, Chela?"

Chela's smile was equally broad. She took Stacy's hand.

"Stace, have you had dinner?"

No reason to split up after running into compatriots abroad; their number swelled by two, for a total of ten, and they headed out to dinner. Once again, they'd reserved an entire room and needn't hold back. Stacy and Fay put up little argument—and the reason for that emerged soon after their arrival.

"I did have other plans! I made a reservation! But when we got there, the sign on the door said it was closed on account of the chef didn't like his hairdo!"

"Yes, yes, the Whimsical Spoon's chef is infamously fickle," said Chela. "But I know just why you can't let it go, Stace. The meat there is simply divine."

"Exactlyyy! I wanted to share it with Fay! He would've loved it!"

Stacy was knocking back wine like crazy, bellyaching. She and Fay had landed ahead of the Sword Roses and had slumped back to the hotel after their reservation fell through.

One eye on Stacy's swiftly emptying glass, Guy whispered to her servant, "Yo, she's plastered before the hors d'oeuvres... Your mistress all right?"

"This is probably for the best... When she saw the restaurant was closed, it was like the world ended. If we hadn't spotted you, I dunno how I'd have

cheered her up."

"She must've really wanted to take you there." Pete grunted. "This meal may not make up for it, but Chela picked the spot, so it oughtta be good."

Fay nodded, taking a bite of his appetizer.

"It is good. Astoundingly good," he said with a sigh. "This is actually my first time out of Yelgland. Stace has been a few times with family, but since they won't take me along, she's been refusing to leave the house. She was last at the Whimsical Spoon before any of that."

"That's why she wanted to bring you there, then," Oliver said, considering Stacy's feelings. "She really loves you, Fay."

He smiled. Fay shot him a look. "Since you're apparently the designated cleanup crew—how're you gonna handle this? I mean, a trip with this gang? Their first taste of freedom in years? You have no idea how wild this could get."

"W-well...I'm sure it'll be fine. As long as we show a modicum of restrai—"

At this point, a pair of arms clamped around Fay's head, to the surprise of everyone. It was Stacy, half in tears and her cheeks fully flushed.

"I'm sooooo sorry, Faaaaay! I'll bring you there next time, I sweeeeear! Even if I have to kick the door iiiiiiin!"

"Uh-huh. I know. I hear ya, Stace..."

"I'm sorryyyyy! Wahhhhh! I love youuuuu! I love you, Faaaaay!"

Repeating this, she kissed his cheeks several times until Chela managed to pull her away. Fay buried his face in his hands as Stacy went back to emptying her glass.

"...So, uh," Guy said. "She's a candid drunk... That's new."

"...You see my point, Oliver?" Fay grumbled.

"...A little too well..."

Oliver was looking tense. Stacy would *never* have let herself get to this point at Kimberly, and that alone convinced him that this vacation took all the rules off the table. He could hardly call her the exception—his group was in the same

exact position.

Katie had been quietly drinking her wine, one eye on Stacy and Fay, but she suddenly burst into tears with no warning.

"...Wahhhhhh..."

"Hrm?! Katie, what heralds these tears?"

"I wanna get it off my chest, but I caaan't! Especially not with you, Nanao!"

"What a sad claim! Come, into my arms, and share away!"

"Hugging makes it worse! Aughhh! I can smell hiiiiim!"

Wrapped in her friend's arms, Katie's sobs turned into a shriek, and Nanao's embrace only got tighter as she tried to sooth her.

Staring at that scene, Pete muttered, "See that, Ms. Carste? They're really letting their hair down."

"Fascinating."

"Right? But once it gets like this...plunging in yourself is an option."

With that, Pete chugged his glass. Guy stared in shock, forgetting all about soothing Katie.

"Augh?! Pete, dammit—"

"She's all yours, Guy."

Pete's eyes glazed over. He poured himself a new glass of wine, stood up, and moved to where Stacy and Chela were talking.

"All right: Stacy, Fay. You're flirting like mad, but how far've you gone? Inquiring minds want to know. Air that laundry."

"Pete?!" Oliver yelped. His friend wasn't often this forward.

Stacy's eyes filled with tears. "We've gone nowheeeere! Fay won't even touch meeee! I make him my pillow, and all he does is pat my head!"

"Stace! Water! Now!" Fay quickly poured her a cup.

"I get it." Pete nodded. "That's exactly how I feel about the guy who regularly spends the entire night with his hands all over me."

With that, he spun around, filling the largest tankard on the table with wine with a ferocity that intimidated Oliver.

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"...Pete, that's, uh, a lot of—"
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"It's for you, Oliver."

Pete held out the very full mug. Oliver flinched backward.

"Uh, I don't think—"

"Duty demands you drink here, yes?"

There was a steely glint in Pete's eyes. He wasn't brooking arguments. No one around them tried to stop him.

Oliver waffled a moment longer, then accepted the mug. He sighed—and chugged the contents.

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"...Urp..."
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"Good boy, Oliver," Pete said, arm around Oliver's shoulders. "If you pass out drunk, I'll nurse you through it. You taught me how to heal, and I'll keep that tender touch going till dawn's early light."

Chela leaped to her feet, hand raised.

"That sounds delightful! I must join you! Pete, you handle the lower half; I'll handle the upper!"

"When'd you get smashed, Chela?!" Guy yelled. "Hoo boy, I can see where this mess is headed. We're all gonna end up passing out, and Marco's gonna have to carry us back to the hotel."

Oliver agreed with that completely. Drinking too much on vacation had a ripple effect and was letting pent-up frustrations erupt willy-nilly. Chela would normally have joined him in settling things, but she was just adding fuel to the fire. This was shaping up to be a wild party. Half of them were drunk already. Only he and Guy were still clinging to their senses—but at least Teresa and Marco weren't drinking at all.

"Unh, I can do that, Guy. I don't drink."

"You're our last shred of hope!" Guy wailed, tearing his hair out. "Fine! I'm

getting drunk my damn self. Let's knock back beers till we forget everything that happens!"

At this point, Katie freed herself from Nanao and came staggering over.

"Guyyyyy! Heeeeelp! The smell! Oliver's smell!!!!!"

"Here comes the primary instigator! Okay, okay, my lap's reserved for you."

"Ahhhhh... Guy, your scent's so soothinggg."

"Yo, Greenwood, you coddle her like that, it's gonna come back to haunt you!"

"Don't act like you got the right to lecture nobody, wolfman! Take your own girl up on her offer before you go offering unsolicited advice to everyone else!"

Fighting words, and Pete was busy filling both boys' wineglasses.

Watching the alcohol-fueled banter fly, Teresa took a sip of her juice.

"...Why are humans so foolish?" she whispered.

"Unh, good question," Marco said, tipping back his own oversized mug.

Oliver fought valiantly to get things under control, but his efforts were mocked, and the revelry only intensified.

Five hours of drink after drink with no signs of the energy waning. Closing time arrived, and the group was nigh forcibly ejected and left wandering the streets, heads still swimming.

"What a glorious evening! Come one and all! Where shall we drink next?!"

"I vote somewhere up high! Consider that roof yonder!"

"The hotel! I've given up on stopping you, but I'm begging you to make it our room!"

Oliver had managed to retain enough of his faculties to insist on this point. If they tumbled into some other bar, the future held only disgraces; at least in the basement suite, they'd retain a modicum of privacy. This was the last means of control afforded to him.

His own head was swimming, but he fought to corral the drunks.

Teresa slipped next to him. "...How are you?" she asked.

"... Hoping the ground opens up so I can sleep. But I'm not giving up here!"

He gritted his teeth, groaning, and Teresa nodded once. Much about this escaped her, but clearly this was a hill her lord planned to die on.

Inside the hotel, the party raged on. Sending familiars out with orders provided endless deliveries of alcohol, and the revelers consequently forgot all about the time.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What was that move?! Who does that in the center of the enemy camp?!"

"Don't knock it! That's the Greenwood secret deep-end watchtower. Made a huge impact in a wild tournament back on version fifteen!"

"Awwww, but countermeasures have long since been discovered. You just do this, this, and this, and then it all comes tumbling down!"

"No advice from the sidelines, Chela! You do that again, I'll give you a silencing hug!"

"Sounds lovely! No downsides for me!"

A game of magic chess was provoking furious debate, but when Guy started paying too much attention to that, the curly-haired girl on his lap started fussing.

"Wahhhh! Guy's abandoning meeee!"

"I'm not, dammit! You see how big these arms are?! I can hold two of you at once!"

"But you've only got one rod! Snort... Hur-hur... Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Fay, your mistress just fell off a chair laughing at her own dirty joke," Pete whispered. "How's that make you feel?"

"Like I regret being born with ears. Please, top me up."

"Rods? Pray tell, what does fishing have to do with it?" Nanao looked baffled. Much of Stacy's drunken "humor" was lost on her.

Oliver had bailed to Marco's lap, trying to sober up, and Teresa was soaking in

the view from a perch on the troll's shoulder.

"...All I can say here is: Don't let the drink drink you," Oliver cautioned.

"The drunk seem to be having a very good time."

"Can't argue with that." Oliver rubbed his forehead. "That's what makes it so terrifying."

Chela was climbing up Marco's knee.

"Oliverrrrr! Don't act like this is beneath you!"

"Ugh...fine! I'm in. I might not like magic chess much, but I know how to play..."

"Oooh, grand! But tell me—what penalty should the loser incurrrr?"

"A kiss! Loser has to kiss the victor!"

"Pete?! You're still in that mood?!"

"I'll kill anyone who kisses Fay!"

"Down, Stace! Put that wand away! We're staying out of this one!"

Fay had Stacy in a full nelson, stopping her. Egged on by the drunks around her, Chela got the board set, and Oliver threw himself into a duel he could not afford to lose.

Oliver clung on for dear life; the battle was a long one. Kicking his dulled brain into action, he desperately fended off Chela's assault, glaring at the board in agony.

"...Gah...! Are you really even drunk, Chela?!"

"Veryyyyy. But magic chess is never a game of *logic*! The moves you make are faaaar too serious."

"Painfully true... But I can't lose here!"

She was moving on instinct alone, and it took every last wit he had to hold fast. But then Chela realized the room had gone silent. The revelers cheering on their game were now asleep on the floor. Teresa and Marco had stayed above the fray, but both were nodding off together. It was past four AM, and high time

for everyone to hit the hay.

"Oh dear... When did they fall asleep? We're all alone," said Chela.

"It's almost dawn. They *should* be in bed. I never saw it coming. Didn't think you'd all go this wild on day one."

Oliver finally made his move, allowing himself a smile.

"...But at least you're actually having fun," he added. "You've been forcing things a bit since that mess at the combat league."

That remark took Chela's breath away.

She'd believed she'd shown no signs of being bothered by her father's slap to her face. So many other memorable events had come and gone, and she'd imagined the incident was buried beneath them in the minds of her friends. But Oliver had been keeping an eye on her. Despite everything else he had on his plate.

"...That's not true. I've sorted myself out. Why my father punished me, my own shortcomings. I'm not dragging that around."

"That's one thing when the others are watching. But you're allowed to gripe with me. Clashes with family always fester. I've had...similar experiences."

Oliver's mind went to his time with his father under the Sherwoods. The nature and specifics varied, but both these mages knew the same darkness. His understanding and sympathy came across and warmed Chela's heart—yet they also saddened her. It was tantamount to taking fleeting relief in finding someone else knee-deep in the same quagmire.

And her wandering thoughts affected her game. A piece she'd moved on impulse made him smile.

"...At last, you expose yourself. I'm turning the tables, Chela."

"Oops—"

Oliver didn't let that go unpunished. He turned the battle around. Chela saw no way to regain control.

"Time we wrap things up," Oliver said. "We've got a long journey ahead of us.

Get some sleep, Chela."

She glanced at her empty cup. "...You've got dirt on you, Oliver."

"Mm? Do I?"

"Stay put."

With that, she leaned over the board, grabbed Oliver's unguarded shoulder, her other hand reaching for his chest—and slid it up, slipping around the back of his head.

"<u>"</u>!"

By the time he realized her intent, she'd pulled him in, her lips on his. Time stopped. Chela's sweet scent tickled his nostrils, the softness of her lips leaving him stunned—and then she pulled away.

"...Just tell yourself the drink got the best of me."

With that excuse, she turned and laid down, putting her arms around Katie on the opposite side from Guy.

Oliver was left watching, unable to speak.

"...Hardly fair, Chela...," he said at last.

One hell of a last-minute ambush. With that thought, he let his own mind slip away.

He was not allowed to sleep for long. Oliver woke before noon and went around shaking everyone awake. They sent Stacy and Fay back to their own room, then gathered up their belongings, pushing each other out of the hotel. Even on the road to the harbor, Guy and Katie looked half dead.

"...My head's killing me..."

"...I can barely move..."

"Yeah, that is what happens," Oliver said, completely unsympathetic.

The two of them were at least walking on their own two feet; Marco had been forced to carry Pete. Even Chela was still in bad enough shape that she wasn't talking much. An extremely concerning start to their second day, so Oliver chose to be extra strict.

"We drank enough to kill any nonmagical person. I'd rather spend the day in bed myself. But we've got a ship to catch. We've gotta get to the dock, even if we have to crawl there."

"Indeed!" Nanao said, striding cheerily forward.

Oliver shook his head. She'd drunk as much as anyone, but she alone had been in high spirits the moment she awoke.

"I can't believe you're unaffected. Not even a smidgen?"

"None at all! Though having the world spin like that was certainly novel."

"So you're a sponge... How many ways must you be like my moth—?"

Oliver's lips had loosened too much, and he caught the word as it slipped out. He hastily looked away, but Nanao came right over to him, eyes wide.

"Oliver ...? What was that?"

"...Nothing."

"A bolt from the blue! Do I really remind you of your mother?"

"You didn't hear that!"

Nanao wasn't letting him off the hook that easily.

"...Put me down," Pete said, patting Marco's arm. "I can walk from here."

As Pete landed, Katie and Guy spoke up.

"I think I'm getting better..."

"Same. Ugh, that was rough."

"You are all mages," Chela said, smiling. "Even at that quantity of drink, the hangover does not last long."

Oliver looked relieved, but Katie was rubbing her head.

"My memories are pretty fuzzy... Did I say anything weird?"

"Don't worry," Guy told her. "Eventually, everyone was saying weird stuff. You were pretty out there but still better than most. Right, Pete?"

Guy shot Pete a look, but the bespectacled boy merely snorted and started

walking faster. He was clearly aware he'd overdone it that night, but since that had been a conscious choice on his part, he wasn't so inclined to regret it. Catching that intent, Guy grinned and glanced back at their hotel.

"I'm more worried about *them*. Willock's probably fine, but let's just hope Cornwallis remembers none of it."

"...Agreed," Oliver muttered.

Every word Stacy had uttered would come back to haunt her. Accordingly, pandemonium already held sway back in their hotel room—but the Sword Roses were blissfully unaware.

They barely made it to their ship in time to board. As it pulled out of the harbor—the same they'd arrived at—they breathed a sigh of relief, basking in the sea breeze on deck.

"...Thank god we're taking ships. I am not ready to ride a broom."

"The changes in scenery keep things fresh. The wheat fields of Lantshire are always a sight to behold," Chela said, gazing at the shore.

"Marco," Teresa piped up. "Let's take a look over there."

"Mm."

Marco wandered off, Teresa on his shoulder. Two very different size frames.

"...When'd they get so close?" Guy wondered aloud. "Do silent types just naturally bond?"

"They spent all last night sober." Oliver smiled. "I imagine that did the trick."

It was a good sign, he thought. Getting out of the school and forming new connections would be good for her. Arguably the reason he'd wanted to bring her along.

But the combo of an oversized demi-human and a tiny little girl certainly drew attention. He voiced a concern on that front.

"Just...we might need to watch out for Marco. This is a bigger ship, so we won't have it all to ourselves—and people will notice him."

"We had him dress up to look less intimidating, but that's just making people

curious. Should we have our wands visible to keep the onlookers at bay?" Chela offered.

"That's...a last resort," Katie said. "I know this is just me not wanting them to think he's a familiar..."

She knew that was a faint hope. Even with no mages in sight, a troll in a place like this? People would assume he was a familiar—or worse, a slave. The fancy outfit would merely make them assume his owner was eccentric.

But both Oliver and Chela agreed there was meaning to it. At the very least, they knew Marco himself got how Katie felt.

Meanwhile, Teresa was surprised to find herself enjoying riding Marco's shoulder around the deck. She had a great view—mostly of the ocean—and everyone she passed was giving them odd looks. That made her uncomfortable at first, but she soon saw the appeal.

"Your shoulder provides an excellent view, Marco."

"Unh, good. Teresa, you usually struggle to see?"

Marco kept his voice to a whisper. No one outside Kimberly knew he could speak, so they'd practiced conversing like this for these particular circumstances. One reason Teresa was on his shoulder was to make communication easier.

"I do sometimes, sure. I mostly observe from the shadows, so this is an allnew perspective."

Marco smiled. Arguably neither one of them knew much about the world at large.

"I didn't think I'd ever see the world of humans like this. Not in the forest or after I was taken to Kimberly."

"...Is it a good thing?"

"I don't know. But it doesn't feel bad."

Sharing these ideas, they wandered on—until a spiteful voice cut in.

"Huh? What the—? Why's there a troll on deck?"

Teresa and Marco looked toward the voice and found a cross-looking man, arms folded. He wore an expensive looking jacket and shiny leather shoes, but the effect was less fashionable than trying really hard to be taken seriously.

"Yo, big guy, you're blocking the hall. You belong below deck."

"Mm? Below deck?"

"There's plenty of space for you to pass us," Teresa called. "We're objectively not in your way. Or are you perhaps blind?"

The man took off his sunglasses, glaring up at her.

"Don't go sneering at your betters from on high, li'l lady. I'm representing a real big merchant, so while I'm still feeling like a gentleman, you tell your thickheaded buddy he don't belong up here."

"Mystifying. Should I shut up him?"

"Unh, Teresa, no."

She was inclined to settle things Kimberly-style, but Marco just turned back the way he'd come.

"Well, ain't he well-behaved." The man snorted. "Shoulda done that in the first place."

Marco said nothing. That just riled Teresa up. She wanted to run back and blast the man with a spell but was hesitant to do so while the actual victim was taking it in stride.

Maybe he had much deeper thoughts on this than she did. That was the impression her oversized friend gave.

"Oh, you're back?" Katie said, meeting them with a smile.

Recalling his exchange with the man just now, Marco asked, "Katie. What's below? Can I see?"

Everyone's smiles faded. Teresa remembered what that man had said—that Marco belonged below deck. Rather than the insult implied, Marco had wondered if there were others of his kind on board.

"Yeah, let's go. I'd always planned to show you this," Katie told him, nodding.

She led the way, and the others followed.

The ship was expansive, and their destination was five floors down. Where truths lay hidden from the cheery deck.

"...Yikes..."

A number of trolls sat in a row along a dimly lit space. Oars as big as they were rested nearby; slotted through holes in the wall, these oars could reach into the water below. Much like the galleys the ordinaries of old employed.

"...Troll oarsmen," Oliver explained. "No work for them at the moment, but depending on the port, they might have to row to the dock after leaving the primary current. They're kept aboard as labor in those eventualities."

If a mage was piloting the ship, they'd just put wind elementals to work, but that didn't apply to most ships on this channel. They'd need to reach the docks themselves, and trolls had the strength to row them there. Naturally, they were called upon to help with cargo, too.

"...Can't call these conditions good," Guy growled, glancing around the gloom. "No windows, low ceilings—they'd bump their heads if they stood up."

"Still better than some," Pete muttered. "I've heard of ships that don't even let them use the bathroom."

Marco was gazing at this in silence, and Katie stepped closer to him.

"Sorry to bring you somewhere so unpleasant, Marco. But I felt you should see this," she told him. "The magic industrial revolution certainly changed all our lives. It enriched the lifestyles of ordinaries, too. But...that's very much propped up by exploiting demi-humans."

Internally, Oliver nodded at these harsh words.

It was an undeniable fact of magical culture. Once, only a few mages had goblins or orcs at their beck and call—but now their entire species were forced to work for humans.

"This is a fact of life. The reality of life as a demi-human that has not been granted civil rights. What you make of it, how you feel about it—I was hoping this journey would give you some food for thought."

Her intentions made known, Katie balled up her fists.

"All I can say for sure is...there's nothing I can do here. Sorry. Be mad if you like."

"...I'm not mad, Katie," Marco said, shaking his head. "This isn't your fault."

The others watched in silence—until they heard screams up above.

"——? What was that?"

"Something going on upstairs. Let's take a look."

They all nodded and headed back to the deck.

The mood on deck was no longer relaxed; the very air felt tense.

"I said put yer hands up! One false move, and we'll throw ya overboard!"

Masked men brandishing blades, bellowing orders. Passengers cowering in fear. So much for a relaxing vacation—violence and terror now reigned supreme.

"This ship's cargo belongs to us! Would love to sell the lot of ya, but we dunno no slavers. Catch my drift? You ain't worth shit! You rank lower than any crate in the hold! So don't give us no trouble. Trash gets in our way, it goes in the river."

The thief banged the back of his blade on the railing for emphasis. But where the others quivered in panic, one man stepped forward, beside himself. The same man who'd sneered at Marco.

"H-hey, wait a sec! I'm from Barbier Shipping. We got our hands in all trade around here. Loads of mages work for us! Try something here, and you'll—"

He attempted to invoke authority but got himself punched in the face instead.

"So where are those mages? You wanna get thrown out like the trash? Say another word, and I'll do exactly that."

"...Gah..."

With a knife to his throat, the man's knees buckled. His hands went up. The rest of the passengers were too scared to try anything, and the thieves now had control.

Pete's scout golems were watching this from the air above, relaying the footage to the others through his wand.

"... A hijacking? Of all the ships to pick!" Chela looked appalled.

Oliver grimaced, arms crossed. There were several unconscious thieves at their feet already; they'd bumped into each other on their way to the deck and fought back when the thieves attacked them.

"I heard ships like this were frequent targets, but it's still very bad luck," Oliver noted. "Maybe more so for *them*."

"No mages involved with the ship's operations. Which makes this a job for us," Guy said.

Oliver took another look through the golems.

The thieves had been mingling with the passengers and had taken down the ship's own guards first thing. The only other threat was the trolls, but they'd been forbidden to set foot on deck, and even if they did run up and fight, that might just sink the ship. The sight of Marco walking around the deck must have rattled the thieves, which was probably why they'd chosen to act once he vanished below deck. The thieves Oliver and his friends had knocked out might have been trying to take down Marco, figuring he could be controlled if they subdued the children with him.

"...They're pulling the crew from the bridge to the deck," Nanao said. "The thieves are few in number; what we see is likely all of them."

"Yeah, and with the ship hugging the cliff face, they must have a strategy to get the cargo ashore," Oliver added, assessing their plan.

Piracy was a perennial problem all along the shipping routes, but these waterways covered every inch of the Union, and it was hard to keep the length of them secure. Ships carrying wealthy passengers might have mages on guard duty or plenty of familiars, but since they were mages themselves, the Sword Roses had chosen a lower-grade vessel—and paid the price for it.

"Suppressing this should be simple. Spread out as we hit the deck—"

"W-wait!" Katie said. "There might be a peaceful solution! Let me try talking

to them."

Everyone looked at each other. Oliver thought this through, then nodded. Odds of success weren't high, but even if she failed, they could handle it.

They put Marco on standby on the stairs, and Katie led the group up to the deck. They were swiftly spotted.

"Yo, kids!" a thief yelled, brandishing a blade. "Who said you could walk around? Do you not have eyes?!"

Katie turned toward him. "Oh, um, are you a pirate?" She then whispered, "How was that...?"

"Aren't pirates at sea? This is a man-made river," Pete pointed out.

"I singularly doubt that's our first concern here," Chela said with a sigh.

None of them looked scared, which seemed to infuriate the thief. He advanced on them, roaring, "Quit that whispering! Put yer hands up! On the floor!"

"Right, we're actually—"

"Ain't you got ears?!"

Katie was reaching for her wand, and the thief's fist connected with her cheek. There was a nasty crack—not from Katie's cheek, but from the thief's wrist.

"Hh-?!"

He staggered back, clutching it. Katie stared at him, then rubbed her cheek.

"...Huh?" she murmured. "Was that a punch? Not a pat?"

This made the thief gape at her.

Katie had just done what she always did. She'd used balance control to stabilize her upright stance and had the mana circulation around her cheek prepare for the blow. It was almost reflexive at this point, not even worth calling defense, let alone an attack. But that was more than enough to shatter the wrist of an ordinary thief who'd been deceived by her appearance.

Oliver sighed, reaching into his own coat. No wonder none of the mages had

been stressing this. Their instincts alone had told them: The creatures before them could not possibly pose a threat.

"Enough, Katie. It's time."

## """"Impediendum."""""

Spells chased their voices—and the nearby thieves collapsed.

"Huh?"

The thief who'd punched Katie blinked—all seven students had vanished. Racing down the deck at speeds too fast for ordinary eyes to follow, knocking out every foe they saw.

"Er... Um?"

"... No way! Why are there mages—?"

"H-hostages—we need hostages! Doesn't matter who, just take someone—"

Realizing their predicament, the thieves tried shielding themselves behind passengers. But Guy's, Pete's, and Nanao's wands got in the way.

"Should've thought that through first," Pete scoffed. "You're way too slow. Are you even trying?"

His spell knocked out the thief before him. Half their number was eliminated already; Oliver was up on the bridge.

"Oliver Horn, Kimberly fourth-year, calling all thieves on board."

He held his wand high, keeping his voice utterly calm. Frightened eyes turned his way.

"Fight us all you like. But remember—we're used to fighting *other mages*. We're not really sure how easily a nonmagical will die. Let that fact inform your decision here."

Words from on high that resonated. Thief after thief dropped their weapons and put their hands up, slumping to the ground. The only choice. They'd been targeting an ordinaries' vessel and were not equipped to battle any mages.

"Wise decision. I take it you're the leader—what's your call?"

The one man who hadn't dropped his weapon was the same thief who'd punched Katie. The man closed his eyes a few seconds—then quivered with fury.

"Fuck it!"

He lunged forward, grabbing a nearby passenger: the man who'd sneered at Teresa and Marco.

Forgetting the pain in his wrist, the thief held his blade to the man's throat.

"...Not happening... This ain't happening! I'm gonna be posting results on this turf! I'll be a made man! I worked my way up from the lowest rung...!"

The future he spoke of was already lost. Pete almost pitied him.

"...Do I take the shot, Oliver?" he asked, aiming his wand.

Oliver shook his head. "No need."

The thief had been too preoccupied with the mages before him to notice the shadow looming overhead until oversized fingers grabbed his blade.

"Ah—"

"Knives are bad," Marco whispered—so low it sounded like a growl.

The thief released both his weapon and his hostage, trying to flee, but then Guy got an arm around his neck.

"H—"

"Trash goes in the river, right? Your words."

He hefted the thief's body, dangling him over the railing. The thief let out a shriek, well aware of what happened to any human who fell into the currents of these waterways. Except *he'd* been the one doing the dumping.

"I gotta disagree," Guy said. "Trash goes in the trash cans, or you bring it home with you."

Having scared him enough, Guy pulled him back on deck and dropped him. All fight had left the thief, and he crumpled.

"Suppression complete," Oliver said. "I'll watch from up here; check to make

sure there's no stragglers on the lower decks."

"Gladly!"

"At once."

Nanao and Teresa dashed off. It didn't take much time for peace to be restored.

The thieves were bound with rope and thrown in the brig. With that, the commotion came to an end, and the ship returned to its intended route. Freed from fear, the passengers looked relieved—and since the mages had made that possible, the hubbub on deck was every bit as loud as when they'd just set out.

"Marco, you okay? You sure you didn't hurt yourself?" Katie asked.

"Unh, I'm fine. That can't cut my fingers."

"It's a mass-produced knife, no magical enhancements," Chela proclaimed. "Cutting troll skin was too much to ask."

None of them had gone up against nonmagical thieves before, and it had been far too easy a task compared to the most basic mage-on-mage scuffle at Kimberly. They'd had more trouble not accidentally going too far.

"Th-thank you, mages!"

"We won't forget this! How can we ever repay you...?"

"Don't worry about it. Handling incidents on board is part of our passenger contracts. We're just relieved nobody got hurt."

Oliver was handling the line of grateful passengers. Katie certainly appreciated this but felt like they were leaving someone out.

"...They could thank Marco, too. He put himself on the line!"

"Forget about it," Guy said. "They don't know he can understand them."

A whole slew of passengers came to thank the seven mages. Marco was right there with them, but no one approached, acting like they couldn't even see him. They weren't scared of him or anything; they simply didn't register him as someone worth thanking.

Katie bit her lip. If they knew Marco could talk, she had to hope that would

change their tune. Guy kept one eye on her—once Oliver finished handling the line, he spoke up.

"That threat was hella effective, Oliver. You rehearse that?"

"Mm? Oh, that's just a classic line to urge nonmagical foes to surrender." Oliver shrugged. "I threw Kimberly's name in there for added punch. Even if they had a mage hidden on their side, odds were that would have made them give up."

He'd anticipated traveling with this crew might get them in trouble; this had been one such situation. Oliver glanced at the other passengers, then at the girl beside him.

"How is he, Teresa?"

"It's done. Bruises, a few cuts in the mouth."

She put her wand away. At her feet was the one passenger who'd sustained any injuries—the man who'd tried to talk them down, been hit for his troubles, then taken hostage in the leader's last stand. He got back up, rubbing his cheek, eyes on Teresa.

"...That hurt like hell," he said. "Payback?"

"Nobody said to make it painless."

"...Ha-ha. Fair enough."

That was a listless laugh. He turned to the others.

"...My life ain't worth much, but the cargo I got aboard is. I ain't gonna forget who saved it, and I will pay you back someday, young mages."

"Thank you. I might add that Barbier Shipping has a long-standing relationship with the McFarlanes. I'll pass your words on to my father."

"...You're a client? Ha-ha-ha, that'll get expensive." He scratched his head, then let out a long sigh. "Right—yo, big man!"

"Unh?"

Marco turned, surprised.

"Did I hear you speak earlier?" the man said, staring up at him. "Nah, couldn't

be. Must've been hearing things."

But he walked up to Marco anyway, patting his arm.

"You saved my ass. I won't call you thickheaded again. I was the one being a dumbass. Same to you, little lady. Sorry I insulted your friend."

With that, he turned on his heel and stalked away. Oliver looked at Teresa.

"...Something happen with him?"

"...Nothing important," she said, running it over in her mind. "It's sorted out now."

Evening that same day, Guy and Katie left the cabins, watching the sun set over a whole new land.

There were other passengers around, but they'd given the mages a wide berth since they'd revealed themselves. Mages invoked awe and fear; no one wanted to stand too close. This was how ordinary passengers and mages often were, but the change still made Guy grimace.

"...Guess we don't need to hide our wands. That does make things easier, I suppose. Certainly, nobody's gonna mess with Marco now."

"...Yeah, but..." Katie leaned against the railing, the red glow of the sky reflected in her eyes. "...I wish we'd been able to keep up the pretense a while longer."

Guy sighed, then pulled her close.

"...Eep...!"

"You're thinking too much. Go on, take a good whiff."

"\_\_\_\_!"

Katie flushed beet red, but then she returned the hug.

From the far side of the deck, Pete whispered, "He's certainly not holding back."

"Lovely, isn't it?" Chela smiled. "Watching them warms my heart."

Like Guy and Katie, the other passengers were keeping their distance, as if

there was an invisible wall around them.

"...Still, one step outside of Kimberly, and this happens. No one dares approach. I suppose it's understandable, but..."

"For better or for worse, we're not like them. Can't go back to pretending we're just regular passengers." Pete shrugged, eyes on the sunset. Then he smirked. "But who cares? As long as we're all together, none of that matters."

Chela smiled, moved behind him, and put her arms around his shoulders.

**CHAPTER 2** 

Farnland, Nation of Lakes

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## **Farnland, Nation of Lakes**

A few days boat ride across several borders, with stops for sightseeing at several ports—and at last, they were near their first real goal.

"We're in Farnland now! Katie's home swift approaches."

On deck, Chela's breath was white, her clothes much warmer. The air was far colder here than in Yelgland, and the shores were covered in snow. Farnland was also known as the Nation of Lakes, and from here, they could see sunlight gleaming on any number of bodies of water—not just the waterways.

Katie took a deep breath, beaming. "Ahh, I missed this air! It's only been three years, but I feel like I've been away for decades..."

"I get that. Time at Kimberly is just that saturated. It ain't just coming home; you're coming back to *life*."

Guy was standing next to her, hands buried in his coat. Then a column of water shot up at the edge of his vision, and a pair of giant wings spread. A dragon taking off from a lake awfully close to the waterway.

"Hrm—"

"A dragon?!"

"Katie, careful!"

"Oh... Right. You guys haven't seen a Farnish lake drake before."

While her friends braced themselves, Katie alone was totally unperturbed. The drake flew past overhead, and the passengers cheered.

"See? They're not your typical dragons. They live right up near human civilizations. Not aggressive, almost never attack land creatures. The government's actually got a conservation program trying to keep the total number from diminishing."

"...Huh. I'd read about them, but...they're still a sight to behold," Oliver said. "That's a village right over there—people live this close to a dragon's lair?"

The village was on the shore, not far off. Chela nodded, agreeing with his sentiment.

"We're both part of the Union, but this is a very different culture than Yelgland. I heard there are demi settlements all over the place."

"Mm, the government's recognized their autonomy, drawn clear lines around them. A number of species not viewed as people elsewhere are granted respect here, so watch yourselves. Outsiders often wind up causing problems."

With that warning, Katie nodded.

"But that's all I'll say now. The rest, you should feel for yourselves."

"—? You sure? I figured once we were on your turf, you'd be talking a mile a minute."

"If I did, your impressions would mold themselves to my words, right? I'd rather you see, touch, and feel for yourselves. Learn what this place is really like." A simple wish—and then a thought occurred to her, and she added, "Oh, one more thing. I'm sure you're aware most of the place is rural. Don't expect the city to be anything like as busy as Lantshire or Daitsch were."

"Ha-ha..."

"That will be far more suited to my tastes," said Nanao.

"Yeah, way more relaxing," Guy added, savoring the scent of greenery and soil.

They'd arrived at the vast land at the north of the Union.

As they disembarked at the harbor, a voice called to them.

"Katie!"

A man and a woman came running over, calling her name. Katie's face lit up.

"Mom! Dad! You came to pick us up?"

They were already in a group hug. The others watched from a respectful distance, smiling. Pete was making observations.

"So those are her parents?"

"First time we've met anyone's parents except for Instructor Theodore," Guy noted. "Kinda heartwarming."

"We're going to be their guests. We should greet them properly," Chela said. "No need to stress it; they'll hardly be as perplexing as *my* father."

Everyone nodded and stepped forward. Katie's mother and father put her back on the ground and turned to face the others. The first of the two parents to speak was a sturdily built man with a well-kept beard.

"And you must be Katie's friends. A pleasure to meet you. I'm Kalervo Aalto. I'm so glad Katie found you."

"Oliver Horn, Kimberly fourth-year. Katie's an endless source of good cheer."

"And an equally significant source of headaches, yes?"

"Mom!"

"Heh-heh, I'm just teasing. Jenna Aalto," the woman said, smiling. "I've read all about you in my daughter's letters. It's nice to put a face your name, Oliver."

Where her husband was well-built, she was slim; her naturally curly hair and the shape of her face definitely resembled Katie's own. Once the others had introduced themselves, Kalervo spoke again.

"I'm afraid this will be far less comfortable than those ships were, but the waterways don't go anywhere near our home. Given what we study, that's an unfortunate necessity."

"I've read enough of your papers to know why," Chela said. "Your firsthand fieldwork studies are all most stimulating, and I frequently lose track of the time pursuing them."

"Thank you, Ms. McFarlane. I'll admit, I never would have imagined we'd be inviting *you* over. Heh-heh, given our history, it's a real surprise. I imagine few Kimberly instructors think much of us."

"Who cares what they say? They're all off their rockers." Guy shrugged.

Kalervo laughed out loud. "Katie's letters certainly did you justice, Guy," he

said. "I see you've got the Greenwoods' big body and big heart."

"Our motto goes, 'The times may change, but good veggies are steadfast.' I brought you some sprint carrots—heard you're both great cooks."

"A welcome gift indeed. What a lovely color. I'll have to think of something to do them justice," Jenna said, taking them from him.

Kalervo clapped his hands together. "We could talk all day, but let's hit the road first. We've readied something big enough to carry Marco, too. Might rock a bit—"

"Sorry!" Katie said, looking grim. "This is gonna be rough."

Everyone gulped.

Not long after, they found themselves on a massive sleigh, skidding across the snow.

"Hngahhhh!"

"Goddamn!"

"Enchanted runners with wind elements circulating above and below, letting it hover. Common practice among mages of yore, I've heard—"

"The idea was left to rot once they paved the roads and made the waterways! Yet in Farnland, it's still alive and well!" Kalervo said, controlling the sleigh with his wand. "Imagine you've traveled to the past, and enjoy the experience."

They were rocketing across roadless snowfields, snaking between the hills and dales. Not merely an uncomfortable ride—it was downright stomach-churning. But exactly the right level of excitement for kids bored from a long ship voyage.



Then Pete spotted an evergreen forest up ahead and yelped, "W-wait, if we go in there—"

"It'll be fine, Pete," Jenna said.

True to her word, just before the sleigh hit the forest, the trees moved aside, and a road opened up. Pete gasped.

"The ordinaries call it a witch's shortcut. If you take the time to forge a bond with the forest, it's not too difficult. Though mages these days are more likely to simply burn a path through."

With that, she glanced around at her daughter's friends.

"...You're all taking this in stride. Most people cling to the sides their first ride. I was expecting we'd have to stop a few times for you to recover..."

"That will not be necessary!"

"We've honed our balance control."

"Though we should keep an eye on Marco..."

Marco was sitting cross-legged at the center, and Chela moved closer to him. Watching them, Jenna nodded to herself.

"R-right... You're all from Kimberly."

The ride was just over two hours, and the sleigh reached their destination shortly before sundown.

"And there it is! Thanks for bearing with us," Kalervo said, slowing the sleigh.

A huge building stood ahead of them. At first glance, it looked like a series of sturdy wooden ranch houses, but on closer inspection, the foundations were rooted in the ground, and portions of it were still in the process of growing new roofs. A living building—in a very different sense than Kimberly itself.

"This is the Aalto residence. Welcome, one and all. Now that you've seen this, you will not leave alive."

"That joke was beaten into the dirt years ago, Kalervo. And we invite ordinaries over all the time."

Everyone got off the sleigh. His curiosity piqued, Pete ran off to get a closer look.

"Such an interesting construct... Is the whole house made of toolplants?"

"It is," Kalervo said, nodding. "No wood was cut to make the house—it's a variation on elf homes. There's a biotope here, too, which isn't as tightly built as the main residence, but it's comfortable enough."

Beside him, Katie smiled, waving her friends along.

"Welcome to my place! Make yourselves at home."

They were first led to the guest room to drop off their things. A large room with basic wooden furniture.

Gazing up at the rafters, Chela whispered, "It's an...odd feeling. Both relaxing and...off, somehow."

"I get that, Chela," Oliver said. "This is far more *open* than other mages' dwellings. Even the way the air flows connects to the outside, the ground below —there's nothing here that feels closed off."

"My very heart relaxes!"

"Same. Feels like home."

"I'll have to get used to it...," Pete said. "Shouldn't take long, though."

At this point, Katie poked her head in.

"Mom and Dad are going crazy in the kitchen! You guys ready to eat?"

Nanao's stomach grumbled loud enough for all of them.

In the dining room, they found the table laden with the Aaltos' home cooking.

"Man, that's good!"

"The broth is so flavorful!"

Guy and Nanao were singing the food's praises already. Oliver and Chela were savoring every bite.

"Less seasonings to bring out the base flavors... So this is Farnish cooking?"

"A fundamentally different approach from Yelgland. This soup could easily

have felt underwhelming, but the power of the ingredients keeps it all in perfect harmony."

"...So warm...," Pete whispered, scooping up another bite of steaming root vegetable soup.

Katie's parents looked relieved by this reception.

"I'm glad you all like it," Kalervo said. "We don't get many imports from the waterways, so our food is mostly grown locally. It's easy to argue the simple flavors are the point, but we weren't too confident that would fly with young palates."

Nanao held out her bowl for more, and Jenna said, "It seems especially popular with the Azian lady, heh-heh. I went to Yamatsu once for research. Perhaps the dried fish stock reminds you of home?"

"I imagine anyone from Yelgland will sympathize, but Farnish food has a reputation as being the worst in the Union," said Kalervo. "We've each long struggled with how to fix that impression..."

"Yes, but for different reasons. The population of Yelgland exploded during the magical industrial revolution, resulting in a lengthy period where food was a secondary consideration. Impressions from that time linger still. While Farnland... I'm speculating based on this experience here, but I'd bet you simply can't reproduce the same flavors with ingredients grown elsewhere."

"Excellent analysis, Oliver. Exactly my own feelings!" Kalervo was getting rather worked up. "You can see for yourselves weren't not using any unusual ingredients, but try making the same dish abroad, and it's never the same. I imagine the approach to agriculture—"

"Dad, enough of that," Katie urged, tugging his sleeve. "Oliver's a good boy, so he'll probably listen to you all night."

"Oh, sorry, Katie. Can't very well rob you of a chance to speak to your friends."

"He is always ready to launch into a discussion," Jenna said. "Feel free to brush him off if he catches you in one of his lectures."

She turned to the biggest guest.

"We've put even less seasonings in your share, Marco. Do you like it?"

"Unh. It's good. Reminds me of the forest."

Marco had been silently working his way through the stewed root vegetables.

Katie started fidgeting. "I can't wait for you to meet Patro! He'll be back tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, and again, sorry," Kalervo said. "He's helping build homes for ordinaries, and they were begging for him to stay so they could finish it tonight. Hard to spurn requests like that."

He waved a wand, chanting a spell. A liquor bottle flew from the shelf, and he caught it with a grin.

"Now we've got something in our stomachs, who fancies a drink? We made this mead ourselves!"

"Urgh, I dunno..." Katie made a face, remembering the first night of their vacation.

"...I'll have some," Oliver said. "I'm sure you've all learned your lesson—but *in moderation*, please."

Three years at Kimberly had left them with no end of things to talk about, and it was well past ten PM before the meal concluded. The Aaltos suggested they turn in for the night, but Katie had one last thing she wanted to do, and the others joined her.

"Teppo! Hely! And Mimmi! I missed youuu!"

The wargs came rushing over when they noticed Katie, delighted to see her. There was grass at their feet but a dome overhead, with lights in the rafters. Oliver could feel life all around them.

"...So this is the famous Aalto biotope? The entrance alone makes the tech convincing."

"Your parents agreed readily, but this is not a place to visit lightly..."

"Oh, don't get all uptight about it, Chela," Katie said, petting the wargs. "My

parents know what parts they can't show you, and I played here all the time growing up. We'll give you a proper tour tomorrow." Seeing her friends peering around avidly, she added, "Kinda like the labyrinth's second layer, right? This biotope isn't built to replicate nature, but to manufacture the ideal environment for the creatures within. Each of them is living in peace. Not without its flaws, but..."

"Yeah, I can tell. This is the home of angels where you were born and raised," Oliver said off-the-cuff, evoking a phrase he'd used with her shortly after they'd started at Kimberly.

Katie buried her face in a warg so that no one could see how red she'd turned. "Um, as for tomorrow's schedule, Mom and Dad have all sorts of plans. If we don't stop them, they'll likely take you along on their fieldwork... Are you up for that?"

"That's allowed?!"

"Then be all means, let's!"

Pete and Chela were champing at the bit.

"I'm up for it, too," Guy said, laughing. "Pete I get, but I never figured *you'd* be this eager, Chela. You read up on their work before we left. Must've really resonated with you."

"It rather did, yes. I've not often had the opportunity to review research done from a pro—civil rights perspective, so that alone was novel, but more than anything, I was blown away by their innovative approaches to each and every subject. I was especially intrigued by their search into demi-human cultures."

"Oh, the treatises on goblin culture? Those were mind-blowing. They've got it that worked out. It seems like a real shame to put the research on the back burner."

"Isn't it? My father's study had the Aaltos' dissertations in it, but given our house's stance, I was not allowed to read them there. This is the perfect chance to make up for lost ground!"

Chela's eyes were positively sparkling, and tears welled up in Katie's own eyes.

"...That's so nice! You care about my parents' research and... Augh, I'm gonna cry!"

"No need for the waterworks." Guy rubbed her head. "Man, Kimberly really kept you in a constant state of stress, huh?"

As their plans for the morrow firmed up, Pete turned to the silent duo.

"Looks like we're following the Aaltos' lead. Teresa, Marco, any objections?"

"None."

"Unh, anywhere's better than that water."

Two affirmative answers, which meant everyone was on board—and at last, they headed to bed.

The next morning, they were just finishing breakfast. Kalervo had taken the sleigh out early and came back with the final member of their family—the one Katie had been dying to see.

"Patroooooooo!"

Katie burst out the door, throwing her arms around him. The others followed, finding themselves face-to-face with a troll noticeably smaller than Marco. Seeing him gently hug Katie back, they approached with smiles.

"Nice to meet you, Patro," said Oliver. "Katie's told us all about you."

"Finally meeting him in the flesh! Totally different build from Marco, huh?" Guy noted.

"Marco is a purebred Gasney, while Patro seems to be primarily Ellney. Not a breed we see often at Kimberly."

"One glance, and you can tell how amiable he is. Think you'll get along, Marco?" Chela asked.

"Unh, not sure. Let's try."

Marco took a step forward, but when Patro heard his voice, the smaller troll flinched.

"Unh...?"

The closer Marco got, the more clearly frightened Patro was. Katie looked puzzled.

"...? What's wrong, Patro? This is Marco, another troll. A friend I made at Kimberly."

She took his hand, but Patro clearly didn't want to get any closer. That left Katie baffled.

"That's weird... He's usually friendly! Is Marco speaking human words that big a shock?"

"Unh, Katie. It's okay. We've got time. Give him space."

Katie was forced to concede the point. For the moment, they parted—but Oliver couldn't shake the way Patro's eyes followed Marco's every move.

After a brief post-breakfast rest, it was time for the official biotope tour. Katie's parents led the way, and everyone stepped though the heavy bulkhead into the interior.

"Where to start was a tough question, but...we settled on this."

They were shown to a room near the center of the transparent dome. Peering inside, they found the top of a large tank set in the ground below. Swimming about beneath the surface were creatures anyone would recognize—the same species of lake drake seen on their arrival in Farnland.

"Studying the life cycle of the lake drake has long been an Aalto family duty. You cannot speak of Farnland history without mentioning them. They pay no heed to human civilization in their territory, yet do fierce battle with any larger beasts that encroach upon it. They're very much our guardians."

Kalervo spoke in detail about how lake drakes and people coexisted. Dragons were known for razing towns to the ground, but here in Farnland, they were known for the opposite—for protecting human settlements. Not that the lake drakes intended to do that—it was more accurate to say that humans had simply fit neatly into their natural ecosystem. Fortunately, the lake drakes themselves showed no real aggression toward humans.

"But the start of the magical industrial revolution placed the species in

danger. Building the waterways required the removal of a number of lakes. Some radicals went so far as to suggest exterminating them, and that was actually carried out in other countries. Everyone got a bit carried away by the sweeping changes in their lives, I suppose."

Jenna sighed. It was all too easy for the others to imagine how that happened. The swelling population destroyed the balance that had made coexistence work; people craving further development began seeing their guardians as obstacles.

"It was our Aalto ancestors who put a stop to that. They came up with hard numbers proving that prioritizing efficiency in waterway construction would negatively impact the environment, and exactly how that would harm people's lives. The more you know about lake drakes' lives, the more clearly such choices would be self-destructive. And nobody wanted to steer the country on a course straight to our doom."

Kalervo sounded proud of this. Lake drakes were apex predators—the environmental impact of their loss would be immeasurable. Their predecessors had made that impact as visible as possible, talking down those urging rapid development.

"As a result, the Aaltos' reputation has been historically quite high within Farnland. Once, we even had some say throughout the Union... Those days are long gone, though."

"Don't beat yourself up here, Kalervo," Jenna urged. "It'll make the children uncomfortable."

Seeing a cloud on Katie's features, Oliver changed the subject.

"... What is that lake drake eating? They look like ordinary fish, but..."

"You've got a keen eye. Right, they're mock life-forms cultured with magic. We use them as feed not just here, but all over the biotope. Can't exactly call them cost-efficient, mind."

Pointing at the drake's meal, Kalervo explained further. Created via application of automata techniques, they were essentially puppets made of flesh in the shape of a fish, programmed to swim around. Technology proposed

to help feed captive creatures with an unstable food supply, Oliver had heard of nowhere else using them on *dragons*. Another glimpse of how advanced the Aaltos were.

"Ecological preservation—like these lake drakes—is an important duty, but not the true nature of Aalto sorcery. What we'll show you next should make that clear."

They turned and walked away. The Sword Roses followed, leaving the lake drake tank behind.

The next zone had an entirely different surprise.

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"...Gosh..."
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"...How...?"

The sight beyond that clear wall left them speechless.

"Spotted it right away?" Jenna said, smiling. "I didn't even need to explain! Impressive."

"I can't believe it!" Chela cried, eyes wide open. "A griffin and a hippogriff, sharing space in harmony?"

Standing next to her, Oliver was every bit as stunned. These were similar species, but the sight of them lying peacefully next to each other—anyone who knew their magical biology would notice how outlandish that was.

Griffins and hippogriffs might have shared several external features, but in the wild, they were infamous for being at each other's throats. They preferred similar habitats, so their territories often overlapped, and neither seemed willing to tolerate the other's presence. Their battles raged until the territory decisively belonged to one species or the other. As a result, the magic world used "griffins lying down with hippogriffs" as an idiomatic expression of a pipe dream.

"It's only recently we figured out the cause of their disputes," said Jenna. "Once, we believed both species were descended from a common ancestor, but analysis of fossils from their terrains suggests their roots are entirely distinct. You're aware of the concept of convergent evolution?"

"Yes, that's where two seemingly unrelated species facing similar challenges wind up developing similar characteristics."

"Exactly, Pete. In other words, the species aren't relatives, but strangers who merely look alike. We believe their instinctive repulsion stems from that. You're aware that if we artificially crossbreed the two species, the resulting grigriff have no reproductive capabilities? That means if they mistake each other for comrades, it will impact their progeny."

"I'm with you so far. In that case, how are they coexisting here?" Oliver asked. The obvious question.

Kalervo folded his arms, grinning. "We intentionally diminished the suitability of the habitat. Specifically, the nourishment and magic particles here—they're enough to live on, but not suitable for reproduction. Like we just said, their enmity is directly connected to the reproductive instinct. In an environment ill-suited for that, we've learned the repulsion is nowhere near as strong. Thus, that was the cause of the ferocity of their terrain disputes."

An unexpected angle of approach that left everyone reeling. Kalervo turned to face them.

"As this experiment suggests, the Aaltos are not naturists. Where necessary, we will preach environmental protection, but only because that is an effective means of achieving the intended goal. Fundamentally, the environment is always in flux. All creatures we know have evolved by adapting to those changes, and few things are more unnatural than unconditional surrender to nature itself. And...we are mages."

This was frequently misunderstood, and he wanted to ensure his daughter's friends were clear on this point.

"What the Aaltos have long sought are biological ideals that could not be achieved by a mere extension of the natural order. If we have to put a word to it, I'd call us post-realists. At least, that was the case. We're no longer walking that path."

A bit of self-deprecation in his tone—and no one here felt ready to pry into the cause.

The day after that, thanks to Chela's profound desire, the Aaltos agreed to show them their fieldwork at a nearby goblin settlement.

"This is the last thing I expected to catch your interest," Kalervo admitted.

He was in the driver's seat, moving the sleigh along.

"Kimberly itself believes in freedom above all else, so both your papers are available in the library," Oliver explained. "It sounds like Instructor Theodore reads them avidly."

"Lord McFarlane himself... It's an honor but also rather unnerving. I've met the man at a few conferences, and the depths of him are impossible to fathom \_\_"

"Kalervo!"

"Oops, pardon me. Not something to say before his daughter."

"Oh, don't mind me." Chela was half smiling. "I share much the same opinion."

Oliver was equally disinclined to rebuke the man. Too much about Theodore was a murky morass, starting with his motivations for bringing Nanao to Kimberly. Even among the faculty, Oliver saw him as aligned with the powers that be.

As he pondered that, the sleigh slowed to a stop. They left it behind, moving on foot through the forest.

"We're almost at the settlement. The goblins here are used to humans, and there's no need for concern, but let's keep our athames inside our robes. Don't want to frighten them," Kalervo advised.

"Of course," said Oliver. "It would never do to flaunt our weapons on arrival."

"Manners maketh man!" Nanao proclaimed.

The others nodded. Seeing everyone in the right frame of mind, Jenna put up both hands, whistling through her fingers. It sounded exactly like the warbling of a bird.

"Imitating a bird cry to announce your visit!" Chela said. "I saw that in your

papers!"

"Yes, their settlements are so often hidden away. There are many variations in these whistles, and using the wrong one could get you in trouble. Copy a bird of prey, and you'll be announcing an attack."

"Still far better than elf villages, yes?"

"Saving me the need to bring up a touchy subject? If it won't bother you, I'll share the stories of our failures there later on."

Chela had clearly done her homework and was making Jenna wince.

At this point, the brush rustled, and a goblin popped out. The newcomer came walking right up to them, not looking the least bit cautious. Kalervo grinned.

"Ah, you're on guard duty, Caffia? Ha-ha, you heard we were coming and arranged your shifts?"

"Such a sweetheart, can't get enough of new things. Katie, hand Caffia the gift bag."

"Okay!"

Katie handed over a wrapped parcel. Caffia took it and opened it on the spot, inspecting the contents. Everyone peered in.

"Salted fish, vegetables, tea leaves...and what's that?"

"A brooch purchased in a human village. Normal stuff for sale at a gift shop."

"They like that sort of thing? Not exactly practical."

"No, Caffia *loves* it," Pete said, eyes on the goblin, who was grinning like crazy, poring over the brooch from every angle.

"They're good with their hands and love art," Kalervo said. "Always eager to get new sources of inspiration for their own creations. They'd actually resent it if we just brought food. It would imply we thought their village didn't have enough to eat."

"Ah, I see..." Oliver nodded.

Forest-dwelling demi-humans were often seen as struggling to get by, but this

was just an unconscious bias.

When Caffia was done inspecting the gifts, the goblin picked them up and headed off.

"Permission to enter," Jenna said, smiling at the others. "Move slowly, taking small steps. Smiles are vital, but there's a trick to it—make sure you show your teeth."

"Oh? Our teeth?"

"What an interesting custom."

"They say 'lips harbor lies.' Goblins do not trust anyone whose mouth is closed. Exposed teeth are ideal—I'd suggest feeling like you must be overdoing it."

"Like so?"

"How's this?"

Nanao and Guy flashed their pearly whites, and Jenna giggled, nodding.

Chela turned to their big friend, worried.

"Will you be okay, Marco? I imagine goblin villages are rather narrow."

"Ha-ha, they'll worry less about him than humans. This village doesn't have any, but it's pretty common for goblins and trolls to live together. They've even got a path for bigger visitors, don't worry."

As Kalervo spoke, they passed through the thicket, and the view opened up.

"...Wow..."

"...Whoa...!"

Huts of various colors and shapes built right up on top of each other, all in a row. They were huts only by human scale—for a species small of stature, they were more than spacious enough. Especially notable was the variety of design and the freedom of expression that invoked. Terraces jutting so far out of the second floor, they seemed liable to topple the building—and that was just the beginning. On the other extreme, there was a house suspended between columns like a swing. Yet the finish and decorative flourishes were all

impeccable, employing craftsmanship far beyond anything they could dismiss as children at play. If the architectural end wasn't sound, half of these wouldn't stand upright for long.

"Cutting-edge designs, yes?" said Kalervo. "Our regular visits have made things a touch gaudier, but every village is full of distinctive designs. They make art a part of their everyday lives. If you tried writing an introduction to goblin architecture, you'd never have enough paper."

"It may look chaotic, but it's not without order," added Jenna. "They simply hate to be confined by a single format. They always build something different from the house next door and alter it over time. That three-story building was a ranch house not long ago."

"...Um, doesn't this go through a lot of wood?" asked Chela. "I see some are using iron and mortar, too. Seems like they must be burning through resources..."

"Unlike elves, that is certainly a constant headache for them," replied Kalervo. "Do you know what humans and goblins first fought over? Lumber."

As they were talking, goblins gathered around.

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"~~~~?"
"~~~~!"
"Whoa...!"
"Hrm?"
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"Ah, they're already talking to you. Michela's hair has caught their attention. They want to know how you've wound it so neatly," Kalervo told Chela.

"Oh, my ringlets? I see their hairstyles are equally varied. City goblins are so often merely shaved..."

"That's what humans demand of them. Shaving their heads has been imprinted as a sign of submission to humans. The practice started because of the bogeys, but...we'll explain more later."

Jenna cut herself off, watching Pete. He was straining his ears, trying to turn what he'd read in books into comprehension of the goblins' chatter. It wasn't

going well, and he groaned.

"Hard to pick out words, right?" Kalervo said. "Don't worry, everyone struggles at first. Until our predecessors proved otherwise, mages did not even believe goblins *had* language. Arguably, that was also because that lie suited the conservatives' purposes, but...the other half lies in the fact that we just can't hear it."

"I'm sure you've read as much, but the aural range employed itself is different. It's even easier to get wrong since there are parts we *can* hear—but more than half of what they say is outside the range detectable by human ears. Mages can train themselves to pick it up, but..."

"Unh, I can catch some," Marco volunteered.

Perhaps he'd had some communication with goblins when he lived in the forest; he certainly seemed to be having an easier time than the others. The goblins were being quite friendly with him. Trolls often worked closely with goblins, so he must have seemed like a good neighbor.

"If you indoctrinate them like city goblins, they can manage a few human words. But to them, it's like speaking with only half their throat. The chief here has managed it, but I'd rather not force him to. I won't deny the necessity of a common tongue, but we're the visitors here—"

"Yo, Aalto. Quite a hubbub. Who's these kids, then?"

A new goblin emerged from the back of the settlement. The way his hair swooped out in front was striking, but what really rattled everyone was the sheer fluency with which he spoke. The timing of his arrival totally undermined Kalervo, who sighed.

"...Impressive fluency, chief, but did you have to speak there? I was just trying to teach them to respect your language."

"Ha! What good's that do anyone? I can speak, so let me. Not like you show any knack for goblinese. You been at it for years, and you ain't getting better."

"Hnggggg...!"

Kalervo gnashed his teeth. Seeing the kids still reeling, Jenna mustered a

smile.

"Spectacular timing, so let me introduce you. This is Morlik, the chief here. Presumably one of the top-ten best goblin speakers of human language in all the world. And he's trilingual."

"You're kidding..."

"That's not even Farnish. That's totally normal Yelglish..."

"You gotta start with the majority language, right? I'm working on Lantish now. Same linguistic root ain't much tougher than a dialect. Won't take me long." Morlik thumped his chest, then looked grave. "But I'm real smart. Exceptional-like. Don't expect this from any of the others. You don't get used to squeezing down your throat; it's pretty painful. Even motivated young 'uns throw in the towel quick."

With that, Oliver got the introductions started. Morlik shook each hand, as per human custom, then looked up at Marco.

"I heard you were in the same boat, huh? You the troll who got your brain messed with?"

"Unh, I'm not as good as you. But I can speak Yelglish."

Morlik let out an extra-long sigh. "That obviously ain't something you get through hard work, no... Must've been rough on you."

He patted Marco's knee, then spun around and walked away.

"If we're gonna talk, let's eat while we do. I wanna celebrate! The big man there, and these kids, too."

Katie blinked, then looked at her mother. "Mom...did you—?"

"Indeed I did. We're not just here for your benefit—we want to ask the chief about Marco's future."

"So! What's the crux of this whole civil rights thing?"

They were sharing a meal with Morlik in a hut built for receiving company—and therefore even more eye-catching. The building was shaped like a basket and painted bright blue, but the variety of food on offer was an even bigger

surprise. Pickles, fried food, even dessert (fruit salad in gelatin). Originally, goblin diets had been much more basic, so this was presumably the result of their curious minds assimilating human cultures.

As they ate, the topic Morlik brought up was one all too often treated in the abstract. Trying not to let this string of surprises throw him, Oliver did his best to keep up.

"Historically speaking, the movement for goblin rights predates trolls by quite a bit," Morlik added. "We were good with our hands, didn't have too much trouble communicating, and there was the odd exception like myself. If the politics had blown right, we might've got them right there and then. Problem was, there was this huge impediment."

"... Those who've lost their way?" Oliver said, picking the phrase carefully.

"Watching your manners, kiddo? Exactly right. You call 'em the bogeys. But they're just goblins that picked the path of violence. Even now, your average joe probably lumps us all together, right? And trying to convince people they're 'safe' leads our poor city brethren to shave their heads."

He stroked his own hairdo proudly. *Bogey* was not a biological term like *goblin* or *troll*; it was simply slang derived from the need to distinguish goblins that did people harm from those that didn't. The goblins themselves had thoughts on the subject but had chosen to refer to them as "those who've lost their way." Naturally, the original expression was in their own language, and this was simply the generally accepted translation.

"Human eyes can't tell the difference between our fancy 'dos and the lost ones' wild manes, apparently. Can't really blame 'em, though. The difference between us ain't much more than you humans with your hunters and your gatherers."

"I wouldn't say that," Oliver replied. "Regional disparities aside, your lifestyles were never based on invasion. I've heard goblins didn't try sustaining themselves by attacking people and livestock until the last thousand years or so. And that this shift was simply an adaption to competition with the human race."

All things his mother once taught him. Morlik smiled.

"You are one serious kid! Not just what you're saying—it's fascinating how you ain't let any wariness into your eyes. That's something that don't go away easy, whether you're pro-rights or not."

His eyes flicked to Guy, who made a noise. Morlik flashed him a smile, then turned back to Oliver.

"You must have been raised by some odd ducks. But at your age, you shouldn't have eyes that run that deep."

The chief seemed to be looking right through him, and it intimidated Oliver. Perhaps picking up on that, too, Morlik looked over at Nanao, who'd remained silent.

"Katie's her own deal. Same with the Azian lady here. Honestly, your eyes are so clear, it's downright spooky! What do you even make of me?"

"You are a gentleman of small stature with a sizable snout. Possessed of an intellect I could not hope to match. And I might add that your hairstyle is the epitome of *cool*."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! That's more like it! You've got a keen eye."

Her response had clearly caught him off guard and tickled his funny bone.

Guy put aside his shame and admitted, "Yeah...I can't quite shake that wariness."

"No big whoop. I can tell you're trying to keep it in check, and that alone says you're a broad-minded kid. Look, if you got no caution at all your first visit here, that's a way bigger problem. Katie may be an exception, but the boy and your Azian girl aren't without it. That ain't about human or goblin; it's just part of being alive."

Morlik let that settle in for a moment, stroking his chin.

"Maybe the framing's misleading. This is more about yer preconceptions. These two look at me the way they would anyone they'd just met, and that feels pretty good. Right, Oliver, Nanao?"

He shot them a smile, then turned back to Marco.

"Let's get back on track. My point is, there ain't no clear rationale for grantin'

civil rights. If language did the trick, we'd have 'em by now. That weren't enough for goblins. Those who've lost their way made a negative impression that far outweighed that. We've been racking our brains, but all we can really do is keep on meeting with different folks and try to convince them we ain't like them."

"...Forgive my ignorance, but is reconciliation impossible?"

"'Fraid so. They're scrambling to stay alive while we were lucky enough to get ourselves on this national conservation deal. Too big a difference. Calling out to them from safety ain't gonna resonate. We see some hovering over the line, sure, we'll try and talk sense into 'em, but..."

Morlik shrugged and went back to Marco.

"But trolls are a whole different story. Your breed kill a fair number of people every year, but only when human expansion clashes with your lives. You're never aggressive about it. So—if you can talk, that'll be more of an advantage than it was for us."

"...You've put so much thought into this, chief!" Katie said, beaming with gratitude.

Morlik took a gulp of wine. "What else am I gonna do if you bring him here, Katie? But if I'm being brutal, language alone won't be the decisive factor. Only troll that can talk right now is your Marco. You haul him this way and that to do lectures, he'll just go down as an exception. That'll make an impact to be sure; can't say it won't do no good."

A very pragmatic stance, and Katie crossed her arms.

"If you're serious about it, you'll wanna up that number," Morlik went on. "If his brain's been messed with, you've got a fair idea how to reproduce it, right? That makes it simple. Get a hundred like him and the winds'll change."

"Absolutely not!" Katie snapped.

Morlik nodded and shrugged. "Yeah, yeah, that's how you think. At the risk of you turning on me—I don't believe you should rule it out," he said. "I mean, all creatures gotta change to survive. That's why we're out here talking like humans, and that's why those who lost their way discarded their way of life.

Survival strategies, both of 'em. Just a question of what means you pick."

He was so matter-of-fact about it, it left Oliver blinking. He'd never imagined he'd hear a goblin talk like this.

"If 'get yer brain messed with' is on the table, I ain't gonna be the one to rule it out. If that's the only thing stopping extinction, I'd say it's downright unnatural to reject the notion. And I ain't suggest you force this on anyone. You look hard enough, I bet you find some trolls that gotta act now or the humans'll wipe 'em out. Take Marco around places like that, have him explain."

"Urge them to hand themselves over to a mage for brain surgery?" Oliver asked, looking tense.

"I sure wouldn't wanna," Morlik said, sighing. "But if their backs are against the wall, some folk'll agree to anything. Get enough of them, you might change things. That's one path to survival of the troll species. Divide them into talking trolls and silent trolls—just like we did goblins and bogeys."

At this point, he turned to Marco.

"This is just *one* way of thinking," he stressed. "That's all I'm trying to say, no more, no less. Just trying to broaden your perspective, I guess. I'm sure girlie here's teaching you all kinds of stuff, but I bet you ain't heard from anyone else considered less than human before, right? Figured it couldn't hurt to rock your foundations. Even if that meant saying something girlie here never would."

"...Unh..."

Marco didn't seem sure how to respond to this, and Morlik nodded knowingly.

"Your head looks ready to pop! But, Marco...remember this much: You stand ready to put the fate of your species on your shoulders. The choices you make might alter the very future of trolls everywhere. You're standing at a crossroads just that significant." Then he added, "Naturally, you don't *gotta* carry that weight. You can drop all that crap and just live out your life as a mite unusual troll. You even got the option of forgetting all these words and going back to the forest, living like a regular one. I bet you girlie here's plotting just that, right?"

Katie hung her head. Morlik let Marco think a minute before continuing.

"But you can also steer things the other way. The choice is *yours*. Don't leave this on Katie. Your burden is your own."

As the meal wound down, so did the topic of Marco's future. They split up to explore the town on their own. Watching his friends enjoying their time with the goblins, Oliver hung out on the edge of the settlement.

"Didn't mean to bend your ears that long. Ain't exactly my thing," Morlik said, coming up behind him.

"No need for modesty," Oliver replied. "Your wisdom really got to me. You realized what it meant to shoulder the future of your species long before Marco even got like this."

"Ha-ha, it ain't all that. I'm pretty bright, sure, but it ain't that hard to find folks like me. I'm working with several. Our side's able to split the burden."

Morlik shot Katie and Marco a loaded look.

Oliver thought for a moment, then asked something he'd been wondering about for a while.

"I'm glad you're considering Marco's well-being, but are you sure about this? The process for altering a troll's brain may wind up applied to goblins one day. That'll affect your brethren put to work in human settlements. I'm sure you can imagine the consequences."

"If that happens, I got no way to stop it. The girlie wouldn't pop open Marco's skull and muck about of her own accord. It's another mage that knows how—which means the technique is already out there. You *know* what I said is based on that assumption, right?"

An accurate statement, and Oliver hung his head. Like the chief said, it was Miligan's research that had made Marco like this, and she'd already reported her results to the school. Darius had been financing her research before his death, and his goal had been to apply the results to elevating human intelligence—which meant they could not rule out it being applied to other demis.

"No matter how much one goblin fights it, mages rule the world. All we can do is make moves to improve our standing within their control. Barring that, all we got left is to cling to a god from some tir or other. And that's the last thing I wanna do. Know too many brethren got themselves killed going there."

Morlik spoke with both resignation and determination. Oliver could think of nothing else to say.

"Naturally, I ain't about to give up on letting goblins live their own lives. Just—at the same time, if it means we survive, there's a lot I'm willing to sacrifice."

With that, he turned back his collar. When Oliver saw what that cloth had hidden, his eyes went wide. Those scars made it clear his throat had been cut open and stitched back up.

"...You mean...!"

"Had 'em take a scalpel to my throat so I could talk human better. Goblin vocal chords just don't let you get this fluent. I've basically had whole chunks of the range humans can't hear removed. We've known there was a need for a while."

He hid the scar again with a sad smile.

"You only heard me speak human, right? Truth is, my goblinese's no longer worth listening to. Villagers gotta make me repeat myself pretty often. Not so bad we can't hold down a conversation or anything, so I don't regret the choice, but..."

Morlik trailed off, eyeing the Aaltos.

"Those bleeding hearts started learning goblinese so they could talk to us better. Would feel bad showing them what I did. I'm sure I'll get caught out sooner or later...but let's make that later. Mum's the word, Oliver."

"...On my honor."

Oliver bobbed his head earnestly.

Morlik cackled and slapped him on the back. "You sure are a stiff one! Just chalk it up as goblin prattling, and don't worry your head about it."

That left Oliver without a good response.

"You got your own burden," Morlik added. "I can tell just looking at you. So I ain't gonna ask you to look after the girlie or Marco. Not after I just advised against dumping a burden on someone else. Just—be with them as long as you can. If possible, until they've found their own paths. And watch to see they don't go down a bad one."

Oliver nodded once more. With that answer received, Morlik grinned and turned to face him.

"Come again, Oliver. I'll read you some Lantish poetry."

"Looking forward to it."

They shook hands. The feel of his first goblin friend's palm was rough but very warm.

Their tour concluded, they got back on the sleigh to head home. There was little chatter—everyone was letting the impact of what they'd seen settle in.

"... A simply astonishing experience," Chela breathed.

"Heh-heh, isn't it?" Jenna said. "The chief is an edge case, but the more we study, the more surprises we find. I've lost track of how many times our mindset was upended."

Her voice took on a wistful tone.

"Would that we could show that village to every mage. I'd especially like the young ones to learn what the goblin species is really like. Neither those eking out a living in the cities nor those attacking en masse are what they were *meant* to be. I won't ask anyone to like them—just know the truth before they make up their minds."

As they spoke, the sun set. A silent night above the snowfields.

When they reached the Aalto home and got off the sleigh, Marco said, "Katie, I want to think on my own awhile."

"Marco... Mm, okay. Call me if you get lonely! I'll come running, no matter how late it is."

"I'll be up late tonight, too."

"Thanks, Katie, Teresa. Don't worry. I'm fine."

Marco shot them a smile, then turned and walked inside.

"He's all hunched over," Guy muttered. "I bet he found this more shocking than any of us."

"Yeah, his first time meeting anyone in the same position. I honestly can't imagine how much that shook him."

Worried about their big friend, they headed inside themselves. Guy and Katie lingered behind.

"...It's not just Marco, though," Guy said. "I feel the same way."

"Huh?" Katie blinked at him, taken aback.

Guy hugged himself, elaborating. "There's lots you and Oliver got that I don't. I never really figured out where the real difference was... Might've caught a glimpse today, though."

"Wh-what? You mean what the chief said? Don't! This was your first time meeting goblins, Guy! Spend more time with them, and your preconceptions will go away on their own."

"Yeah, I bet we could be friends. That ain't my point." Guy shook his head. He thought for a moment, getting the words in order. "It's like...a perception gap. You're all seeing a way bigger picture than me. The goblins are part of that, which is why you could talk to the chief all normal. That's the difference. My world expanded today—but until now, goblins just weren't a part of it."

With that laid out, he turned to face Katie.

"You and Oliver started on the same scale. Just your whole worldviews. They might not align—but they're equally expansive. I think that's what drew you to him. You knew instinctively he was *like you*."

"....!"

Unable to deny it, Katie chose silence.

"I can tell," Guy said, his gaze turned inward. "My view's just not that big. That's my limitation, I guess. I know you were born the way you are, Katie. But

was Oliver? Was he always like this? I find that hard to believe. I bet he didn't start out much different from me. A normal kid who liked making people laugh—and then something went wrong. Shattered his framework, rebuilt it in a whole new shape..."

He trailed off into his thoughts. Unable to bear it, Katie threw her arms around him.

"Mm? Where'd that come from?" Guy asked.

"I don't know...! But I felt like if I didn't, you'd go away somewhere..."

She had no idea where this wave of panic came from. Guy managed a grin and mussed her hair.

"That's my line. I ain't going anywhere," he told her. "Other way around. I'm always wondering how I can keep you all tethered down."

He was looking her right in the eye. She was still searching for a response when he turned away.

"Gah, this just ain't me... I'm gonna go soak in the breeze a bit."

"Ah-"

She reached out a hand to his retreating back, but his next words stopped her.

"It's your home, Katie. Take advantage of it; get your feelings in line. Don't keep running to me."

Words as kind as they were harsh, and they hit her right in the heart.

She thought he'd nailed it.

On her own, no clue what to say to him, Katie found herself wandering the halls of her home.

*"…"* 

She hadn't needed it spelled out to know—things were messed up. She had no reins on her feelings for Oliver and was just using Guy as an outlet for those frustrations. She'd been conscious of that for a while, but Oliver and Nanao were getting much more intimate, and that had sent her mess into overdrive.

Cuddling up with someone she felt safe with helped her settle down—like she was a kid again.

"...Ugh."

Katie wished this was as simple as feeling jealous of the boy she liked and a close friend.

But she knew better. What lay within her was nothing so adorable.

"Ah..."

As she wrestled with this, she found the cause of it before her. Oliver was standing at the window, gazing mournfully at the night sky. Katie's heart skipped a beat; she longed to abandon thought and throw her arms around him.

She waffled for several seconds, then stepped forward.

This required *courage*.

"Oliver, can we talk?"

"Sure. What's on your mind, Katie?"

Oliver turned to face her. The curly-haired girl stood there, her bright smile tinged with nerves.

"So many stars, right? I thought this was what the night sky looked like everywhere and was shocked when I first got to Kimberly."

"I imagine you would, raised under this splendor."

Oliver nodded, meaning every word. Katie stepped up next to him, looking at the view herself.

"Yeah—and it also made me homesick. Really proved how far from home I'd come."

She closed her eyes, remembering how that felt. Oliver waited this out, listening for what came next. He knew she was here to talk about something important.

"It really helped that I had Marco and Nanao to worry about. Someone worse off than me, someone who'd come from even farther away. I filled my head

with them and kept myself from crying."

Her eyes turned from the stars to the boy beside her.

"...You were thinking about Mr. Leik, right?"

She heard Oliver choke up and turned her eyes back to the stars glittering above.

"He liked the stars. He'd have loved coming here."

"...Yeah, he'd have run wild," Oliver managed, stifling the tremor in his voice.

Yuri was officially "missing," and Katie didn't know what had really happened to him. But Kimberly students walked hand in hand with death and grew instincts for these things. Katie knew: He would not return.

For a while, both stood in silence. At last, she whispered, "That's where you are now."

"Huh?"

He wasn't sure what that meant. Katie locked eyes with him.

"Mr. Leik. Nanao. Teresa. Your head's full of other people. And I bet it's not just them."

He had no answer. Katie flashed a smile and looked back at the stars.

"I'm the same. So being home like this—it's the first time I've thought about myself."

*"…"* 

"We're not real good at that. There's a limit to our mental resources, and in order to pack more stuff in there, we dump ourselves out first. Pain, suffering, torment—if it's ours, we can just ignore it."

That really hit him where it hurt. A move he'd pulled far too often, yet still he had the nerve to urge his friends to love themselves. A contradiction he was all too aware of.

"That's not our best feature, and yet it isn't something we can ever change," Katie said. "There are too many other things that matter, and we don't have time to put ourselves first. We have to invent *reasons* to take care of ourselves

at all. Like, 'I have to rest here, or it'll hurt someone I care about.""

That thought was so familiar, it made his head spin. He wanted to yowl with grief and loathing—rather than admit she had the same sickness he did.

"Yeah," he said, forcing it out, unable to refute it. "We've got that in common."

Katie's smile was as bright as his heart wasn't.

"Thanks, Oliver. Meeting you saved me."

The gratitude she voiced struck him as all too ironic.

"Sorry to make it weird. But I wanted to say it aloud. If I can get that out..."

She clutched her hands to her chest, downcast. Like everything else she meant was contained within it.

"Nope, that's all," she said. "Dinner's almost ready. I'll go on ahead."

She spun around and ran off down the hall. Oliver couldn't even watch her go.

He was left standing there, his fists balled up tight.

That night, his companions long since asleep, Oliver could not manage the same. Not after what Katie had said.

Kalervo found him, a bottle in hand—as if he'd been waiting for this.

"Care to join me, Oliver?"



"Yes, I'd be happy to."

He'd had a hunch. He followed Kalervo to the lounge, where Jenna was waiting at the table.

"I know it's late. We debated it, but you're the heart of this group. Right?"

"Hard to call myself that, but...I can at least represent them and listen," Oliver said.

Taking that as evidence he knew what this was about, Kalervo nodded.

"Fair enough. We should probably have done this with everyone present, but it felt like throwing a wet blanket on a fun vacation. Consider this an off-therecord discussion just between the three of us."

He broke off, and Jenna spoke up.

"Let's start with this—Katie. In your eyes, how close to the brink is she?"

Oliver took a long moment. After considering it, he decided not to mince words.

"Extremely close. We've had several interventions on the subject already."

Silence settled over the room. One eye on their faces, he elaborated.

"There was a lot she said that was beyond our understanding. But being here, seeing where she grew up—I feel like several pieces fell into place. Like I see where her soul is headed."

He broke off, staring at her parents.

"Yeah." Kalervo nodded. "The dream that we cast aside. The Aalto spell that we deemed unobtainable."

The pain was evident on his face.

"We never meant to put this on her. We brought her up here with love, but I swear to you, we did not mean to indoctrinate her. She was born with that inside her. An ironic twist of fate."

He sighed.

"Oliver," Jenna began quietly. "How much do you know about the Aaltos'

"...What all the world knows. In other words..."

He opened and closed his mouth a few times, searching for a better turn of phrase, but none existed. He steeled himself and said it aloud.

"...You spread a gnosis, and the outcome cost many a life."

"That's the sum of it." Jenna nodded. "But let us tell you the story ourselves."

A wave of a wand will bake no bread. An old saying.

Naturally, apply alchemic principles, and you can make something rather like bread. That is not the point of the proverb—what matters here is that *ordinary* bodies cannot process things directly manufactured with magic.

For the same reason, potions have extremely limited uses for anyone but mages. When healing the nonmagical with spells, the best one can do is give their natural healing abilities a gentle push. To a mage's eyes, ordinary people are highly delicate creatures.

But mages have a very good reason to keep ordinaries safe. Namely: The total number of mages was *directly proportional* to the ordinary population. This fixed ratio made it impossible for anyone to harbor aspirations of turning the entirety of humanity into mages.

If you wanted more mages—you needed more ordinaries. That required sustaining them, but bread made with wands would not keep them fed. They were forced to rely on farms and livestock free of magical influence—and that ran up against the labor-supply problem. Ordinaries working to feed ordinaries alone was no different from ancient times and *so* inefficient.

Mages wondered if there was a work force that was easier to control. Dexterous enough, capable of minimal communication, and which no one would mind if you worked them too hard.

The answer was right in front of them: Of course! Like humans yet *not*.

The magical industrial revolution began with the enslavement of demihumans.

The earliest signs of this worried the Aaltos. This method had consequences.

It was not merely an emotional repulsion. Following this approach to its extreme would leave them with an enslaved demi population that outnumbered the humans—oppressive overwork would fuel rebellion, and the Gnostic threat would pour fuel on that fire. They feared the risk of collapse was too great to make it a sustainable societal model.

But arguing the risks alone was hardly convincing. They needed an alternative. A means to feed the ordinaries without all those slaves.

They turned to the impossible. To wand-made bread—to life-free sustenance.

Their research remained at an impasse for generations. They produced many side products—including the mock feed for magic beasts—but had yet to find any means that would cure the root problem. No matter what they did, they could not keep ordinaries fed.

At times they compromised, working on more efficient crops and livestock. But these soon faced the same concerns. Like foods created with magic, consuming creatures altered with it also had a debilitating effect on ordinaries' health. Their greatest successes came through slow and steady breed refinement, no magic employed—ironically, the Aaltos achieved great things in that field. They took no pride in this; one eye always on the acceleration of the magical industrial revolution, their fears of its outcome only grew.

The impasse finally ended in Kalervo and Jenna's time. After countless trials and innumerable errors, they finally found it. The wand-made bread. A magical product ordinaries could digest without harm. A material that flew against the rules of the world—and they failed to see the trap it contained.

"You're familiar with the food-chain pyramid? The higher you go, the fewer their numbers. Magical ecosystems have alternate patterns, but it doesn't hurt to assume they share the same trends," Jenna explained. "During one fieldwork expedition, we found a place that contradicted that. By which I mean—carnivores far outnumbered herbivores. Yet none of them were starving or fighting among themselves. It felt like a dream come true."

She hung her head, her tone registering infinite regret.

"What do you think they ate? Dirt. Turned up the humus, and the entire area was blanketed in a strange yellowish soil. If the animals grew hungry, they dug a

bit—and ate that. All creatures, magical or otherwise."

"…"

"Dubious, right? Exactly what we thought. But...we couldn't let it go. We were just that alarmed by the state of the world. We had to do *something* before we hit the point of no return. And I'm sure our pride as representatives of the civil rights movement was also a factor."

Oliver listened in silence, saying nothing.

"We took a sample back with us," Jenna rasped. "It was all so smooth. We investigated the soil from every angle and found no evidence that it was harmful. The nutritional properties were astounding, downright unnatural. We hypothesized it was the creation of an unknown elemental and published our research..."

"It's a sad excuse now, but tir origins were among the first possibilities we considered," said Kalervo. "And yet—it's very tough to *tell*. Regular migrations have long influenced our world, and the existing ecosystems have often absorbed them successfully. Once they adapt to this world, it's hard to tell where they originated—and just because it's from a tir doesn't necessarily mean it's harmful."

"We were acutely aware of the need for caution. That's why we turned to the world at large. We wanted more mages to look into it from far more perspectives. For years after our initial publication, there was not one report of harm. We were running through every type of animal experiment ourselves when..."

Jenna broke off, and Kalervo took over.

"Horrifying news reached us. A group of ordinaries and demis who'd eaten the soil had turned violent."

"...You were already doing widespread human experimentation?"

"No—we allowed no such thing. But the more samples got out, the harder they were to contain. The soil was a tír trap from the very beginning. If the soil was out there on its own, mages would swiftly confiscate it. But if it came approved by experts, then it could spread so much farther. The incident occurred one step before that stage—but the casualties were still significant. Someone had to take the fall," Jenna whispered, closing her eyes.

"...We lost our standing and voice in the Union," Kalervo said, sounding every bit as exhausted as if this had happened the day before. "There was no end to demands for further consequences. It was so bad—" Emotion drained from his face. "Well, we were lucky to keep our house."

"A concession to the Aaltos' prior results," Jenna added. "We lost ninety percent of our research funding, and most foreign houses broke off contact with us altogether. This biotope is now a fifth the scale of what it used to be. We were left with no choice but to settle down in Farnland, researching the innocuous. And even that is getting off lightly."

Oliver was nodding inside. Aiding a tír invasion was just that bad.

"So we wanted to let Katie be free. Didn't hope for any revolutionary results. We'd have been fine with her being a village mage, somewhere abounding with nature... But perhaps that was a vain hope. We soon learned she was made for nothing that small scale."

Jenna shook her head ruefully. Lost in memories.

"When she said she wanted to enroll in Kimberly, we objected, of course. Spent months trying to talk sense into her. But—we also knew we *shouldn't* stop her. Putting herself in a hostile environment where she might grow—wasn't that exactly what we did in our own youths? We knew better than anyone that our objections would not diminish her passion," Jenna said at length. "Send her to a civil rights school, and she'd die on the vine. The Union has few schools aligned that way, and their facilities and faculties are hardly impressive. Featherston's headmaster is little more than a puppet."

Jenna set her wineglass on the table—she'd yet to take a sip. Oliver imagined if she let herself start, she'd drain the bottle.

"...And we *did* have hope. Hope that Kimberly would beat her down. That if she saw how bad mages really are—knew just how depressing our world is—that she might choose a peaceful life."

"No such luck. I'm sure she had her share of struggles. But she found good friends, and Kimberly helped her grow into a proper mage. The headwinds only made her stronger. I knew that the moment we saw her at the docks."

Oliver had been listening in silence, and now Jenna turned her eyes to him.

"She wrote to us about how you all met. You're such good friends. We can tell how deep the bonds you've forged are. And how that's helped her become who she is now," she told him. "You especially, Oliver. Your name comes up in her letters more than anyone else. You compared her to an angel once?"

"... My mouth may have gotten ahead of me."

It felt like a very long time ago.

"You've been a rock for her ever since," Jenna whispered. "In that hellscape, she met someone who got her, who admired her. That must have been such a comfort when she first arrived."

Oliver felt the same way about Katie. Finding someone that *nice* at Kimberly—that had been a saving grace.

"You've kept her smiling the way she used to. So we'd like to pin our hopes on you, well aware that this is unbecoming behavior for any parent."

Kalervo made to speak, but Jenna waved him off.

"Oliver—step in to stop Katie. Keep her on *this* side so that she might retain that smile. I don't care how. We don't give a damn about *results*. Just..."

The desperation in her mother's eyes twisted like a knife in Oliver's chest. All sorts of emotions wrestled for control within, but one phrase won out: "Thanks, Oliver. Meeting you—"

After a long inner turmoil, he cast his eyes to the floor and spoke.

"I know how you feel. But...I doubt I can live up to those hopes."

He heard them gasp but made his position clear.

"My wish is not to restrain Katie, but to protect her true nature. Wherever that leads her, if she's thought it through, and that is what she truly desires... then I have no words to stop her. No one in this world does. And if that puts us

in conflict, I will draw my wand."

He could say nothing else. Could not do as they asked if they desired no deceit.

"...I was afraid of that." Jenna smiled faintly—she'd seen this coming. "You're a good boy, Oliver. Kind and thoughtful and respectful of others. Someone like you at Kimberly is nothing short of miraculous," she told him. "But at the same time, you are every bit a mage. We knew. No ordinary boy has eyes that have peered into the abyss."

A bitter smile twisted Oliver's lips.

Ah, so my eyes do betray me.

"You won't stop Katie. You may warn against a careless act—but if she's thought it through and chooses to cross the line, you'll back that play. As you must. You're well past stopping that. You are a creature cut from that same cloth."

*"…"* 

"Watching her go is one thing. But you might give her that last *push*. If that benefits *your purpose*, no matter how much she looks up to you—"

Jenna's wand leaped to her hand. Kalervo jumped to his feet.

"Jenna!"

"I long to strike you down, Oliver. She'd hate me for it, but...that's a mother's duty."

She had her wand pointed directly at Oliver's brow, but he remained seated, unmoving. His gaze was behind her.

"Back down, Teresa," he said. "Mrs. Aalto doesn't intend to follow through."

""——?!""

Both parents gasped. Neither one had noticed Teresa sneak up behind Jenna, her athame pressed against her back. At her master's word, Teresa darted off into the darkness of the hall, leaving the Aaltos gaping.

"Pardon her behavior. But I'm sure you're well aware," Oliver warned, "killing

me will not change Katie."

A harsh truth, and it made Jenna collapse in her chair, like her strings had snapped.

"...Why did we end up talking like this? Our daughter brought *friends* home with her. And he's her first love...," she whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks. "If only he'd been a *normal* boy...!"

One arm around his wife, Kalervo shot Oliver a plaintive look.

"...I beg your pardon, Oliver. We'll make it up to you later, but for now..."

"No need for apologies. You've got nothing to be sorry for."

With that, Oliver stood up, bobbed his head, and left the lounge. In the hall, Teresa emerged from darkness, sticking close to his side.

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"...My lord..."

"Back to your room, Teresa. I'm gonna take a walk outside."

"I'll join you."

"Did you not hear—?"

"I'm coming with you."
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Teresa was not obeying *this* order. He couldn't bring himself to issue it again. The chill in his heart found her warmth all too great a comfort.

The next morning, Katie came up to him in the hall after breakfast.

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"Oliver…"
"Mm?"
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"Sorry for the weird question, but...did something go down between you and my parents last night?"

That made him tense up. He'd thought they were acting natural, but apparently not enough to fool their daughter's eyes. Careful not to let anything slip, he picked his words.

"...Not particularly. They caught me up late, and we shared a drink. The three of us had a really nice chat."

"Really? Okay... Just my imagination, then."

Katie brightened up. Whatever felt off to her must not have been all that obvious, and he'd managed to wriggle out of it. They headed off to the guest room.

"...Er, ahem," Katie began, drawing her friends' attention.

She hesitated for a long moment before continuing.

"We've been a lot of places, and we're all worn out! I know just the thing to ease that fatigue."

"Oh?"

"What's this about?"

"Suspicious."

They waited for her to elaborate, and her fists tightened up into little balls.

"Your first time, it, um...might be super awkward, but it's all in your heads! It's actually not the least bit embarrassing. Totally normal! Everyone does it."

"Katie...?" Oliver asked, not sure what else to say.

She lifted her head, her mind made up.

"Come with me."

Unsure of their destination, they followed Katie's lead across the snow.

"Is that it...?"

Ahead, they spied a dome made of brick. Plumes of white smoke rose from the chimney—was there a fire lit within?

"Oh, I get it," said Guy, the first among the group to figure it out. "A sauna, right? Those originated in Farnland."

"Oh? Then 'tis like a steam bath?" Nanao asked, perking up.

Katie nodded and opened the door to the structure built against the dome, pointing inside.

"Here's the changing room. We've got towels and a change of clothes within."

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"? We go in here? Who goes first—boys or—?"
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It took a moment for that to sink in, and she piled on.

"Again, all together. That's how we do it here."

"Uh—but wait, you mean that? We all gotta get naked?"

"There are towels to cover yourself with. Nothing wrong with that!"

"Settle down, Katie," Oliver urged. "You're getting a bit worked up."

Katie made a face and stared at the ground.

"...I've always wanted to do this," she said. "Take visiting friends to the sauna, that is."

The intensity there silenced him. Nanao and Chela glanced at each other, grinning.

"I have no objections."

"Neither do I."

Both began removing their clothes. Guy slapped his hands over his eyes.

"Augh! Wait, don't do that!"

"It's a bit late for that concern. Or are you saying my body's not worth seeing?"

"Don't make it weirder, Chela! This is a cultural—"

"Join us, Oliver."

"Aughhhh!"

Nanao had started removing Oliver's clothing for him. The tide was against them, and soon all were sporting only a single towel each.

"Why'd it have to be a girl day...?" Pete sighed, clearly resigned to this.

"...You can't switch? Thought you'd gained some control over it," said Guy.

"Not on such short notice. It takes a few hours..."

As the friends talked, they moved down the short hall into the sauna itself.

<sup>&</sup>quot;All together," Katie said, smiling brightly.

Oliver glanced at the girl beside him.

"...You don't have to join in, Teresa."

"But I will. Unclothed means undefended."

She had a wand hidden beneath her towel.

"Don't worry!" Katie said up ahead. "It's only embarrassing at first! Once we're inside, you'll forget everything else!"

As the sauna door opened, a wave of heat overwhelmed them.

"Hoo—"

"...That's hot...!"

"Okay, sit where you please! It gets hotter higher up! Marco, you sit here."

Katie soon got everyone seated. Guy and Oliver sat together in the middle row, feeling their skin bake.

"...Katie, I'm not an expert, but...this is really hot, right?"

"We're just getting started. It'll feel a lot hotter!"

With that, she scooped water over the stone stove. There was a *hiss*, and steam rose from it.

"We splash scented water on the hot stones and fill the room with steam. That conducts heat, warming us further. And it smells good, right?"

"...It does, but the temperature..."

"...I'm sweating already..."

Pete was watching the beads of perspiration roll down his arm.

"That's the idea!" Katie said, sitting down in the top row. "Mages have strong bodies, so milder temperatures aren't stimulating enough to get you there. It's meant to drive you to the point where your heart is racing, and you feel lightheaded."

"Is that...part of some process?"

"Yep! The sauna's just the start. The real thing comes after..."

For a while, they sat roasting. Drops of sweat running down their skin.

"It might be getting hard, but hang in there till I say so. You won't regret it!"

They took her at her word and endured. Feeling like bread in an oven, time passed.

"...Still, Katie? This is getting...rough..."

"...Not quite yet... It'd be a waste to leave too soon..."

"...Heh-heh... How it takes me back... I once challenged my grandfather, seeing who could stay in longest..."

"I've heard Yamatsu has many hot springs," Chela noted. "That said...this is rather intense..."

Puddles of sweat were forming at their feet. Sensing danger, Oliver said, "Katie, we're at our limit here! Any longer and..."

"Last spurt! Thirty more seconds!"

She held them to that, then jumped to her feet.

"Okay, outside! Follow me!"

She raced through the doors, and the others were on her heels. Out across the snow, barefoot.

"Wh-what...? It's not over?" Pete gasped.

"Nope! Time for the *real* experience! Dive in!"

Katie was pointing at the pond before them. The surface was iced over, with snow on top of it. Guy looked at that, then at Katie.

"...The *frozen* pond? Right after baking ourselves to a crisp? You've gotta be kidding!"

"I mean it! Like this!"

Katie took the first plunge. Her body broke through the ice, and cold water shot out. Everyone flinched.

"Y-yo, Katie...!"

"Are you okay?!"

"Bwah! Hurry, get in! Your feet'll reach the bottom! Now, before you cool off!"

Having put themselves through that furnace, no one was really going to argue with her now. They followed her lead and jumped on through the ice. Shrieks went up as the frigid water hit them.

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"Gahhhh...!"
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"It's colder if you move around! Get your shoulders under and stay still!"

They did as they were told, hunkering down. She was right: Their heated skin warmed the water in contact with them, easing the chill. But just as they were relaxing, Marco got in, displacing so much water, it unintentionally churned the pond.

"Aughhh! If the water moves, it's worse!" Guy yelled.

"Unh, sorry. I tried to ease in."

"Oliver, look! A fish!"

"You dove under to catch that?! Let it go! The cold made it sluggish!"

Nanao put the fish back in the water, and Oliver glanced at Teresa.

"You can get out first," he said. "You're smaller; the heat'll leave you faster."

"...I'm not getting out before her."

"It's not a competition!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;C-cooold—!"



Teresa stubbornly stuck to her guns. Everyone endured the cold for a solid two minutes, and at last Katie got out.

"Okay—back inside! More sauna time!" Katie announced.

"Wha—?! Seriously?! We're looping this?!"

"Exactly! You gotta do three reps!"

"Three...! This is far more grueling than I anticipated...!" Chela moaned.

Collecting their nerves, they began alternating sauna sessions with cold baths, exposing themselves to temperature contrasts beyond anything regular life presented. After the last cold dip, Katie turned to face them.

"Okay, we're done! Good work! Kick back in the break room here."

Inside were comfortable temperatures and deck chairs. All participants looked relieved.

"Yeesh... I thought I was done for."

"...Same... But it's an odd sensation. Like—my head feels so...clear?"

Pete broke off there, eyes half-open, not moving. Guy blinked at him.

"...Pete? Earth to Pete?"

"Looks like it's hit him already," said Katie. "Everyone, relax, close your eyes, do nothing. Just let the sensations take hold."

And a new experience awaited.

"Hrm—"

"\_\_\_\_!"

Noises escaped them but achieved no meaning. Seeing everyone had arrived, Katie smiled.

"You get it now? I wanted you guys to feel this. Amazing, right?"

".....Yeah," Oliver whispered. "It's really something..."

Basking in the same glow, Chela asked, "Katie, this is what you wanted to share?"

"...Yeah... I wanted us all to get here...together."

"...You've convinced me," Guy said. "Would never've gotten it if I hadn't tried this for myself..."

For a while they talked quietly, letting the experience wash over them.

"...It's wearing off," Katie said, sitting back up. "The peak is past—how's everyone feeling?"

"...Like I've been reborn," Oliver replied.

"Do you feel the same, Marco?" Chela asked.

"Unh, not sure if it's exactly the same, but it felt good."

The deck chair creaked under him as he nodded.

Guy glanced out the window at the sauna.

"I want one of these in our base. Shouldn't be that hard to warm a room..."

"That would be nice," Katie said. "But it wouldn't be nearly as effective. There's more to it than just the temperature. The quality of the water, the scent of the air, the sunlight streaming in from outside..."

Oliver privately agreed with her. This was something they felt today, with this company. A marvel that lived in the moment.

"I'm convinced this is the best sauna in all the world," Katie added. "This is the best way I know to repay you guys. Did it do the trick?"

"Indeed it did," Nanao said, speaking for everyone. "Katie, your home is magnificent."

Katie visibly relaxed. "Oh... That's a relief."

She sank into her deck chair, eyes closed, deeply at peace.

Chela slowly got to her feet, watching Katie.

Catching this from the corner of his eye, Oliver hissed, "Chela, I know you're blissed out, but you *have* to put clothes on before you start hugging people. I'm gonna insist on that point!"

"Oh, you're ahead of me... Well spotted, Oliver."

"Since when was wearing clothes a condition of the free-hug rule?"

"Pete, don't encourage her! You'll end up streaking around the place before you know it!" Guy shouted.

But they soon forgot about getting dressed and were tussling in their towels.

Late that night, their daughter and her friends all in bed, Jenna was sipping wine in the living room.

Her husband joined her. "... Everyone turned in?" he asked.

"Yes—wore themselves out. We offered to split them up, but they're all in the same room," Jenna said, laughing.

Not just Oliver—she had never expected her daughter to find so many good friends in a place like Kimberly. She'd imagined Katie alone, isolated, with no one around who understood her. For that reason, she was eternally gratefully—and yet...

"...If they could be like that forever, I'd want nothing else."

Why was that wish so out of reach? Hand tightening around her glass, Jenna sobbed—and Kalervo silently pulled her close.

Meanwhile, Marco had risen to get some water and bumped into an unexpected troll in the hall.

"...Mm?"

Patro waved for him to follow, then turned around. Confused, Marco went after him.

"...You sure you want me here?"

Wordlessly, they moved over to the biotope. One corner of the vast space was set up for meetings and featured two troll-sized chairs. They sat down facing each other. Patro filled two tankards with fizzless cider and handed one to Marco.

Sorry. I knew you weren't a bad guy.

Patro spoke no words, but they were both trolls—Marco grasped his intent. This was an apology for his past behavior and a sign he wanted to make up for

it.

I was just scared. Hearing human words come from one of us—it made me panic. I don't really know why. But a chill went down my spine.

This was the best explanation he had. Marco smiled, shaking his head.

It's fine. If our positions were reversed, I'd have felt the same.

And he wondered if he'd avoided thinking too hard about it—about how he himself had changed since learning human words.

These days, I even think in their language. And that's gradually starting to feel normal. I may no longer be who I once was.

This admission provoked a long silence. As Marco drained his tankard, Patro began to softly sing.

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"FOO......WOO......"
```

The resonance of it hit Marco deep, and before he knew it, he was singing with Patro. How many years had it been since he sang with another of his kind?

```
""......WOO......RUU......""
```

There was nothing stopping them from being two trolls enjoying a peaceful evening.

```
"...Hmm..."
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Woken at dawn by birdsong, Oliver opened his eyes and found a girl's dark brown eyes inches from his own.

"...How long have you been there, Teresa?"

"The whole time. It never gets dull."

She'd been watching him sleep for quite a while; somehow that didn't surprise him. He made a face, sat up, and looked around. All seven of them were packed into five beds, with Marco on a mat nearby. Hard not to smile at the sight.

Certain they were the only ones up, Oliver turned back to Teresa.

"...I've got something for you. Let's step out."

Outside, they found a clearing, and Oliver gathered kindling, using a spell to ignite it. He took a metal flask from his belongings, opened the lid, and heated the bottom over the flames. A sweet scent filled the air, and Teresa's nose twitched.

"...What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing special. Just something nice to sip on a cold day."

When it was warm enough, he poured the thick brown liquid into wooden cups, handing one to Teresa. She accepted it, blew on it, and took a sip—and her eyes went wide.

"....!"

"Hits the spot, right? Totally normal hot chocolate feels like a luxury here."

Smiling, he took a sip of his own. He knew she had a sweet tooth, so he'd prepped this as a little treat, not having imagined he would find such a perfect location for it.

He looked around. The Aalto home was on elevated land, looking down on the snowcapped forest, gleaming in the light of dawn. A breathtaking view shared with the girl beside him. For a while, they let it soak in.

"...I wanted you to see this. To know that the world is filled with beautiful things to see. That those dimly lit corridors aren't all the world has to offer," Oliver murmured.

His expression stiffened, and he turned to face Teresa.

"But your next answer may alter the implications of that. Teresa, tell me the truth."

"I swear," she said, her hot chocolate already gone.

Looking right into her eyes, he asked what he already knew.

"How much longer will you live?"

She didn't hesitate. A smile as free as her master was not.

"Not much more than you will, my lord."

An awful truth, one that pierced his very heart. Yet—not a surprise. He'd

hoped it would be otherwise but had seen this answer coming.

"Extreme silence is tantamount to death. My stealth is achieved by placing myself closer to it. Not as a technique, but as a principle of my existence," Teresa added. "Like that astra, I was born half-ghost."

"...I've heard Rivermoore's creation is expected to live awhile longer."

"Yes—so what I am is not as *successful*. I am a byproduct of an experiment that was always expected to fail. That I am allowed to serve you alone is blessing enough."

She spoke of her own fate in measured tones. This was clearly something she had long since accepted—a fact that made Oliver grind his teeth.

"...There's nothing to be done?"

"Not practically, no. Even if I attempted to find a solution, it would be every bit as difficult as what the Scavenger faced. Thus—put it out of your mind. Your life gives you no more time to waste than mine."

This admonishment only twisted the knife. Oliver's purpose alone was too much for someone with his mediocre gifts. How could he afford to search blindly for solutions to the unsolvable?

".....Fine."

And so, he cut it loose. He'd wanted to free her from the battle before it was too late—a vain wish that he now crushed in the palm of his own hand. This girl had only a few years to live. Sending her out in the world and claiming he'd set her free—that would be shameful indeed.

"...I brought you on this journey as some small payment for your labor. Our battles will only get worse. This could be our last chance to *rest*."

"I know."

He shouldered all this. Her life and death, her devotion—this was all part of his *sin*. And in light of that, he had only one thing to say to her.

"Serve at my side, Teresa. Until your last moments arrive."

"Gladly."

Her answer came swiftly, and she knelt before him. A moment of silence, loyalty sworn—and her face rose once more.

"But if I may ask one thing in return?"

"What?"

"I would like a kiss. Not on the cheek, but here."

Hesitantly, she pointed at her lips. Without a word, Oliver put his hands around her shoulders.

He had no right to refuse. She gave him her life; there was no price he would not pay.

"...Mm..."

Their lips tasted of chocolate. Yet it could not disguise the bitterness of this kiss.

At last, it was time to leave. Surprising no one, Katie was openly weeping, her arms around her parents and Patro.

"...Wahhhhhh...!"

Her family reunion had been all too brief. Fighting off their own tears, her parents tried calming her down.

"We'll miss you, too," Kalervo told her. "But it's time you dried your eyes. You've been at this a full hour now!"

"...Right, and you've got one last thing to take care of, yes?" Jenna said, giving Katie a gentle push.

At last, Katie managed to stop the waterworks.

"Sniff— Yeah, I know. Everybody! I want to make one detour on our way to the port."

"Sure."

"No problem. We got time."

They all had a hunch what this meant. Appreciating that fact, Katie finished up her preparations and held out a hand to their big friend.

```
"Come on, Marco."
```

```
"...Unh."
```

Kalervo guided the sleigh across the snowfields to a settlement not human—but no less peaceful.

```
"Wow..."
```

The trolls looked up from their cooking, their gaze on the visitors. Katie waved at them all.

"This is the nearest troll village to our home. One of the few such villages left on open land. This area is all under Aalto conservatorship, so there's no risk of that changing. I'd go so far as to call it the safest troll village in the entire world."

She turned to the troll beside her.

"Marco, if you want—you could live here. Kimberly may grumble about it, but I can always make up a story about you dying during an experiment. I'll miss having you around, but I can visit sometimes... And the trolls here are super nice."

```
"…"
```

Marco stood a while, watching his brethren. This could quite literally be his salvation.

"We are mages and must go back to Kimberly. But there's no need for you to join us. You don't have to go anywhere that scary ever again. You can live a normal life here like any other troll. You can once again have everything you lost."

Katie was stifling her own conflicts—and in time, Marco took a step toward the village.

```
"...Nn..."
```

Katie bit her lip, holding in the brunt of her emotions. But Marco stopped. He never took a second step.

"...I knew you would do this, Katie. I even hoped you would. I knew you were

nice—if I went with you, you'd let me leave someday."

He was speaking not just of what he'd struggled with, but the conclusion he'd reached.

"But...I never stopped thinking. About what I saw at Kimberly, on the voyage here, talking to the goblin chief. So many things that changed my perspective."

Each moment ran through his mind. Then he turned to face the mages.

"And I thought: There is a role for me to play."

He moved back to Katie, taking a knee in the snow before her.

"I want to find that with you. Take me back, Katie."

This request made her quiver, her fists clenched tight, her head down.

"...You're sure?" she said. "Think about it—do you really want to go back to Kimberly?"

"It's not just me. You're there, Teresa's there, all of you are. I'm not scared."

"...But this time it might be the death of you! I don't even know if I can keep myself safe!"

Her voice grew louder, tears in her eyes.

Marco thought a while, then turned to the ringlet girl.

"Chela, may I borrow your hat?"

"? Ah, yes. Of course."

Chela took a brimmed hat out of her luggage, and Marco put it on, smiling.

"Look, Katie. You ever seen another troll look this good in a hat?"

The last thing anyone expected him to say. There was a stunned silence.

"...Marco..."

"...Told a joke..."

Katie smiled through her tears and wiped her eyes. Accepting how he felt—that his mind was made up.

".....Never," she said. "No such thing!"

"I know. So...it'd be a waste to leave me in the boonies."

"...Ha-ha. Point taken."

Katie took Marco's hand. Squeezed his big fingers—then turned back to her friends.

"Come on, everyone. Marco's made his choice."

"Yeah."

"Indeed he has!"

"Looking forward to it, Marco."

They all celebrated their friend's decision.

Teresa scrambled up onto his shoulder and whispered in his ear, "I thought this was good-bye."

"Unh. Sorry, Teresa."

They were done here. They climbed back on Kalervo's sleigh and left the troll village. Marco alone looked back, watching his brethren until they were out of sight.

"...Good-bye," he whispered—and did not turn back again.

**CHAPTER 3** 

**Portents** 

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## **Portents**

Katie's was the only home that required a trip abroad, so their return voyage took them back the way they'd come. But rather than head straight to Yelgland, they took a few detours.

"Yes, yes, you do not 'ave to tell me," Tullio Rossi said, waving them off with a look of tremendous pity. They were in a bustling, sun-drenched Ytallian port. "... You missed me, no? I 'ad no way of being with you on your journey."

Pete and Guy weren't having it.

"We should be able to hit the art museum today."

"But first—anyone else hungry?"

"I do not give up! 'aving my first volley so blithely ignored will not discourage me!" Rossi declared with a laugh.

Oliver took a step forward, facing him.

"I appreciate you meeting us, Rossi. Never imagined you'd actually make good on your word. So nice of you to take our nod to common courtesy seriously."

"Not at all! Ytallians 'ave smiles in their 'earts and do not sweat the small stuff. May our sunshine melt those spirits warped in your Yelglish cold and damp."

This exchange of spite was followed by a handshake, and Katie looked puzzled.

"...Is it just me, or is Oliver acting different?"

"He's not normally prone to sarcasm. Does Rossi just bring it out of him?" Pete wondered.

"...No, he's simply being polite," Chela insisted, offering her friends a proper explanation. "You're aware of the rather dubious Yelglish tradition of close

friends trading insults, yes? You may have seen our elders at Kimberly engaged in the practice. Exchanging sarcastic quips can be an expression of intimacy."

"I know that much, but Oliver's not really the type," said Katie.

"True, but here he's returning the favor. Observe Mr. Rossi's attire."

Their Ytallian friend was all dressed up in a gaudily patterned shirt and a coat that appeared to be custom tailored. He certainly pulled off the getup, but it also made him look a solid 30 percent shiftier than usual.

"His fashion choices and hairstyle are both flawless—no, he's included a perfect touch of roughness to each. The spitting image of an Ytallian dandy. The moment Oliver set eyes on it, he knew—this moment required he embody the proper Yelglish gentleman!"

Chela was getting rather carried away while the boys continued their trash talk unabated.

"Hey, I heard the news. They say Ytallians have learned to read sentences longer than three lines. Mind taking me to a bookstore? Maybe they managed to fit Arnaud's *Beauty and Shame* into a mere two hundred volumes."

"Fear not, they sell it in a single volume for you 'ardheads. Though I must insist poetry is best recited from memory, no? Whispered in the ear of the one you woo. It must be so difficult if you 'ave to fetch a book from the shelf each time, eh?"

The spite was flowing like wine, and the spectacle made Guy and Katie fold their arms, brows creased.

"...So..."

"...They're being super friendly?"

As they left the harbor for the city proper, Oliver let himself relax.

"Thanks again for coming, Rossi. But I think I've had enough. Trying to keep that going the whole visit would just be exhausting."



"Nah-ha-ha!" Rossi cackled. "A fine effort. I knew you would play along! Ethnic 'umor is a pillar of magic comedy, no?"

Oliver's smile was a bit strained. He'd known what Rossi wanted without it being said aloud. Three years together at Kimberly were just that intense. Enough that water and oil would start to blend.

"What do you wish to see, then? I can guide you to all our most famous locales," Rossi offered. "Ytallian gentlemen learn these things—showing the ladies around."

"...Those exaggerations drive stereotypes even farther from reality," Pete pointed out.

"Indeed," Chela said. "Surely even Ytalli has shy, earnest men!"

Rossi shrugged, whistling. "That it does. My brother is one of them. 'ad not seen 'im in ages, and we could barely talk at all."

"Agreed on that point, you clown."

This voice came from behind, and everyone turned to find a diligent-looking young man in small round spectacles. Yet something about him did remind them of Rossi.

"Dario?!" Rossi yelped. "Wh-why are you 'ere? You said you 'ad work!"

"I insisted on slipping out. Couldn't shake the impression you were actively rubbing dirt on our family name."

Realizing this was the very man they'd been speaking of, the others moved to greet him.

"I take it you're Ros—Tullio's brother? Nice to meet you," said Oliver.

"Dario Rossi. I apologize for the abrupt entrance, Kimberly students. But I simply could not leave this to my fool of a brother. Let me be clear: He does not speak for the Rossi clan. He's more of a black sheep."

"ow so?!" Rossi protested. "You should be proud! I am off to a good school!"

Dario ignored him completely. "I'm merely here to make a formal greeting and will not linger. I'm pulled a few strings; nothing much, but it should help

you enjoy the sights. No matter where you go, you'll be welcomed."

"That's...very generous. We appreciate the gesture," Chela said, well aware it was her family name that prompted this treatment.

Dario shook his head. "Not at all. I've done very little—perhaps not enough. Especially considering what rudeness *he's* undoubtedly committed at Kimberly."

"Why is that the assumption?! You do me wrong, Dario! I am doing wonders for our name!"

"I hear you've yet to defeat this Mr. Horn?"

"I cannot 'ear you! My ears fail me!"

Rossi clapped both hands to his head, turning away. Dario allowed himself a smirk and turned back to their guests.

"He's a handful, but it seems he does intend to make you welcome here. I hope you enjoy yourselves."

"The honor is ours," Oliver said, bowing.

With that, Dario turned and left, true to his word.

Rossi pursed his lips, grumbling, "Ugh, that brother of mine 'as cut the wind from my sails. I am tired—can I go 'ome?"

"No need to sulk, Rossi. That was hilarious," Guy said.

"You've got a good brother," Chela told him. "You should do your part to reassure him."

"I'd start by only hitting on one girl at a time, though," Katie added.

"Now everyone is on my case, eh?! I 'ave 'ad enough of this!"

Rossi turned to go, and Oliver had to grab his collar. An entirely different kind of commotion—and their Ytalli visit was underway.

They hit several famous spots, shared a meal, and then it was time to reluctantly return to their ship.

"Later! 'it me up next time you come, eh?" Rossi said, waving them off at the docks as their ship pulled away.

Oliver waved until Rossi left, then he turned back to his friends. From here, they had no more stops—it was straight home to Yelgland.

"...That ends our Union tour."

"Such a shame," Chela said. "But I'm glad we came. There will be more opportunities in the future."

"Yep. If we feel up to it, we can always fly over for the weekend."

"Guy, you've heard of the broomrider who ran out of mana over the ocean, right?"

As their friends bantered, Oliver turned to Chela.

"Time to refocus and hit up the Yelgland contingent's homes. You're up first."

"Yes, and they should be ready for us. Still...I'm nervous. I can't guarantee it's a place you'll find fun."

"I'm more worried about whether they'll even let us in the door," Guy said. "I mean, I brought my best duds..."

"Oh, that won't be an issue. If you're found wanting, we'll simply tailor you something better."

"That actually more frightening, Chela..."

"Is your manor styled after your hair?"

Katie and Nanao had their own ideas about this, while Oliver had a different concern.

"You said he's too busy to come, but...I can't shake the notion Instructor Theodore will be waiting to ambush us. He does love surprises."

"Oh, this time I can promise he won't. I've got just the person to keep my father away."

An intriguing turn of phrase, but Chela did not elaborate—though her smile spoke volumes.

Disembarking at the same Yelgland southern port they'd left from, they switched to the inland ferry. After that, they were on foot, but after a thirty-minute walk along paved roads flanked by ordinary residences, Guy cocked his

head.

"...We've come pretty far. We still not at your place?"

"That's a difficult question. We've been on McFarlane holdings for quite a while now."

Chela spoke like this was nothing, but Guy just gaped at her, then looked around again.

"...?! All of this?! But it's just houses!"

"Well, manors require all sorts of people to keep them running. House them all, and you get a sizable town. And the McFarlanes expect the bulk of them to provide for themselves."

No one had been prepared for a home of this scale—but as they goggled, passing ordinaries began to greet her.

"Oh, look! Welcome back, Lady McFarlane."

"You've become even lovelier! Heh-heh, you'd best make haste. They're eagerly awaiting your arrival."

Chela answered with a wave, and Nanao nodded, crossing her arms.

"Aha! It all makes sense now."

"Nanao?"

"I thought the ambience felt familiar—this is much like the town surrounding a castle. The populace's lives enriched beneath the rule of a wise lord. Naturally, they look upon Chela as one would a princess."

"Do they? I think princess is a touch exaggerated." Chela winced.

In time, they reached a large mansion, where they were greeted by a man in formal attire—clearly a servant.

"Welcome home, Lady Michela. Please wait with your guests within."

They were swiftly led inside. Seated on couches in a huge room, Oliver looked around.

"...Is this a guest house?"

"Very funny, Oliver. This is clearly just a waiting room."

"No way—it's bigger than my whole house!" Guy cried.

"Chela, be honest: Did my house look...shabby?" Katie asked, her voice shaking.

Not long after, the servant rejoined them, making eye contact with Chela. She rose to her feet.

"She's ready. Brace yourselves, everyone. My mother is a rather...no, a *highly* unique individual."

They went out the back door of the so-called waiting room and down a long path, at the end of which was a building every bit as imposing as the average palace. Once inside, they were led down a long corridor to a door—from which emerged a distinct odor.

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"...Is that ...?"
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"...Tobacco smoke...?"

Chela knocked, and a voice answered. All nodded and pushed the door open.

"You've arrived, daughter?"

At the back of the room behind an imposing desk sat an elf. A cigar in one hand. Her skin noticeably darker than Chela's own, but they had those blond ringlets in common—and the coat she had slung over the shoulders of her suit projected a ruler's dignity. As the others froze up, Chela stepped forward and took a knee.

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"That I have. It has been far too long, Mother."
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"Mm."

The elf lady nodded, placed her cigar on an ashtray, and rose to her feet—at which point, everyone lost sight of her.

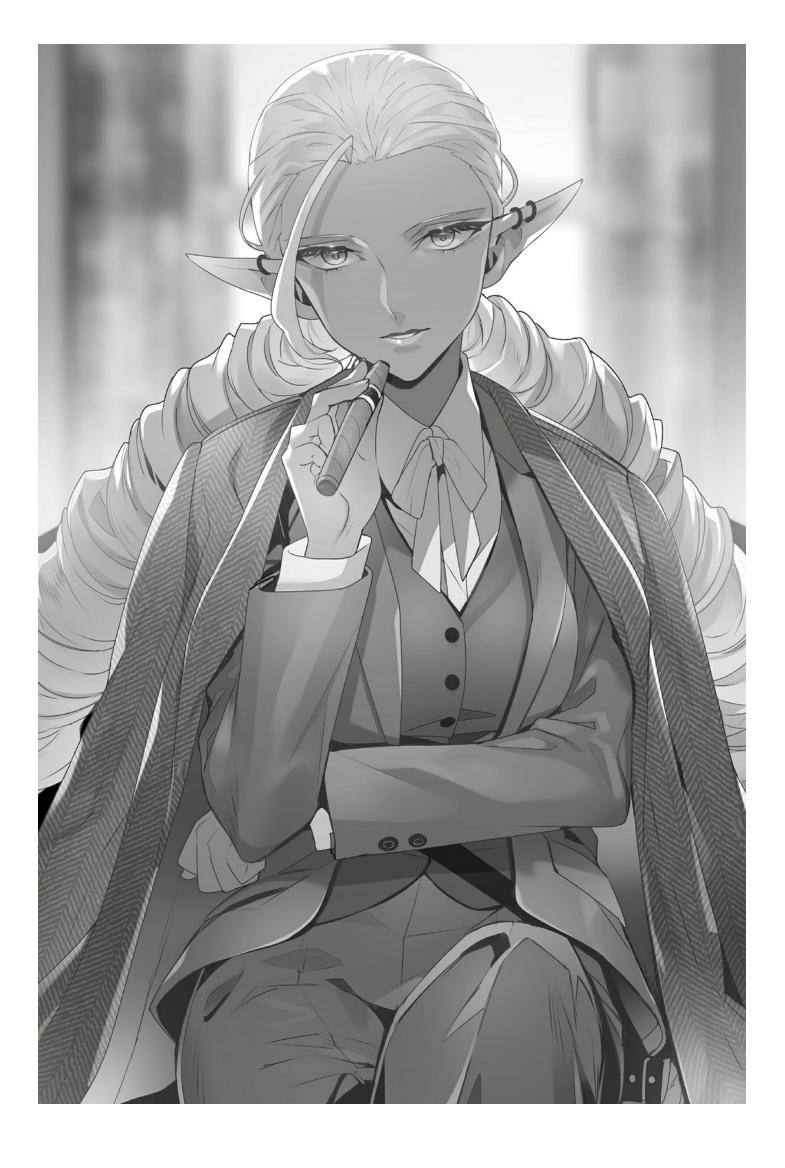
```
"Mid."
```

"Huh?"

The voice came from behind Guy. Stunned, he turned to find Chela's mother standing *right there*. Everyone flinched. Teresa's hand even snapped to her

athame.

No one had managed to react. Not until the elf woman was right next to them.



"Mid."

Katie was next, followed by Pete.

"...Hmm, this one's a reversi. Mid-plus."

She turned toward Nanao and paused, gazing down at the Azian girl.

"Good-looking for a short-lifer," the woman said. "Peak."

A faint smile, then she cast a sidelong glance at Oliver.

"Can't bear to look at him; no score."

Oliver swallowed hard, and the woman moved to Chela.

"Those two could work as grooms; don't even think about him."

"Mother, they are all equally my close friends."

Chela's voice was polite but firm. And this made the woman's lips soften; she pulled a new cigar from her pocket.

"Apologies, Chela. Maternal instincts got the best of me... Can I get a light?"

Chela drew her wand, a flame at the tip. The woman put her cigar to it, took a few puffs, then exhaled a plume of smoke.

"Ahh, that's good. They do taste different when you light them."

She kissed Chela's cheek affectionately. Then she moved back to the desk, taking a seat behind it.

"Mishakua McFarlane. You must be my daughter's school friends."

This formal introduction made them all straighten up. Their minds were working again. This was Chela's mother—Theodore McFarlane's elven bride.

"At ease. Don't get stiff. I loathe humans but adore children. An elven weakness—the sight of you makes us want to dole out candy."

Mishakua smiled and waved at the couch across from the desk. Everyone was rattled, but with "no score" still echoing in his ears, Oliver put up some resistance.

"...How long do we stay children to you?"

"As long as that label still annoys you, boy," she replied with a stream of cigar smoke.

Chela made to protest again, but Oliver waved her off and took a seat. He hadn't *actually* taken offense. His instincts merely told him this woman would appreciate a retort.

"Oliver Horn. All of us are good friends with your daughter and appreciate your hospitality."

"K-Katie Aalto."

"Guy Greenwood..."

A bit overwhelmed, everyone managed to introduce themselves. Once she'd heard all their names, Mishakua nodded.

"I won't forget those. Now, what shall we play?"

"Huh?" Oliver said, not catching her meaning.

"My daughter brought friends over. We must have fun."

With that, Mishakua put her cigar down and looked out the window.

"Sitting around is so dull. Time to fly."

Before anyone could work out her intent, she'd taken them to the broom flight grounds on the mansion's property.

"Seiiiiiiiiiiii!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Splendid! Act like you mean it!"

Nanao and Mishakua were furiously trading blows far above.

Broom in one hand, flat on her back on the ground, Katie whispered, "Chela..."

"...Yes?"

Lying next to her and equally confused, Guy finished the question. "Why's your mom knocking us out of the air?"

"...She's just like this." Chela sighed. "How can I put it? Endlessly exuberant. This is clearly her idea of how to welcome us all, but..."

Oliver sat up. "So she *is* just playing?" he asked. "Like any mother would with their daughter's friends...?"

"Perhaps it's hard to believe, but she means nothing more than that. She is nothing but sincere around children. If she offers to play, she will do so until the sun sets. I'm certain she's canceled all other appointments for the duration of our stay."

Oliver pulled a face. She wasn't calling them children dismissively; she *meant* it. With a fervor that banished any irritation he may have felt.

"Got it. Then we can't exactly bail first."

"...Yeah. Dammit. Shoulda practiced flying more."

"I-I'm getting back in this...! I'm all fired up now!"

"...Same. Don't want her thinking Kimberly students give up this quick," Pete growled.

Everyone returned to the air. There were hours left before sundown, and they spent that whole time "playing" with their friend's mother.

At last, evening arrived. The kids were all flat out on the ground, gasping for air.

"Good enough," Mishakua said with a snort. "Time to bathe! Then we eat."

With that, they left the practice grounds. Servants led each guest to a private bath, and once clean, they were taken to a dining room. Luxurious dish after luxurious dish was carried in, and Katie and Guy were torn between delight and dismay.

"...Augh! It's all so good...!"

"B-but I'm too hungry... Can't even savor it...!"

All that flying had left their bodies craving nourishment. The others were no different, but had just enough of their wits about them to remain aware of their surroundings—specifically, the far side of the table where Mishakua was busy carving up a tenderloin.

"...I see you're eating meat," Oliver noted.

"I walk the path of human sorcery. It's good! Only mildly nauseating."

Her answer made his mind churn even harder. The cigars alone had demonstrated it, but she was certainly far from the typical elf. Marrying into a human household proved as much.

She wiped her mouth with a napkin and glanced around the table.

"You made it to sundown, so I can tell you've done your training. After dinner, let me see you move."

"Mother, I appreciate the offer, but we're all tired from our journey..."

"I don't mind."

"Me neither!"

"Long as I got food in me...!"

Pete, Katie, and Guy were on board. That meant Oliver had to join them. He, too, was a Kimberly student—and moments like this lit a fire beneath him.

"Whoaaaa...!"

"Aughhhhhh...!"

Mishakua was chasing them around a disk, which itself was revolving unpredictably.

"Neat, right?" she said. "This is how McFarlane mages train their Wall Walking. If it's too slow for you, I'll speed it up."

"By all means!" Nanao cried.

"W-wait, Nanao!" Pete yelped. "We're not ready for that!"

Teresa had elected to sit this one out and was on the sidelines with Marco and Oliver—the disk supported only four at a time, so the latter was waiting his turn.

"...The facilities here as every bit as impressive as I'd heard. No wonder you got so strong."

"Heh-heh, the revolving disk is merely the beginning," Chela said. "We have all manner of training equipment."

"...Shame we're only here a few days, then. We could easily spend our entire break taking advantage of that."

"Marry me, and they're yours forever."

"Don't threaten me with a good time." Playing along with Chela's joke, Oliver looked around. "...But it does make me worry—we've barely seen any mages here. Besides your mother."

"That's her doing. You can hardly relax and have fun surrounded by our best and brightest. The extended family have any number of mages with centuries under their belts..."

"True, running into those would give me a heart attack. But...isn't your mother one of them?"

"Yes, she's turning three hundred and eighty this year. I understand there was quite an uproar over her standing in the household when she first married into the family—especially since she's older than my father's great-grandmother."

Oliver tried to picture it, then abandoned the idea, shaking his head. This was a marriage that defied his meager imagination, and no speculation he produced would be remotely close to the truth.

"I'm more curious how elves came to be welcomed into the fold at all. Instructor Theodore is always evasive when people ask."

"It's not a secret or anything. He'd just rather not discuss it. From what he's said, it was a dark time for him. But don't worry, they have talked it out with her home and come to terms."

"Oh? Curious about my standing?"

Oliver jumped and turned to find Mishakua no longer on the disk, but right behind him.

"Mother? Weren't you—?"

"They're all on the floor. You can see them spinning, yes?"

"Then stop the disk!"

Chela ran off to the contraption's controls. Her mother watched her go.

"Imagine what you like. Our story isn't that complex. This nutbar showed up in our village just as I'd been craving change. I took advantage of the opportunity—that's all. Though it may have come close to starting a war along the way."

"The short version sounds like it's leaving out some horrors. Is there not a rule prohibiting exogamy?"

"Elves will have no future if they stick to that principle. On that, at least, I agree with the miscreant who fled to Kimberly. If I had not done the honors, someone else would have."

Mishakua sounded certain of that. By "miscreant," she must have meant Khiirgi Albschuch. Khiirgi's position had been precarious, and it was not hard to see how Mishakua—who held similarly unorthodox views—would have played a part in getting her enrolled.

Chela got the disk to stop, and her friends were no longer glued to it—they soon joined Oliver and Mishakua.

"My eyes are still spinning..."

"Wait, Guy... I can't walk straight..."

"That was enjoyable. That's all for today! Get some sleep. Tomorrow you'll be helping with the festivities."

"...Ohhh," Chela said, hand to her chin. "I suppose it is that time."

The next evening, the McFarlane manor ground was filled with food and drink, free for all residents. Chela's friends joined in the revelries, albeit in a somewhat-unusual role.

"Are you a naughty child?"

Children were running around with candy when out popped Mishakua, wearing a hideous wooden mask. This frightened the children, who shook their heads frantically.

"Aiiiieee!"

"No, I'm not! I'm on my way home!"

"Reeeally? You're not lying, are you?!"

She intimidated them a while, then released them, handing out bags of treats. Her performance over, Mishakua took off the mask, turning to Oliver and his friends.

"That's how it's done. Make sure you scare them properly first. No wishywashy stuff! Try and make 'em cry!"

With that, she vanished into the festival, leaving them gaping.

"...I'd heard they had a holiday like this down south, but..."

"... Never thought I'd be part of it. And with a real one on the spooking side..."

They were wearing tattered black robes, wooden masks, and fake pointy ears. Disguised as the stars of this festival—the man-eating elves. Their role: to scare children, warn them against staying out after dark, then give them candy.

"The holiday itself has been in the area awhile, but now my mother runs it every year. She calls it a good excuse to get to know the neighbors."

"Does she want to improve their image of her or destroy it?" Guy asked.

"I think it's working," Katie said. "The kids are having fun."

"Indeed! My home had a similar festival!"

Nanao seemed to be thriving on this whole thing. They ran around a while, scaring kids until a thought struck Oliver.

"...Chela, how does this end?"

"Meaning?"

"There are regional differences, sure, but there's a standard climax to holidays like this, right? If this is based on the tall tales of elves stealing children, then—"

"Yes, exactly that. It ends with the elf defeat. My mother goes all out!"

"...She's certainly...amenable."

"Heh-heh. But there is another key difference. Look, it's starting."

Mishakua had appeared on the stage at the center, drawing eyes her way.

"Mwahhhh! How can this be?! I've searched long and hard and found no naughty children! How am I supposed to snatch anyone?!"

The "man-eating elf" clutched her head in agony. Then another figure burst onto the stage.

"That's enough, vile elf! There are no children for you here! Get back to the forest!"

"Hng?! Who might you be?"

Mishakua raised a long wand. Her opponent's lower body was that of a horse, and the upper body that of a man.

"Huh?" Katie gasped. "A centaur?!"

"Shhh. He's the hunter here," said Chela.

They settled in to watch the performance.

"Begone, four-legs!" Mishakua roared, stomping her foot. "There is a feast before me, and I cannot just leave!"

"Then I shall strike you down! To arms!"

The centaur drew his athame. The battle that followed was tremendous, even to Kimberly-trained eyes. Spells sending fire and lightning wild, blades clashing —far removed from *real* combat, yet no less technically proficient. This was a *show* fight.

"Damn you! Damn you, four-legs! Though my body may fail me, I shall make you pay! May you live in fear of the forest for all time!"

"Then, with the help of man, I shall bring light to that darkness! Fragor!"

"Gahhhhhhhh!"

Struck by the spell, Mishakua exploded in a burst of light. The crowd roared. Such a tremendous finale, it left Guy's jaw hanging open.

"...Uh, your mom just blew up."

"Even more spectacular than usual. But don't worry; she'll be lighting a cigar backstage by now."

"Uh, um! Chela!" Katie said, eyes gleaming.

"I thought this would happen." Chela chuckled, way ahead of her. "Let's go meet the hunter."

Chela led her friends around the back of the stage to an area filled with tools large and small. Three figures sat at a table in the middle.

"You're making this flashier every year, Misha. We need to cut ourselves off before my body gives out."

"Don't be daft, Torlia. Train children's eyes, and they will want more. If we don't push ourselves, they'll turn up their noses, call it a poor showing. I'd rather die."

"Heh-heh, no point if ain't a spectacle! Maybe I should join in next time? Play a man-eating dwarf?"

"Don't be a fool. No need to create your own baseless horror stories."

Mishakua was seated with the centaur, and the third figure was a sturdily-built female dwarf. They were chatting casually, sipping drinks—a sight that made Guy goggle.

"... Wow. An elf, a dwarf, and a centaur sitting at a table and drinking."

"Quite the spectacle... I saw them both around the event," said Oliver.

"Cross-species contact has been growing a lot down south. Arguably due to contacts my mother brought. They're characters, but good people."

Chela brought them over to the table. All three turned at their approach.

"Ah, there you are. Michela—how'd you like my performance?"

"You always make a fine villain, Mother. Mr. Torlia, thank you for indulging her. I'm sure you have better things to do that play along with my mother's enthusiasms."

The centaur responded with a broad smile. "No need for niceties, Michela. This is an excellent chance for my kind to connect to the people, and I'm glad for it. Putting up with the stage manager's standards is a small price."

"I'm glad we can help, then. Your whiskers are even more magnificent today,

Ms. Luluim," Chela said, turning to the dwarf.

Typically, even dwarf ladies sported facial hair and were proud of it.

"H-hey, Chela," Katie said, tugging her friend's sleeve, unable to wait longer. "Are they...?"

"Friends of the McFarlanes. Mr. Torlia and Ms. Luluim. Representing the southern centaurs and dwarves respectively. Introduce yourself, Katie."

Looking very nervous, Katie stepped up, eyes of two other species on her.

"N-nice to meet you!" she blurted out. "I'm Katie Aalto, a human mage!"

"Ah, you're Chela's school friends, then? Thanks for helping with the festival."

"Nice work. Help yourselves to the grub. Human children are so scrawny!"

Both welcomed her to the table. The other friends began pulling over chairs.

Unable to contain her excitement, Katie babbled, "Er, um...! I'm really into demi-human rights! I'm got a lot of questions...!"

"We're not going anywhere. Go on, sit down."

"And we won't bite. Humans don't taste that good. Mwa-ha-ha!"

Luluim's joke made Torlia wince. Having never encountered dwarf humor before, the mages quietly joined the circle, unsure what to make of it.

Both were affable types, and once they got talking, they were far easier to connect with than Mishakua had been. Soon everyone felt comfortable asking questions.

"...I've never met a centaur mage before, but your performance was certainly impressive, Mr. Torlia."

"Ha-ha, that was nothing. It's acting, but I'm paired with her. I'm mostly trying not to accidentally get myself killed and spoil the party."

"You ain't fooling anyone, Forest Guard," said Luluim. "You're the hero of the Sixty Years' War. Plenty of mages out there still shake in their boots when they hear your name."

That stunned Oliver, Katie, and Pete at once. The Sixty Years' War could only

be the famous historical centaur rebellion, and Forest Guard was the epithet of the centaur who'd commanded their forces. If that was the case, then they were quite legitimately in the presence of a bona fide hero.

"My rep's massively inflated," Torlia said, making a face. "These days it just gets in the way of my dealings with humans."

"...Um, can I ask more about that? I'm part of the civil rights movement myself and would love to hear how centaurs achieved their current standing direct from the source..."

"Sure, I can share, but—"

"Mr. Torlia! There you are!"

Just as Katie got to the point, an ordinary man came running up. He soon realized who else was at the table, and that he'd interrupted them; he turned rather pale, but Chela smiled.

"Never mind us—you have urgent business," she said.

The man moved up and whispered something to Torlia, whose brow furrowed.

"...I was afraid of that, but we'll have to act."

He sighed, then put down his mug.

"Sorry, Ms. Aalto," he said. "Hate to leave, but this is no time for drinks. Luluim, you come with. Don't take another sip."

"What, we fighting?"

She was already reaching for the handle of her ax. Torlia nodded gravely.

"Afraid so," he replied. "No harm in you all knowing—there's been tensions with the bogeys for a while, and they've launched an offensive. Wiped out a nearby town."

"——!"

Everyone's faces tensed.

"I'll be leading the campaign to put them down," Torlia went on. "We will try to negotiate first, but there's almost certainly gonna be bloodshed. The fight

won't get this far, don't worry. You and Chela enjoy—"

"Why not take them with you?" Mishakua suggested.

Oliver and the others looked shocked, but she didn't hesitate.

"They'll make themselves useful. They're Kimberly fourth-years. I guarantee they know their stuff."

When none of the students said anything, Toria turned to face them, arms crossed.

"...True, we could use every hand we've got. I've got lots of nonmagical comrades and troops in this battle. Even if you aren't active participants, if you'll help heal the wounded, we'd appreciate it."

"Don't worry. Stay behind me, and I'll keep you all safe and sound." Luluim grinned, flexing.

This unexpected request left them exchanging glances. Though surprised, given the situation, it was entirely appropriate to ask for their help. This was Chela's home, which also encouraged them to lend their wands. If there was any reason to refuse...

"...What do you say, Katie?" Guy asked.

".....I'm in. This is mage work."

She looked tense, but if she was going, no one else was inclined to decline. When everyone nodded, she spoke again.

"But I want to be sure of one thing. How are we treating foes who won't fight or the ones who surrender during combat?"

"Neutralize and capture once the fighting's over," Torlia replied. "If, during questioning, they agree to abandon the life of conquest and go back to being 'goblins,' then we'll give them the education they need to work in the factories. More or less the same for the kobolds that live with them."

"Factories..."

"That bugs you, too? You really are an activist. I dunno that this'll help, but I'll make sure their dwellings meet southern legal standards. We got an elf—

Mishakua—checking those standards often, so it oughtta be a lot better than regions run by humans alone."

That made Katie fold her arms and groan.

"That's far better than the losing side usually gets." Luluim shrugged. "Not long ago we'd just turn 'em over to their victims and forget. But that made them less inclined to surrender. And we know them raising the white flag's easiest for all of us."

Oliver had to nod at that. Having a plan in place post-surrender was clearly a conscientious approach.

"The settlement's scale is bigger than some," Torlia added. "We're expecting minimal casualties, even among the rank and file, but bogeys can be a real threat when they know the land. It'll be good experience for all of you."

Oliver and his friends nodded, took a deep breath, and exhaled. That alone was enough to make them put the merriment behind them.

They spent the night prepping and then headed west across the land, following Torlia's directions. They'd debated whether to use a summoning spell to get Marco there, but Mishakua solved that problem by showing up with a large chariot pulled by manacattle. Learning that she would be joining them on the front, Oliver concluded that she intended this whole thing to be a learning experience for them. With the McFarlanes' power, they'd hardly lack for military might, and either Mishakua or Torlia could likely crush a bogey village all on their own.

"Everyone's here. Begin!"

But once they met Torlia's forces on site, he had no choice but to revise that impression. Torlia had a lot more nonmagical troops with him than Oliver had expected, and it was clear they were meant to be the primary offense.

"I'll cover your retreat. Yell if a behemoth shows," Mishakua deadpanned, stopping alone at the forest entrance.

Torlia nodded, smirking. Oliver wasn't surprised she was avoiding the front lines. She was just too powerful and made it hard to take this seriously. Bogeys were a threat even ordinaries could handle if properly equipped—odds were

Torlia was looking to get *them* more experience. In light of which, Oliver wondered just how they should handle themselves.

Accompanying the troops, all eight of Oliver's crew advanced into the depths of the forest.

"...Hey, if we do have to fight...," Katie began.

"Don't need to tell me."

"Neutralize with minimal injuries, right?"

Guy and Pete were way ahead of her. Katie looked surprised, and Guy pursed his lips.

"I don't wanna feel bad about this, either. Especially after meeting them back in Farnland. We're hitting a village—there's gonna be kids, too."

Oliver entirely agreed with him. He made up his mind—rather than worry about what was their *best* option, he was going to follow Katie's heart.

They advanced with caution through the trees, Torlia in the lead—and in time, he stopped, put his fingers to his lips, and whistled like a bird. This custom was the same for bogeys and goblins alike.

"Wise forest children, I am Torlia, the Forest Guard! I'm afraid my alliance with the McFarlanes requires me to stand against actions violating the accord, like your assault on the human village. I swear that if you put your weapons down and surrender, no blood will be shed. What say you?!"

His voice faded into the darkness of the forest. The answer came not in words, but in a volley of arrows to the ground at his feet. Torlia sighed and reached for his athame.

"So much for speeches. Time to fight!"

"We'll lead."

Without waiting for orders, the mages stepped out. If they were going to play a bigger role than expected, now was the time to act.

Luluim blinked at them. "Ey, what's the rush? You wait in back—"

They'd known someone would stop them—so Oliver didn't let her finish.

"Cut 'em down, Nanao."

#### "Gladio Ferrum!"

Nanao's severing spell cut through all the trees before them. Any number of foes fell with these, and Oliver was already barking his next order.

"Take 'em out, Chela!"

# "Magnus Tonitrus!"

Her doublecant blanketed the area, hitting all the bogeys in an ambush. Guy and Katie went rushing in, wands waving.

### "Impediendum!"

# "Impediendum!"

Any foes who escaped the electric net were quickly neutralized. While they worked, Pete was flying multiple scout golems, searching for more.

"...Big group to the northwest. Small squads approaching from east and west. Best to hit those before they regroup."

"Roger that," said Oliver. "We'll open a path; you take out anything that gets past us. Marco, you stand down and guard the ordinaries."

"Unh, got it."

Armed with info, Oliver controlled the flow of battle. With a practiced ease that left the actual commanders slack-jawed.

"...You've gotta be kidding...," Luluim managed.

"Better than expected." Torlia grinned. "We may not get a turn here."

Up ahead, Oliver was pushing the front lines back. Katie was running alongside him.

"Katie, I'm sure you know...," he began.

"Yep." She nodded. "We're totally jumping the gun."

Torlia had brought these nonmagical soldiers along to teach them how to defend themselves; mages robbing them of that opportunity was less than desirable. Well aware of that, Katie chose to follow her own desire.

"But what of it? I care more about making sure these people aren't hurt. That's my priority!"

Oliver nodded. He knew: This was Katie's fight.

Meanwhile, deeper in the forest, far from the mages' battle...

"The attack's begun. Such horrid people."

A calm man's voice. In response—an unearthly sound. Bogey growls that could be taken as pain or elation.

"Yet we need not fear. You are no longer helpless bogeys. You can feel it, yes?"

Propelled by his words, they advanced. Watching their unnatural silhouettes go, a figure muttered: "Show your strength. As long as this blessing lies upon you."

The first stage of the battle was resolved, yet the mages did not relax, eyes on their surroundings.

"...It's awfully quiet."

"They lose their nerve?"

"Way too soon for that. They should have more forces—"

The moment Oliver spoke, Nanao's shoulders jumped.

"I sense something ominous," she intoned.

Oliver barked a warning: "Halt!"

"What?" Luluim said, puzzled. "We've got 'em on the ropes."

"Not if Nanao's instincts say otherwise. Mr. Torlia! Are we really just fighting bogeys and kobolds?"

".....?" Torlia looked confused. "They might have wargs or the like, but in my experience, no greater threat—"

"Below!" Chela yelled.

The mages leaped back—as something ripped out of the ground.

"...What the...?!" Pete said, narrowing his eyes.

These were bogeys—but their arms were transformed, hard and pointy, like drill bits. Bogeys had no such talents, and the sight of it made the centaur yelp.

"...No—they've gone Gnostic?!"

""""GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"""""

The bogeys charged, their freakish hands outstretched. Torlia wasted no time shouting orders.

"Company, retreat! Circular formation, defensive stances!"

"Firming up the ground! Fortis Prohibere!"

Luluim aimed her labrys at her feet, hardening the topsoil in the area. This prevented further attacks from below and let her start strutting her stuff.

"Fahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

With a roar, Luluim sent bogeys flying with her ax. While momentum was on her side, the nonmagical troops regrouped.

"Sorry. Did *not* see this coming," Torlia muttered. "There's been no signs of any Gnostic activities in this region, not for years. For it to show while you're with us—"

"Consider it a stroke of luck you had the extra might along," Oliver said.

"...Katie, I'm afraid this changes things," Chela cautioned.

"We can't hold back here," Guy added. "Sorry, but the gloves are off."

"...Ngh... Right...!"

Katie collected her nerves and raised her athame. Teresa's eyes were scanning the trees around them.

"——? What's up, Teresa?"

"...I'm not sure. Something's bugging me."

Not much of an answer, but Oliver nodded, growing even more cautious.

If she voiced a concern here, her covert instincts must have been sounding the alarm. Kobolds as gnosticized as the bogeys were pouring out of the brush, but they were *not* the only threat. Blasting the enemy aside with his spells, Oliver was all too sure of that.

"Damn, they're strong!" Guy growled, firing away. "These things really used to be normal bogeys and kobolds?!"

Spells worked on both types of enemies, but since they were coordinating their attacks and striking in numbers, the mages could not be careless. Further unforeseen attacks were in the cards here—and these creatures' transformations had clearly made them far more durable. They were as tough as the beasts in the Kimberly labyrinth.

"That's the Gnostic blessing. The one means by which those without magic aptitude can stand against a mage. Heedless of the cost that incurs..."

As Oliver spoke, he frowned. Even factoring in the gnosticization, this felt wrong.

"...But something's off. They're *too* strong. This isn't just an individual power-up; they know how to take advantage of their transformations in combat. That's doable if you have time to prepare, but—"

"They didn't," Torlia said, shaking his head. A bogey fell from a tree, and he kicked it away. "We were watching them the whole time, right up till the final warning today. If our network failed to detect it, they must have only just succumbed. The answer is obvious: Someone must have *taught* them."

Teresa had been watching their surroundings the whole time.

"Ms. Hibiya," she said.

"Mm? Yes, Teresa?"

"Cut down the trees behind us, to the left. Without looking. A single slice on the turn."

## "Gladio!"

Nanao accommodated this request at once. With a crash, the trees fell—and Oliver caught a glimpse of someone inside. He pointed his athame toward them.

"Someone's there! Don't let them leave! Flamma!"

#### """"Flamma!"""""

Their spells set the fallen trees alight, flushing out the hidden figure.

An elderly man in simple robes much like an Azian monk. Nearly seven feet tall, with gaunt cheeks and a build like steel wires. In his hand, a pentagonal staff, nearly as long as he was tall. A clear departure from the standard mage's appearance, yet the way he carried himself suggested he was a hardened veteran.

"You have fine instincts. I should not have dismissed you as children."



He sounded impressed. Oliver and the others glared at him, guarded.

"...A human mage."

"Stand down, Katie. You can tell, right? You can feel his threat."

Even as she urged Katie to retreat, Chela felt sweat running down her own back. Torlia and Luluim stepped forward, covering them.

"A priest of the Sacred Light. And rather high-ranking... A bishop or an archbishop?"

Torlia derived all this from the man's appearance. Resting that white staff behind him, the man bowed his head.

"Indeed, I am Evit. Despite my age, I serve as the lowest seat of the Pentagon."

Those words noticeably upped the stress on every face present. There were numerous Gnostic groups, and the Order of the Sacred Light was among the largest, boasting many mages among their ranks. But they had sworn loyalty to a tír god, their paths straying far from what a mage ought to be.

"You've been on the Gnostic Hunter blacklist for a solid fifty years! Hard-core," said Luluim. "Didn't expect you on McFarlane territory—you a workaholic?"

"We are not choosy. Where there are those in need of salvation, we arrive to answer their prayers."

Evit spoke with conviction. Torlia brandished his athame.

"If you've shown yourself, we must strike you down. Do you need our names?"

"I do not, centaur hero. Such a shame—I would have loved to perfect your form as well."

Sounding regretful, Evit raised his pentagonal staff. Stepping up beside Torlia, Luluim addressed the young mages behind them.

"We'll handle him. He ain't a foe for children's hands."

"...I hate to be rude, but can you win?"

This foe was an unknown quantity, and optimism was unadvisable.

Luluim met Oliver's blunt question with a grin.

"Lemme aboard, partner!"

"Don't you fall off!"

Labrys in hand, she leaped up on Torlia's back. Four hooves struck the ground, and together the pair charged at their foe.

Oliver gasped. "... A centaur desant!"

As the priest raised his staff, the demi duo made the first strike.

#### "Impetus!"

"Raughhhhhhhhhhh!"

The spell forced their foe onto the receiving end, and then Luluim's labrys slammed home, boosted by the momentum of the charge. A furious assault that left Evit on the defensive.

Katie and Guy watched with bated breath.

"Wow...!"

"They fight as one unit...!"

"There's no time to marvel at it!" Chela shouted. "We've got bogeys to fight!"

Leaving the priest to Torlia and Luluim, the Sword Roses refocused on the gnosticized bogeys. Their presence here had proven a boon to the commanders; no nonmagical soldiers could stand against creatures altered by tir powers. Had the Kimberly contingent not been here, Torlia and Luluim could never have focused their full attention on Evit.

"Whew, such fury! Too much for these old bones." The priest sighed, deflecting another attack. Yet he hadn't even broken a sweat.

Torlia and Luluim were well aware of how odd that was—he'd weathered their assault without a single spell cast. Superlative footwork alone could not explain it—they had to assume that pentagonal staff supplied protection.

"Best I shut those hooves down. Manifest pillar—

An unnatural spell crossed Evit's lips. Multiple white pillars rose from all around, restraining the centaur's movements. Luluim slammed one with her ax, but a blow that could shatter steel merely bounced off with a *clang*.

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"Ngh! Can't break 'em...!"
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"Sacraments! No matter—I'll just run through them!"

Torlia was already threading his way through the pillars. For a split second, a pillar stood between them and their foe—and the priest was gone, escaping their line of sight.

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"Huh—?"
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"I did not seek to slow you—merely limit you."

He was in their blind spot. By the time they realized that, the tip of the staff had struck Luluim's left arm.

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"Gah...!"
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"Luluim!"

With his partner injured, Torlia backed off. As they handled the bogeys, the other mages saw the same thing and tensed up.

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"...Wh-what just happened?"
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"How'd he move that fast...?"

"That's the Sacred Light's geomartial arts. The closer their movements get to the orderliness of regular polygons, the stronger their god's blessing is. With the pillars limiting his movement, Mr. Torlia doesn't stand a chance."

Oliver had read up on this, so he could offer that much explanation.

Torlia and Luluim were left scowling at their foe.

"His movements are that much more precise than our own. I knew that going in, yet..."

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"Tch, eff that... I ain't good at math."
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Even as she spoke, Luluim took a short hold on her labrys, scraping away her own skin and flesh. Gnostic attacks always carried a risk of corruption, and this was the treatment.

The priest sighed. "You removed the stigmata. Merely accept it, and you could be one of us."

"Hell no! I ain't about to join no boring world without drinks or song! Clypeus!"

As they moved again, Luluim put a big pillar between them and their foe. She seemed to be imitating the priest, who frowned.

"Increasing your own impediments? Foolish—"

"That'd be you."

Luluim chopped the pillar like it was firewood—and it split in five, the pieces flying out in all directions. She'd adjusted her visualization on the spell before generating it.

"...Hng...!"

"Go on, move! Follow your little rules!"

# "Impetus!"

The pieces of the fallen pillar obstructed Evit's pathing, and Torlia's spell shot toward him. An approach that stifled the priest's strengths.

"...They're good," Oliver said, visibly impressed. "The pieces fell right where they'd block the polygons."

"And make the ground rougher," Chela added. "Even the Order's martial arts can be disrupted if they're forced to jump, while a centaur's sure footing excels on rough ground."

As he fended off the ensuring assault, the priest muttered, "Ah, very good... I see those sixty years at war served you well."

"Yer damn right! Battle ain't no place for a ruler or a compass!" Luluim yelled.

Their charge was ferocious, but against their heroics, the priest stood his staff on the ground.

"However, I've fought the Gnostic Hunters for a *hundred* years," he said. "Two-armed, four-legged centaurs—"

Luluim's ax swung down. Evit caught the blow with the point of his staff and slipped beneath Torlia's belly.

"—cannot reach beneath them. A well-known fact."

Once more, his moves left the others tongue-tied. Their foe was now hiding beneath Luluim's mount—yet she just grinned.

"Dumbass! You missed two arms. Impetus!"

She snapped her wand toward Torlia's flank. The handle sank into his side, the blade beneath him—firing a wind spell at the priest below.

"Hng...!"

Evit blocked with his staff but was flung out from beneath the centaur. Torlia wheeled around toward him but was drawn up short by the pain in his side.

"...Unh..."

"Sorry; snapped a rib. Wouldn't have reached the old man if I hadn't swung that hard."

"...I know. Just...buy me a drink later."

With that, they were back in the fray. The priest was once again on his feet, dusting off his robes with a sigh.

"...My goodness. A dwarf and a centaur fighting together—you certainly are a nuisance."

"We can go all night," Luluim taunted. "If you can swing that long pole one-handed."

Evit had been in no position to defend himself while clinging to the centaur's underside—the dwarf's labrys had broken his left arm. Then the Kimberly group came running up.

"Gnostic bogeys and kobolds down. They were a small part of the whole."

"We can back you up now. It'll be a tough fight, Sacred Light priest," Chela said, pointing her athame his way.

Surrounded by wands, Evit frowned. "I underestimated the children, too. I had no time to coach anyone properly—and I certainly didn't expect nine mages

to put down one bogey village."

His right hand slipped from the pentagonal staff. That might have looked like a sign of surrender—but his lips betrayed that.

"Grant unquenchable thirst—■■■■■. Let god's authority hold sway, however fleeting."

The mages fired lightning over the priest's unnatural incantation. But then a cube appeared from nothing and swallowed each bolt.

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"Hng—"
"It inhaled our spells?!"
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As they gaped, the cube began to absorb the very air around them, as if there was a hole in the world. They stood their ground against the pull of it but heard screams behind them.

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"Ah! Gah—aughhhhhh!"

"O-owww...!"

"Dry... Dry... Too dry...!"
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Even at that distance, the sacrament was drying out the nonmagical soldiers' skins. That plus what he'd read led Oliver to the nature of this threat.

"An Urani Sponge! A tír object that expands the more it absorbs! Move before it grows or it'll take your body!"

He'd seen records of this sacrament, witnessed on the Gnostic fronts. Oliver and his friends quickly retreated, trying to escape its pull, but with it absorbing their spells on cast, they could not fight back. The nonmagical troops were drying out and toppling over behind them, and they were helpless to stop it.

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"Shit! This is bad...!"
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"We can't even protect them!"

#### "Fortis Prohibere Resistis!"

The pulling stopped dead. A triplecant, far more powerful than anything they

could produce. Like a plug dropped in a drain, the air around the tír object went still.

"Do my eyes deceive me, or is this worse than a behemoth?"

"Mother!" Chela gasped, her eyes turning to the sky behind her.

Mishakua McFarlane, astride a broom, wand in hand. Her spell was engaged in an active tug-of-war with the sacrament.

"And now *you've* arrived." The priest sighed. "I suppose this is where I bid you adieu."

"Why the hurry, little Sacred Light boy? I don't mind going all out right here."

"I'm honored by the offer, but neither of us have any such intentions."

Dismissing her challenge, he ended the sacrament. His next chant spawned a diagonal pillar, and he kicked off the end as it grew, launching himself into the trees.

"No need to rush—salvation is never far from reach."

With those last words, he was gone. Freed from the gravitational pull, fatigue caught up with everyone present. Mishakua leaped from her broom, glancing around.

"Much as I'd love to pursue and pummel the man, some of these ordinaries won't last. Torlia, Luluim, got anything left?"

"...Wish I did..."

"Sorry..."

They were both injured and clearly in pain. Mishakua nodded and glanced at the young mages.

"That is the Gnostic threat. Did we all learn something today, kids?"

She flashed a smile. No one dared say a word. This unsettling foe and their first battle with a mage armed with the tír's mysteries—neither was something they would ever forget.

Meanwhile, in Lantshire... Two mages reached their destination.

They were through the sturdy iron doors in the mountainous walls, and the building within was all the more brutal. The fortress filled their vision with black and gray, less mausoleum than plain old tombstone. Here, the very notion of decorative flourish was considered pointless. No such efforts would ever disguise the permanent stench of death.

*"…."* 

"...Hmph."

This was the Gnostic Hunter headquarters, the likes of which could not be found anywhere else in the world. The mage pair had left the hellscape of Kimberly and fallen straight into an even more fiery cauldron.

"...Can you feel it, Lesedi?" Godfrey asked, eyes on that ghastly sight.

The woman next to him nodded. "Yeah. Reminds me of my first day at Kimberly."

They grinned at each other, finding humor in their shared sentiment.

"Time we went in."

"I'm with you."

Their next step could not be retracted. Both minds wondered how to greet those within—or what spell to hit them with.

END

# **Afterword**

A vacation as unnerving as it was relaxing. Greetings. My name is Bokuto Uno.

How does the world operate under mage rule? How do those who live there engage with its bounties? On their long voyage, all our heroes got a choice taste of *that*.

Ordinaries enriched by magic society, demi-humans engaged in their own survival strategies, and a brush with the mage's mortal enemy: the tír. Each experience will inform the friends' future actions. Three years at Kimberly has given them power. And when that aligns with their motives, what *spell* will their eyes find?

There is little time to mull it over. Their horizons broadened, they head back to school...to find much has changed. Thus—dear readers, broaden your own minds. This world is far too complex to be discussed in terms of black and white.





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# **Table of Contents**

- 1. Cover
- 2. Insert
- 3. <u>Title Page</u>
- 4. Copyright
- 5. <u>Prologue</u>
- 6. Chapter 1: Departure
- 7. Chapter 2: Farnland, Nation of Lakes
- 8. Chapter 3: Portents
- 9. Afterword
- 10. Yen Newsletter