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Majo to Yohei Vol. 2

©Chohokiteki Kaeru (Original Story)

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NOVEL

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Chapter 1:

A New Conflict

W HEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE, A NEW LOCATION or environment probably isn't enough to drastically change someone."

It was something a former mercenary buddy of Zig's had told him while the man was drunk on both booze and himself. Those words ended up being half-true...and half-bullshit.

Siasha had changed dramatically since they first met, but himself? Not so much. The difference likely came down to how much effort she had been willing to put into transforming herself.

It may be cliché, but as they say: "It depends on the individual."

Those thoughts ran through Zig's mind as he and Siasha made their way toward the establishment Alan and his party told them about.

A few days earlier, an emergency had come up while they were in the special extermination squad, and Alan implored Zig to help out his comrades. The day after the squad returned home, Alan and his party were called to the guild for extra debriefings, but they eventually finished those duties and called upon Zig and Siasha. The two were now being treated to this dinner so Alan and his party could express their gratitude—and so Zig could receive his payment.

Alan was waiting outside the restaurant when Zig and Siasha arrived.

"Ah, Zig, Siasha, well met," he said.

"Same to you," Zig replied.

"Let's head on in. I hope you don't mind that I picked the place?"

"That's fine."

"Glad to hear it. The rest of my party is already inside securing us seats."

The restaurant Alan chose wasn't particularly big, but it seemed well constructed and had a relaxing ambiance.

They followed the swordsman inside. While most of the clientele were adventurers, the atmosphere wasn't unrefined. The patrons were laughing and chatting with each other, but the mood was calm and no one was unruly.

"This is a really nice place," Siasha murmured, sharing a similar impression to Zig's.

With just a glance around at the other customers, Zig could sense their intimidating prowess—the kind unique to highly skilled individuals—from their physiques and the items they carried. Not every adventurer there was a big shot, but a significant percentage of them were.

"The prices of this establishment cater toward the more high-level adventurers, so naturally, you'll find more of those types here," Alan explained. "However, there are a decent number of capable adventurers who'd rather associate with a diverse crowd than deal solely with the upper crust."

"What about the non-adventurers that seem to be mixed in here and there?" Zig asked.

"They're mostly the family or partners of adventurers, or maybe wealthy clients who've come here to directly offer someone a job."

"Makes sense."

After Alan told the staff member who came to help him that they were meeting someone, they were led to the back of the establishment where the rest of his party was waiting. Food was already laid out, wisps of steam rising from the lavish spread.

"Sorry for the wait," Alan said.

"You're killing us, Captain!" Lyle exclaimed. "Let's start digging in."

"Now, now," Alan placated his party's shield fighter. "Be patient for just a little longer."

He turned to face the group.

"I'd like to make a formal introduction," he continued. "This is Zig and Siasha. Not only did they help us resolve the recent incident, but we owe them a great debt for rescuing our companions from serious danger. I've invited both of them to dine with us today as a show of gratitude. Please eat and drink as much as you like! Cheers!"

They all took hearty swigs of their drinks as Alan concluded his speech. Downing his own beverage in one gulp, the swordsman held out a leather satchel full of coins.

"Here's your payment," he said. "You fulfilled the terms for a successful mission, so you'll be happy to hear it's the whole amount."

"Much appreciated," Zig said. The bigger payout made putting his life on the line feel even more worth it. The weight of all 100,000 dren felt comforting as Zig slipped the bag into a pocket—instantly filling the void left in his wallet from recently purchasing new equipment. After completing such a strenuous job and landing a satisfying bounty for it, the alcohol tasted even more delicious than usual.

The group continued to eat and drink together while chatting about various things.

"So was it you who warned us back then?"

"Yeah, it was me. I'm sorry that we were spying on you."

The conversation had made its way back to their first encounter with the ghost shark.

"That's what you're concerned about?" Lyle laughed loudly as he smacked Zig, who sat next to him, on the shoulder. "Saving someone's life is far more important, don't you think?!"

"Truthfully," Malt, the party's magic user who had also been present during the attack, spoke up between slow and deliberate sips of his drink, "I'm not too thrilled to hear we were being watched, but it's nothing to get up in arms about considering it's what saved us in the end."

"I appreciate you saying that," Zig said.

They seemed nowhere near as upset at being spied on as the mercenary had feared. In fact, now that the topic had resurfaced, the party was thanking him again.

"What happens to those who are caught peeping where you come from, Zig?"

"Let's see... A good beating would be getting off light," he mused. "Depending on who you're spying on, losing your dominant arm also wouldn't be too out of the question."

Alan and his companions froze at that.

Beads of cold sweat trickled down Lyle's face as he choked out, "That's horrible! That's the norm where you're from?"

"It's tantamount to robbing someone's business," was the mercenary's reply.

Someone watching would learn the moves and skills someone had poured their heart and soul into mastering—a spy should know the dire consequences of attempting to steal them.

"How about another drink, Zig?" Listy asked.

"Oh, yes please."

The archer poured some more booze into Zig's empty tankard.

"You're even more on the ball than usual today, Listy!" Malt commented.

"Are you trying to make a pass at him?"

"He's got a promising future; I might as well try my luck."

"Future? He's pretty damn strong right now!"

Listy completely ignored Malt's comeback as Alan looked on with a smile. But his expression quickly turned serious.

"Putting your personal ambitions aside, Listy..." he said as he turned to their guests. "Zig, Siasha, what would you say to joining us?"

"You're serious, Captain?" Lyle asked in surprise. However, Alan's tone and expression made him quickly realize that the man wasn't joking.

In contrast, Siasha continued to calmly sip her drink.

"I am," the swordsman said. "I saw firsthand the extent of Siasha's magic. I don't doubt her capabilities one bit."

"I suppose I'm in agreement," was Malt's logical response. "My magic leans toward scouting and protection. With her firepower and mana supply, the number of tactics we could use would dramatically increase."

Listy was apparently on board with the idea from the get-go, but there was still something that made Lyle hesitate.

"That may be true, but there's a huge gap in our levels," he pointed out. "What are you planning to do about that?"

"I'm not saying they need to enter our ranks immediately," their leader said. "It's something that we could discuss again once she receives a few more promotions. Of course, we'll give her as much support as possible if she's in agreement. Or...is it that you don't think they're capable enough to join us?"

"I'm not saying that, but..."

"Hold on," Listy cut in, "isn't it more important for us to ask the people in question how they feel instead of arguing among ourselves?"

The two men looked slightly abashed at her reasonable statement.

"Sorry, it seems we got a little carried away," Alan apologized.

"That was damn embarrassing..." Lyle murmured.

The two men then just stood there awkwardly, so the archer ended up posing the question to Siasha and Zig herself.

"Well, what do you think?"

Siasha was the first to respond. "Let us think it over for a bit. I'm actually in the middle of considering what I should do in the future."

"Oh yeah?"

"I was thinking about getting some experience working with a party by joining one temporarily in a support role."

"Hm... That's a good idea."

Listy seemed satisfied with Siasha's answer. She turned to Zig next.

"I have a good idea of what it might be, but what's your next move?"

Zig chugged the remaining drink in his tankard before setting it on the table and looking directly at Alan's party. "Sorry, but I have no plans to quit being a mercenary."

None of them looked particularly surprised; that was probably the answer they were expecting.

"But you can call upon me if it's necessary," he continued. "I'll lend you a hand if I'm free, depending on what I'm getting paid, that is."

"Well, I guess that's that."

With those words, the topic came to a close.

Alan's party got even livelier as they consumed more alcohol, with Listy making little jabs at her companions here and there as they continued to feast. The restaurant soon began to fill up, and other groups settled in the seats nearby.

A woman approached them. "Oh? Alan, is that you?"

"Good evening, Elsia," Alan greeted.

She had a unique appearance—silver hair, a voluptuous body adorned with vestments, and a piece of cloth draped over her eyes. He had only met her once, but Zig remembered who she was.

The woman's mouth twisted into a grimace as she recognized him. "You...

You're that shithead from that day..."

"N-now, now, Elsia..." Alan tried to placate her as she began to emanate an aura of malevolence.

Realizing that causing a scene in the restaurant would be a poor choice, she seemed to glare at Zig through her eye covering instead.

Zig sighed at her searing gaze. "You got what was coming to you, you know."

"I'll let it slide this time, out of consideration for Alan," Elsia said angrily, "but you won't get off so easy if you ever try messing with me again." She stormed off and took a seat at the neighboring table.

Lyle and the rest of Alan's party were stunned at the scene before them.

"What on earth did you do?" Lyle demanded.

"It seemed like she was up to some funny business, so I slipped her a laxative."

"Are you even human?!" the shield fighter said in exasperation. "That's terrible..."

"All I did was ask Elsia to look for someone for me," Alan explained. "Seems there were some misunderstandings along the way." The swordsman had only wanted to know who had warned him and his party about the ghost shark.

While he couldn't see her eyes due to the cloth that covered them, Zig could sense her gaze. Her wine glass was tilted toward him, as if she were observing him closely. His temples started to throb uncomfortably, and the distinctive smell that meant someone was using magic filled his nostrils.

Siasha stiffened slightly, catching on to what was happening before anyone else. She recognized the mercenary's demeanor—the same one she felt when she faced off against him in that forest where they first met. The air surrounding him felt incredibly similar to how he carried himself when fighting an enemy to the death.

Zig slowly reached into one of his pockets and took out what looked to be a single silver coin. His fingers blurred, and the coin disappeared before Siasha's eyes.

There was the sound of breaking glass and a woman's alarmed gasp.

Siasha turned in the direction of the commotion to see a completely stunned Elsia clutching a shattered goblet. Zig had shot straight through it with the coin.

The who and how were clear, but what Siasha didn't understand was the why.

Since Elsia was looking in their direction, she immediately put two and two together.

"You!" she roared at Zig. "What the hell are you doing?!"

At her fiery outburst, Alan and company knew exactly what had happened.

"Come on, Zig. That was really out of line..."

"Elsia shouldn't have been so aggressive, but what you did just now was way too much."

Their reprimands seemed to fall on deaf ears; Zig continued to fix Elsia with a cold gaze. It only served to further fan the flames of her rage.

"What sort of stunt was that?!" she seethed, clearly trying to suppress her anger. "I turned the other cheek because Alan and company seemed to be besotted with you, but you've pushed far beyond the limits of my kindness. Go outside at once; it seems you need to be taught a lesson."

Alan and his party started to panic—this was no laughing matter. Even among third-class adventurers, Elsia was easily one of the most accomplished. Zig had picked the wrong person to mess with. While they were still racking their brains to come up with a way to somehow defuse the situation, Zig finally spoke.

"What's the big idea?"

"I believe that's my line," Elsia sighed, not understanding the intent of his question.

"This is the second time you've tried to use magic on me, isn't it?"

"Wh-what?" Zig's accusation made her freeze.

Her anger dissipated, replaced instead by unmistakable shock. The response answered Zig's question without her even needing to say a word.

"What...did you mean by that, Zig?" Alan asked.

"Exactly what it sounds like," he said. "She tried using magic on me the last time too."

"But how did you pick up on it?"

It was incredibly difficult to sense magic while it was still being cast unless it was a very powerful and large-scale spell. Still, judging by Elsia's reaction, it was obvious she was doing exactly what he had accused her of.

"I've got a little trick up my sleeve," Zig answered evasively before rising to his feet.

He slowly made his way over to Elsia and stood before her.

"I let you get away with it once—but there are no second chances," he said. "If you weren't an adventurer, that projectile would've gone straight through your neck instead. Go outside. This is going to hurt a little."

Realizing the situation was about to get ugly, Alan stepped in front of Zig. "That's enough."

Slight chills ran down his spine as the mercenary's glower shifted to him. There wasn't any murderous intent in those eyes, but it was as if Alan was an obstacle that needed to be eliminated.

Zig's cold stare, so different from that of a monstrosity or common thief, made Alan's body feel rigid. Still, he held his gaze fast, refusing to let his fear show.

"Would you please get out of the way?" Zig asked.

"I can't do that," the captain replied. "Is there any way you can resolve this

just by talking it out?"

"You want me to talk it out with someone who tried to cast magic on me as soon as we first met?"

"Now, I'm not saying that you're lying, but you also don't have any proof of that claim, do you? The one who's going to end up in hot water here is you—and by extension, your employer, Siasha."

Even Zig had to pause at the mention of her name. A bodyguard taking actions that would put his client in danger was putting the cart before the horse.

On the other hand, he couldn't just leave a possible threat unchecked. Alan may have stopped Zig, but he wasn't withdrawing either.

"I can understand why you wouldn't want to sweep this under the rug," Alan continued, "but that's the very reason you should be open to considering a discussion."

Zig was silent, his eyes never moving from Alan's face as the man looked straight back at him. After a moment's hesitation, he spoke.

"Fine. But I don't need to talk. She owes me one. If she's willing to accept those terms, we'll be on our way."

Somehow, Alan had managed to extract a concession from Zig. The swordsman glanced at Elsia, who still seemed to be in shock. The woman nodded in agreement.

"Understood," she said.

As soon as he heard her response, Zig turned on his heel and walked away. Siasha quickly followed behind him, but not before turning around and politely bowing to the rest of the group.

"It got a little chaotic at the end, but thank you so much for treating us to dinner."

"Sure thing," Alan responded. "We'll see you around."

Alan wiped the sweat from his brow as he watched them leave. Somehow, he had been able to get them out of that sticky situation.

"Well, I don't think he was serious..." he mumbled.

Were those chills running up his spine just a figment of his imagination? If his instincts were correct, had he let things run the way they were going, it would've likely ended in bloodshed.

Still, despite his muscular and rough appearance, Zig was the cautious type. He wouldn't do something that would put the person he was supposed to be protecting at risk.

Then, who could've prompted this feeling? he wondered.

Alan dismissed the first person who popped into his head. He glanced back at Elsia—she was still sitting in her chair looking despondent. For a moment, he considered saying something but figured that it was best to just leave her be for now. He returned to his own table.

"Well, they're quite an *impressive* pair of new recruits. No, wait. The man isn't an adventurer, huh..."

Malt was purposely keeping his opinion vague. Alan could understand why.

He turned to Lyle, who was still drinking with a grim expression. "What do you think?"

"I wish you'd given me a head's up about all this. I would've been much better prepared in that case."

"Sorry about that."

Lyle was essentially the brains of the operation, the helmsman who guided the rest of the party with his astuteness and extensive experience. Alan hoped to get his opinion on Zig and Siasha after they had an opportunity to meet and talk.

Lyle's face looked strained, but it didn't appear that all hope was lost.

"The man seems like the loyal type when it comes to work," he said. "He may have a bit of a stubborn streak, but that just means you can trust him to do a reliable job. He may call himself a mercenary, but to me, the feeling he gives off is closer to that of an assassin."

Lyle's character assessment made perfect sense to Alan.

He's right on the money with that assassin comment.

"He shouldn't pose any danger to us unless we act aggressively toward him, right?" the swordsman asked.

"Probably," Lyle replied. "He didn't seem the type to actively break the law."

"What about his capabilities?"

"I only saw him taking care of small fry, so I can't say for sure, but I don't think I'd be able to handle him."

"He's that strong...?" Alan murmured.

Lyle was an elite shield fighter. When it came to just defensive fighting, he could hold his own against even a third-class adventurer. But...there was a different reason for Lyle's grimace.

"It's the woman, though..." he said softly. "I don't get her deal."

"What do you mean?" the captain asked.

It was exceedingly rare for Lyle to say he didn't understand someone. He had the ability to get a good feel for most people just by sharing a meal and chatting with them.

Zig aside, Alan wondered what it was about Siasha that had Lyle so in doubt.

"If I was just making an assessment based on observing and talking to her, I'd say she's a cute and earnest country girl." Lyle took a sip of his drink as he thought aloud. But when he put the cup down, his expression turned dark.

"They're so deep. Her eyes, that is."

"Deep?"

"Yeah... I've never seen anyone with such depth in their eyes. When I was looking into them, I got struck with the feeling that they were sucking me in. I can't read her true intentions at all. What in the world is she?" Lyle shivered at the memory of that sensation.

Alan had never seen him like this before.

That reminded him... The person whom he thought of first earlier was none other than Siasha.

He had laughed it off at the time, but now...

"There is one thing I know, though," Lyle said, his words cutting through Alan's thoughts. With an expression that brimmed with confidence, he continued, "That woman—Siasha—no matter what happens, she'll stick with Zig."

Zig and Siasha walked quietly down the dark road.

Their strides were different, though Zig was matching his to Siasha's to ensure they weren't too far apart. It was only recently that she noticed he did that. She had never walked alongside another person until now, and the happiness she felt from receiving such care made her smile.

She slowly glanced up at Zig and said, "I wouldn't have minded squaring off with her back there."

The mercenary held back a sigh. As soon as he mentioned that Elsia was trying to use magic on him, Siasha immediately—and unbeknownst to the others—began to cast magic directly aimed at her.

Zig hadn't seriously been looking for a fight; he had just been trying to scare her so she wouldn't pull any of that funny business again.

Truth be told, he wished he had the chance to be a little more threatening, but when he noticed Siasha seriously preparing for battle, he forced himself to drop the act. Siasha was a rational person, but she could also be a bit extreme.

Sometimes she judged whether someone was an ally or an enemy a little too quickly. It was understandable as a survival technique, but there were many people in the world who didn't fall under either category. Neither of them would be able to stay alive if they made enemies out of everyone who landed in the gray zone.

"Your adventuring is going so well as of late," Zig commented. "Make it count, okay?"

"You've got a point," she said. "Every day's been so busy lately, I'm really enjoying it!" Siasha laughed happily and skipped ahead of Zig, but after a few moments she turned back toward him. "What about you?"

Her blue eyes shone in the moonlight as she looked at him—eyes so deep that it felt like he was being sucked into her gaze.

"Well, I suppose this work is more fulfilling than the monotony of being on the battlefield all the time."

Siasha softly smiled. That was a satisfactory answer.

Stepping back in stride with Zig, she linked one of her arms through his, her long black hair brushing against them as it fluttered in the breeze. She cheerfully walked alongside him for a while before realizing there was something on his mind.

"Is something bothering you?"

"Hm..." he muttered. "It's just the way that eye-masked woman acted..."

Zig had been able to sense that she was trying to use magic, so Elsia's surprise was understandable. Still, just as Alan said, he didn't have any proof. She could have easily denied his allegations... And yet, she reacted like that.

It felt too over the top for someone who just had their magic discovered,

almost like he'd seen something he shouldn't have.

Siasha looked grim after hearing Zig's thoughts.

"Could you tell what kind of magic it was?" she asked.

"No, I've never smelled something like that before," he said. "That's why...I can't explain it well, but it was a different scent from offensive or defensive spells."



"So far, you've seen offensive, defensive, healing, and fortification magic, right? Oh, and stealth as well."

She was referring to the ghost shark's magic. The memory was faint now, but he remembered it having a somewhat grassy smell. The scent of Elsia's magic had a strong bitterness to it.

"I suppose out of all of them, it was the closest to the stealth one...?"

"Hm. That's too little information to reach much of a conclusion."

There were a lot of strange things about that eye-masked woman. Something about her bothered Zig, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He mentally added her to the list of people he needed to keep an eye on.

"Zig, I've been thinking about joining a party temporarily like Isana suggested."

She's probably recalling her earlier conversation with Alan, Zig thought. About her future plans.

"That sounds like a good idea," he said. "You'll likely be collaborating with other adventurers a lot more in the future."

Even if Siasha didn't officially join a party, their experiences during the extermination squad showed she needed to fight alongside others sometimes. It would be difficult for her moving forward if she didn't learn how to work as part of a team.

"Do you have any leads?"

"I was thinking about meeting with a party that Listy told me about."

From what Siasha had heard, most of the party members were female and were also eighth-class adventurers like herself. Since Listy recommended them, their conduct wasn't likely to be a problem. They seemed like the perfect group to team up with, at least for the time being.

Siasha had a slight air of dejection about her as she glanced back at Zig. "With

that being the case, I'm really sorry, but—"

"Don't worry," Zig cut in. "I'll figure something out."

He had a pretty good idea of what she was trying to say. Even if she was only working with them temporarily, it would be difficult for a party to accept her if she had a bodyguard trailing her.

"It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world for me to take some time off," he continued. "However, you need to let me know in advance when I should expect you back. If you're significantly later than planned, I'll go looking for you."

"Understood."

With Siasha's capabilities, Zig doubted that anything would happen. But just in case... Since there were still many things they didn't know about monstrosities, it was best to be prepared.

Still discussing their future plans, the pair continued to walk home.

It was so quiet one could hear the crickets chirping.

Tension hung in the air as two groups sat at the furthermost table of the guild's dining hall. The tea in their cups had long since grown cold, perfectly mirroring everyone's mood.

With a serious—or more accurately, rigid—expression on her face, Siasha sat facing the adventurers Listy had introduced her to, the members of the party she was supposed to join short-term.

"Um, so...you're Siasha, right? We heard about you from Listy. You wanted to work with us...uh, temporarily?"

One of the party members—Lindia, an adventurer who looked like a young girl—addressed her on behalf of her group as if to move the conversation along. She forced a wry smile at Siasha, who was frozen with nerves from the moment she arrived.

"Th-that's right!"

Siasha was so incredibly tense that she found herself unable to move. She was now somewhat used to interacting with humans since she started spending time with Zig, but this atmosphere was different from conversing with staff at shops or the guild's receptionist.

Even if they would only be working together for a limited time, she didn't know how to act toward these humans who would be her future companions.

"A-anyway, please relax," Lindia stammered. "U-uh... We already introduced ourselves, right? So...um, what next?"

The members of the party also seemed to feel overwhelmed by Siasha's presence. Her beauty took their breaths away despite all of them also being female. One of them hastily reached for her cup but completely missed, her empty hand hanging limply in the air.

"Hee hee."

Siasha's face creased into a smile when she realized the other girls were just as nervous as she was.

What a bizarre scene, she thought to herself.

They were different species from different continents, with varying ages and values... And yet both she and this party were completely flummoxed by how to interact with each other. It was just laughably absurd.

She—the one they once called the Silent Witch—was just as perplexed as these human girls.

"'Go about things in a way that one day you can look back on them and laugh,' was it?" She whispered the advice Zig had once given her under her breath.

Just repeating the words released the tension in her body, making her realize that it all came down to her state of mind. She slowly closed her eyes. Upon opening them again, she was back to her normal self. "I usually work as part of a duo," she said brightly, "but I wanted to try adventuring with a larger group. I hope you'll have me?"

"Oh, sure."

It was like a spell had been cast on them. Lindia and her companions were so bewitched by Siasha's enchanting smile that all they could muster was that dazed response.

People came and went as they headed to work. After escorting Siasha to the guild so she could meet with her prospective party, Zig found himself wandering through town. Since he had been acting as Siasha's bodyguard, he had never had much time to just take a stroll.

He already had a basic understanding of Halian's layout, but he figured exploring might be an efficient use of his time. At least, that was his excuse as he peeked into an establishment that he'd had his eye on for some time.

His destination was a shop that mainly sold magic implements. Their items captured his interest, but unfortunately, he couldn't use mana to activate them.

Zig examined the rows of products on display.

"Heh, this gauntlet glows when it's struck. I suppose it could function as a torch...?"

He found it enjoyable to just look at things that seemed to have no practical use. With his recent pay burning a hole in his pocket, purchasing something might not be a bad idea. Zig, having a weakness for new items, searched through the wares to look for something within his budget.

Among various small items such as arrows and knives, something caught his eye that stood out from the rest: a row of several dull-blue coins.

"Coins?"

His curiosity piqued, Zig waved over a nearby shop clerk.

"These are coins primarily made from indigo adamantine," the clerk explained.

"I've heard that name before," Zig mused. "It can disrupt magic, right?"

He remembered finding a dagger made of the stuff when he and Siasha went looking for magic items a while back. The material's unique property of being able to cut through magic had intrigued him. However, a small dagger didn't have much practicality, and making a weapon of a usable size for him would've cost a fortune—so he had given up on it.

"Yes. These coins were excavated from historic ruins. Apparently, they were used as currency by some country in the past. Due to their unique nature to prevent magic from working, it's believed they had a high degree of credibility as they were hard to counterfeit or conceal."

"They're not in use anymore?"

"Indigo adamantine isn't as plentiful as it used to be, so continuing to use it to make coins would be difficult. It's been a very long time since these were in circulation, but since they have a splendid design, the owner of this shop decided it would be better to sell them as antiques rather than melt them down."

The number of coins they had available for sale wouldn't be enough to forge even a single dagger. Taking the processing fees into consideration, it probably wasn't worth making something out of them.

"Hmm. 300,000 dren, huh?"

There were 30 coins of equal size. They were priced at 10,000 dren each—buying the lot would add up to a hefty sum.

"On what kind of scale would these be able to dissipate magic?" he asked. "For example, what would happen if they touched a spell?"

"Let's see..." the clerk pondered. "You could think of it like, whatever part of the spell it touched would vanish. It could poke holes in offensive and defensive spells, but if it's just a small hole, the one casting could just infuse more mana in it and it would quickly patch up."

Of course, things were never easy. He was hoping he would be able to use these coins to obstruct spells.

"However," the clerk continued just when Zig was about to move on, "magic is delicate, and concentration is required to keep a spell going. For example, in the case of concealment magic, a touch from one of these coins would greatly disrupt the caster."

"Interesting."

Zig's mind was reeling at the information. Even if a hole was ripped in the spell itself, the magic user could fix the problem by adding more mana. But... that wasn't the case if the casting process itself was the target.

"In other words...if someone was struck by one of these coins while in the middle of casting a spell, what would happen?"

The clerk cupped their chin in their hand as they contemplated Zig's question.

"I think it might work," they said. "Even when we make magic implements that use indigo adamantine, we use a different material for the handles to make sure it doesn't interfere with casting. However, these are only small items, and they don't continually cause disruption. At best, you can cut off a spell for only a fraction of a second."

"A fraction of a second is enough."

For someone like Zig who could smell magic being cast, the coins could be useful tools. He broke into a big smile; it felt like he had struck gold. Finds like these were the reason he kept searching for these kinds of stores.

"I'll take all of them," he said. "Do you have any more in stock?"

"This is all our store has at the moment, but I can put them on back order if you're interested."

The current amount was probably enough for now. They were something he

could pick up and use again, and he could always come back for more when his supply ran low.

Although, it should've crossed his mind what he would do if they didn't work as intended. Practically speaking, he should've only bought one for testing purposes first. But he was so caught up in his discovery that he lost sight of the big picture.

Unfortunately, this was one of his bad habits.

"This is fine for now," the mercenary said. "That'll be 300,000 dren, right?" "We appreciate your patronage, sir."

Zig took the coins after the clerk confirmed his purchase. The large sum he received from Alan meant that the amount he spent was still within his budget.

He examined them once again. The indigo adamantine coins were hard enough to be perfect projectiles. "Now, I just need to see how good they are at disrupting magic."

He'd ask Siasha to help him experiment later.

Zig left the shop feeling on top of the world... And then spotted a familiar face in the distance. He immediately recognized that distinct hair color.

Isana's white locks whipped around her as she glanced about. She appeared to be searching for someone.

Zig made no move to call out to her. He already knew that dealing with Isana would lead to nothing but a headache, so he pretended he didn't see anything.

Let sleeping dogs lie.

Knowing just how good her hearing was, he didn't dare speak the words aloud. Instead, he tried to scurry away as quietly as he could despite his burly stature.

"Hey! How dare you take one look at someone's face and run away!"

"Urk."

A burly man was still a burly man. No matter how silently he moved, his size always ratted him out. Resigned, Zig turned around to face Isana. She appeared to be flustered, her ears twitching constantly.

"What are you up to?" Zig asked. "Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes, I am. You haven't seen my child, have you?"

Her unexpected question made Zig freeze, causing Isana to give him a suspicious glare. Recovering from the shock, he managed a response.

"You...have a child?"

"I guess I wasn't specific enough," she said. "The child is a member of my tribe, not my own."

"I see."

He wiped away the cold sweat that had begun to gather on his brow. With that misunderstanding cleared up, Zig decided to prod Isana further about her missing person.

"Did they get lost?"

"It's...complicated."

Isana looked like she was struggling to answer. From her expression, he realized the situation probably wasn't so simple.

"I see. Sorry, but I haven't seen anyone like that. Anyway, I have things to do, so—"

He turned to try and run away from an inevitable headache, but having already caught his attention, she seemed to have had no intention of letting him go.

Isana firmly grabbed one of his arms. "Wait."

Her grip was too strong for him to easily shake off, likely due to fortifying herself with magic.

"You're not with that girl today, so you must have some free time, right?" she

said. "I want to hire you."

"You've got to be kidding me," he said in exasperation. "You seriously think I'm going to take on a job just to look for some lost kid?"

Even if Zig's motto was accepting any work if the pay was right, there were still limits. This job didn't even require physical strength! If it was just looking for someone, there were plenty of others up to the task.

"Ask the military police. If you're looking for someone, you'd benefit from sheer numbers over raw strength."

"They won't listen to a request coming from an immigrant," Isana sputtered contemptuously, scowling at Zig's otherwise reasonable suggestion.

"Last I checked you were an adventurer," he said, "and a second-class one at that."

"That status is only worth something to the guild and this country's elite. The general public doesn't give a crap. Even if they act like they're helping, no one is going to do a proper search."

Isana's tone wasn't angry or hateful—it was resigned. She was probably speaking from a wealth of experience. The racial tensions in this country might not break through to the surface, but that didn't mean they didn't run deep.

So why not ask the guild for assistance then? The fact that she came directly to him without approaching them...

Zig pondered on that for a moment before asking, "It's something you can't ask the guild, isn't it? Is this mafia related?"

Isana looked taken aback. Bullseye.

If the mafia messed with Isana directly, they would face retaliation and make an enemy of the guild. No matter how tough the two major families were, the odds wouldn't be in their favor. So instead, they had gone for the children of Isana's tribe—normal citizens that the military police were supposed to protect. But since the victims were members of a minority race, their response would be

sluggish at best. And since it wasn't an actual guild member being targeted, it would also be hard for them to get involved.

"No... More like, they wouldn't want to get involved," Zig muttered.

No matter where you were, no one wanted to get mixed up in racial issues. The missing child wasn't even Isana's biologically. Since the situation didn't directly affect one of their members, the guild couldn't afford to make a move. If she was really unlucky, they might even instruct the other adventurers not to get involved.

"I can't rely on the guild this time," Isana pleaded. "Please. I'll pay whatever it takes."

"Depending on what happens, this proposal of yours may put me at odds with the mafia," Zig said. "Putting my own safety aside, it's too much of a risk for someone who's also working as a bodyguard."

"All you need to do is wear a mask to conceal your identity. If your weapon is too distinctive, I can prepare a replacement for you to use."

She was slowly chipping away at all his reasons to refuse.

When he could no longer think of any more good excuses, he heaved a heavy sigh and said, "Let me just warn you—I'm expensive."

"You'll really do it?"

Isana's eyes sparkled at his begrudging acceptance. She didn't expect him to take the job.

"It'd just be a pain in the neck if I refuse and you blabber about what happened between us," he said with a shrug. His tone became a touch boastful. "And I figured it wouldn't be horrible to have you in my debt a little."

At his words, Isana straightened, made a fist with one hand, and clasped it with the other in front of her chest. She bowed to Zig, the movement elegant and beautiful. The mercenary wasn't sure exactly what it meant, but he could sense the gesture represented an immense level of gratitude.

"On behalf of my people, I thank you for your help."



Chapter 2:

Outsiders and Change

AGREEING TO ISANA'S SUGGESTION OF TALKING ELSEWHERE, Zig followed behind her. They left the main street and headed for the back alleys. As they walked, he asked her for a basic rundown of the situation.

"So, what exactly's going on?"

"Starting several days ago, we've been receiving numerous reports of children not returning home—about thirty in total."

"That's way too many to be chalked up to just getting lost."

"Yes. In all likelihood they were taken."

"Have there been any witnesses?"

Isana shook her head. "No. Not one."

Zig's brow furrowed at that. It was incredibly strange for over thirty children to disappear without a single witness, especially if the culprits were outsiders to the tribe—they would've stood out.

If that was the case, the first line of suspicion would fall on...

"Do you think it was an inside job?"

"Out of the question," she said. "Our people...are well aware of how terrifying our elite are."

"What if the mafia coaxed them into it?"

"Only the mafia wishes to drive our people out. Even if the gold was tempting, I don't think it would be an option considering the future repercussions."

Her logic was sound. It would be incredibly difficult for any migrants, especially from the Jinsu-Yah tribe, to live in this town on their own. Having enough money wasn't the issue—in fact, having money would make it more

dangerous.

But then, who could've done the kidnappings?

The question continued to bother Zig as they ventured deeper into the alleyways.

After some time, the scenery began to change. It looked like there were attempts to keep the streets clean, and instead of abandoned buildings, there were rows of structures that appeared to be residences cramped together.

There weren't many people around. They saw the occasional man walking by, but there were no signs of women and children at all.

When Zig asked Isana why this was the case, she explained, "Everyone's been ordered to stay inside so that we don't lose anyone else. It also makes it easier to search for the culprit."

The mercenary trailed after Isana as she quickly made for somewhere in the rear of the settlement, which must've been their destination. He could feel many eyes upon them—likely the residents who were concealed inside their homes.

Considering the circumstances, it was no surprise that any unfamiliar individuals would attract a great deal of attention. The suspicion was palpable in the air. Zig brushed the sensation off and continued to follow Isana until they reached a large building.

It wasn't extravagant, but the unique decorations made it stand out. Whoever lived here was probably of considerable status. Isana entered without hesitating.

Inside were several men—all with pointed ears. They turned to look at the newcomers, their faces growing wary at the sight of Zig.

"I've returned, Elder," Isana announced, bowing to the oldest in the group.

The old man nodded back gravely and gestured for her to be at ease.

"We appreciate all your hard work, Isana," he said. "Were you able to find any

clues?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but I still haven't been able to discern the children's whereabouts."

The elder's shoulders slumped at the response.

"I see," he said, keeping his eyes on Isana before motioning to Zig. "And who might this be?"

"A collaborator," she replied. "I've asked for his assistance in resolving the situation."

"He doesn't...appear to be an adventurer," the elder said, the eyes on his wrinkled face narrowing as if appraising Zig. "I doubt they would intervene anyway. My dear gentleman, who might you be?"

"I'm Zig. A mercenary."

The men grew warier at hearing Zig's profession. He supposed it was natural —on this continent, there weren't many differences between mercenaries, common thugs, and quasi-gangsters.

Unlike his companions, however, the elder had no reaction and just stared at Zig silently.

"I see," he said. "I appreciate your help in this matter."

The others immediately began to object.

"My apologies, Elder, but I'm against cooperating with this man that we don't know!"

Based on the tribe's experiences, they likely didn't want to ask for help from outsiders.

"We'll figure out a way to solve this problem ourselves!" one chimed in.

"The reason Isana brought this man here is because we determined that wasn't possible," the elder responded.

"Know your place!"

The elder's reprimand cut through those who were refusing to back down. His gaze was piercing despite his advanced age, and they cowered under his glare.

"I apologize for the rudeness of our younger tribesmen," the elder said as he gave Zig a deep bow. "Please help us find our children."

"Understood," Zig replied.

"I'll have someone go over the details with you shortly. That'll be all for now, Isana."

"Yes, sir!" Isana bowed once more before turning to leave. "Pardon us."

Zig nodded at the elder before following her out the door. The other men shot him dirty looks but made no hostile actions.

"Aside from the elder, they reacted just as I expected," Isana sighed as she and Zig walked outside. "Don't worry about them, okay? They're just desperate to protect this space we've created for ourselves."

"It doesn't bother me," he said. "More importantly, what should we do now?"

Isana couldn't help but chuckle at Zig's indifference. "Let's get something to eat. The elder will send someone knowledgeable on the matter to give us details."

"He didn't tell us where to meet them though."

"Just where do you think you are?" she said smugly.

Apparently, nothing happening in this place went undetected. That was to be expected—it was the Jinsu-Yah stronghold, after all.

Zig was on board with the idea of a meal. One should always eat whenever possible... Besides, he was interested in their food culture.

Isana quickly chose a restaurant, and they both went inside. There weren't many other customers, likely due to the current situation. An employee came to take their order once they were seated.

"What do you want—wait, do you even know what anything is?" Isana inquired.

"I'll take whatever she's having," Zig replied.

"Coming right up," the employee offhandedly remarked before heading back into the kitchen.

Zig didn't have a clue about anything on the menu, but it wasn't uncommon in his experience, so he was unfazed. During his travels around various regions, he never had the mental energy to learn the names of local foods. Often, he would just order by pointing to what another customer was eating.

Occasionally, he would gamble and order something randomly, but more often than not it ended very poorly for him. He decided to be prudent today.

Judging from the fragrant aroma that filled the restaurant, it seemed like this place specialized in fried food.

The employee soon returned with a couple of plates.

"Instead of having just one main dish, it's customary for us to eat several small dishes of different types of foods," Isana explained.

"Guess it'll be fun to try various things."

The employee placed the food in front of them. However, despite ordering the same meal as Isana, his was different. She had been served fried shrimp, but gracing his plate were...fried caterpillars.

"Huh?!" Isana gasped, her eyes narrowing. Her soft voice didn't hide her anger. "What's the meaning of this?"

The employee returned her glare, seemingly without a care that he was facing one of the elite members of his tribe.

"I thought it would be fitting for an outsider."

Isana resisted the urge to click her tongue at her own carelessness. Just as the people in town held a distaste for members of other races, the feeling was

mutual for many of her tribe.

However, this was a clear insult even she could not overlook.

"Why, you—" Isana seethed.

Zig looked startled at how she was acting. "Hey, hey. What's the big fuss all about?"

She whirled back at him.

"What's the big fuss all about?! You're—huh?"

"Hm?" Zig looked confused as he munched down on his food—the fried caterpillars.

"Whoa..." the employee looked taken aback.

"There's no need to throw a tantrum even if they served us a dish you don't like. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Huh? No, that's not... You know those are caterpillars you're eating, right?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

"And you're okay with that?"

"They're tasty," Zig said, popping another one into his mouth.

From the way he was savoring the food as he chewed, it didn't seem like he was putting on a brave front. While Isana's people did consume bugs, it was an outdated custom. These days, only a few of the elderly ate them.

Bug dishes were generally something for adventurous eaters to try—but occasionally young people ordered them at restaurants as a punishment of sorts or to test their courage. Regardless, most people in town would never eat them nor even consider them food.

"I didn't realize the taste would be so different when properly prepared," Zig said.

The caterpillars were crunchy on the outside, creamy on the inside. They were

perfectly salted and fragrant from the sesame oil used to fry them. He couldn't help but gobble them down.

Isana felt her skin crawl. Sincerely hoping that she'd misheard him, she prodded, "'Properly prepared,' you said?"

"Well, yeah. I've had to turn to stuff like this whenever a war dragged on too long and food supplies ran out. Obviously, I tried to catch the ones that looked the least poisonous."

"You cooked them, right?"

"You can't just make a fire when you're preparing for an ambush. I ate them raw."

Isana had no response. Her anger had dissipated, but it felt like her appetite had disappeared with it. The restaurant employee was so disgusted that he couldn't even speak.

"After eating this, I have high expectations for the rest of the food," Zig said, full of mirth. "I can't wait to try it!"

"R-right," was all the employee was able to muster before heading back to the kitchen.

That incident was probably enough for him to lose hostility toward Zig, because for the rest of the meal he solemnly brought out regular dishes without any more adventurous ingredients.

Zig looked incredibly satisfied with the meal, but Isana's pointed ears drooped limply as she forced herself to eat.

"Is now a good time?"

Zig and Isana were enjoying a post-meal tea when a man approached them. His hair was brushed back, though he had no other distinct features. He bowed politely; his eyes closed as he smiled softly.

"The elder asked me to give you details on the current situation."

Maybe finding them took longer than expected, Zig surmised, but more likely the man had waited until they were finished eating. He had the feeling someone was watching them while they ate; it must've been him.

"Shuoh?" Isana asked. "It feels like an overreaction to have sent you here as a mere messenger."

"If it's the elder's will... Hmm, that's him?" The man Isana called Shuoh glanced at Zig.

"Yes, this is Zig, the mercenary."

"A mercenary, huh? Quite an unusual choice."

"I can attest to his capabilities." Isana gestured for him to stop probing and continue. "So?"

Shuoh cleared his throat and began to explain the details the tribe had put together regarding the disappearances.

"The incidents always occur between night and early morning. Before anyone realizes, the children are missing and unable to be found. There aren't any eyewitness reports of anyone lurking about or other suspicious parties."

"Whoever it is must be incredibly stealthy," Isana murmured. "No, not even that would be enough. I don't think it's physically possible to take so many children without being discovered at all."

"I agree," Shuoh replied.

No matter how good they were at concealing themselves, there was a limit to how far they could go undetected. And this wasn't just one or two people going missing—there were over a couple dozen victims. They had to be using something beyond normal means.

"I've been wondering, what about your other elite members?" Zig cut in. "I'd like to hear their opinions on these incidents."

"Most of the people you're referring to aren't around at the moment. They're migrant workers."

"Migrant workers?"

Halian was a big enough town; it seemed odd to leave it for other places to search for work.

Sensing Zig's uncertainty, Shuoh gave a wry smile.

"All of our capable members are rather tricky," he said. "Those like Miss Isana, accustomed to living in town, are a very small minority."

"Aside from me, I think there's maybe only one other that holds a regular job," she confirmed.

"And he...has many issues of his own. Which is why Miss Isana was the only one entrusted with this task."

"Hm..." Zig mused, trying to mentally compile all the information Shuoh had given.

As he started to piece together all the parts that concerned him the most, one thought crossed his mind.

"From what I'm hearing, this perpetrator is almost *too good*," he said. "Is it really just a coincidence this is happening when your major players aren't around?"

Shuoh and Isana looked grim. Zig had a very valid point.

"We wanted to believe...this wasn't an inside job," Shuoh said.

Isana remained silent.

Their people had left their homeland and ended up in this town, where everyone else was seen as an enemy. Of course, they were reluctant to consider that these acts were being committed by one of their own—the only allies they had.

However, Zig had no intention of meddling with the intricacies of their

circumstances. All he needed to do was the job he had been hired for.

"Can I get a map of the area?" he requested.

"Is there something you noticed?" Shuoh asked.

"No, it's not that."

After Shuoh provided him with what he asked for, Zig started to cross-reference where the incidents had taken place with the local topography. Trying to stake out the scene of a crime and catch someone red-handed might take too long.

"The objective is to shift the focus from apprehending the culprit to rescuing the children," Zig stated.

"What do you mean?" asked Isana.

"What do you think the purpose of kidnapping these children is?" Zig asked.

"To use them as hostages, right?" Shuoh replied.

"All thirty of them? And besides, you haven't received any demands yet, have you?"

Managing hostages was a cumbersome task. They had to be fed, they had to shit. Since they weren't of any use dead, someone had to keep them alive. Putting aside negotiations between countries, the ironclad rule of dealing with hostages was that they should be high quality and small in number.

"It's likely the children themselves are targets," Zig concluded. "In other words, human trafficking."

"That can't..." Shuoh stuttered. "No, but..."

"Isn't targeting us a huge risk?" Isana added.

She had a point. There were many capable fighters in the Jinsu-Yah; not even the mafia were willing to touch them. Considering the retaliation the mafia would face, they could take them off the list of suspects.

But that was only if they were looking at things in terms of physical strength.

"It's because you're too weak," Zig said.

Isana and Shuoh froze at his statement. After a few moments, Shuoh started to chuckle.

"Ha ha, now that's funny. I don't think I've ever been called weak before."

His tone was calm, but Zig could hear the bite of something dangerous despite his smile. Although he probably wasn't on the same level as Isana, this man was strong in his own right.

"I can't deny that you're strong," Shuoh continued, his brow twitching slightly, but is the difference in our skill so great that you feel the need to completely dismiss us?"

It was a slap in the face to a group who relied on their strength to survive.

"Didn't you have to turn to an outsider for help because you couldn't solve this problem on your own?" Zig said flatly. "Not to mention the military police and government wouldn't usually turn a blind eye to this many people going missing."

"That's..." Shuoh started to protest, but trailed off.

It was unfortunate but true that they wouldn't be able to rely on any powers of the state for help. Though, none of that mattered to their current foe.

"The bottom line is, as long as you don't know who you're dealing with, you're basically sitting ducks."

They didn't have any definitive proof of anything, and if they did try to retaliate, the military police would surely get involved. The culprit knew there were other methods they could use if they couldn't beat this tribe with pure brawn.

That's all there was to it.

"What else would you call a group who are persecuted and considered dangerous just because they hail from another place or look a little different, even if they're skilled?"

Unable to find any other words of rebuttal, Shuoh hung his head. "Damn it!"

Isana, despite looking increasingly frustrated, managed to hold her tongue. As a successful adventurer, she was painfully aware of what Zig was implying.

"Getting back on topic," the mercenary continued, "if you're in the business of human trafficking, you need a location that's decent enough to keep the 'product.' A place that's secluded or rigged in a way that voices won't leak outside."

"You don't think they'd be sold immediately?" Shuoh interjected, seeming to have already recovered from his agitation.

"As long as it's not a premium item—trouble and cost-wise—it's usually better to deliver them all in one batch. Unlike other goods, there's no guarantee they'll do as they're told. Once they've gathered a certain amount, they'll likely be loaded in a wagon and shipped off."

"I see. So that's why finding the location is so important."

"Exactly. If there are any unoccupied buildings nearby, you should investigate whether anyone's been seen coming or going lately."

Shuoh nodded before quickly scurrying off.

They were dealing with professionals who could deceive even the Jinsu-Yah. Finding the missing children would be far less difficult than uncovering the culprit, but it was highly likely that the mafia was the core of it all.

Although there would be no point searching for the children if they'd been taken to a mafia stronghold, that possibility was incredibly low. If the mafia were the culprits, their greatest fear would be the discovery of evidence that linked them to the kidnappings. If that happened, the military police would get involved, regardless of whether the victims were of another race or not.

Even if Isana and the others became desperate enough to rush in headstrong, the mafia would surely have countermeasures in place to prevent any problems.

"Taking it all into account, they likely hired some lackeys," Zig explained.

In order to convolute the trail and keep it from leading back to them, they might have distributed the job through several groups of hoodlums and vagrants. While Zig continued to ponder all the possibilities, he realized that Isana was glaring at him with disgust.

"You're awfully knowledgeable about all this," she said. "I don't want to believe it, but...is this something you've done before?"

"I've had business dealings that involved those types in the past."

At times he protected them as an escort, at others they were his target. His explanation seemed to placate the swordswoman enough to stop giving him the stink eye.

"I'm actually grateful you're more of an underworld type than I thought," she said. "I didn't expect you'd start dealing with the issue so quickly."

"This is all just speculation; we don't have any evidence yet. Besides, everything I told you is common knowledge where I come from."

In truth, he was taken aback by just how unfamiliar the Jinsu-Yah—a group the mafia were so afraid of—were with the nature of organized crime. Because they were so skilled, they'd probably been able to live how they pleased without resorting to violence. However, the world wasn't a kind place—and getting by on physical strength alone wasn't enough. The reason the mafia were employing these tactics was because they finally realized just how precarious the Jinsu-Yah's social position was.

"Isana," Zig said.

"Hm? What is it?" she asked, sipping her tea with newfound optimism.

"Even if we successfully resolve this incident, your troubles won't stop there."

"I know that. Now that they've discovered our weak point, this won't be the last of it."

She already seemed aware of what he was trying to say.

"This may mean that we also have to change."

They decided to get Zig's alternative equipment ready while they waited for further reports. Zig followed Isana to what looked to be a warehouse on the outskirts of the settlement. His twinblade made him stick out like a sore thumb, and it was imperative that the mafia wouldn't be able to deduce his identity.

"Pick whichever one strikes your fancy," Isana said. "You're not going to break it...right?"

"I'll try not to."

Once inside, Zig started browsing through the collection. The weapons of the Jinsu-Yah were different in both design and shape compared to what he usually saw around town.

He was fascinated by Isana's sword—the katana, she called it—but it looked like he needed significant practice with the blade. There was no point in selecting a weapon he didn't know how to use.

Zig headed in the direction of the spears—weapons he was familiar with.

Unlike the swords and armor, they were made in a style he was more used to.

No matter where you hailed from, the role of a spear user seemed to stay mostly the same.

As the mercenary examined a few potential candidates, a certain weapon caught his eye.

"This is a little different from a normal spear," he commented. "Is it a... glaive?"

There was a long, slightly curved blade attached to the top of the spear.

"That's a *naginata*," Isana corrected. "Although, it basically functions the same way as a glaive."

Zig reached out and gripped the naginata. It had a good weight to it, although

it wasn't nearly as heavy as his twinblade. The ability to use slashing attacks would be useful, even if it only had one blade.

"Are these pretty durable?" he asked.

"The materials they're constructed from are higher quality than your current weapon, but I believe the strength of impact will be a little weaker."

As the blade on top was specifically designed for slashing and cutting, it was rigid—not a weapon intended for landing heavy blows.

"You probably shouldn't use it to smack something with all your might," Isana advised.

"That should be fine," Zig said. "I've never had a weapon that survived a full-force smash intact."

"They're quite expensive, you know. Please do your utmost not to break it." "I'll be careful." He had decided on a weapon.

Zig pondered what they should do next as Isana gave him a sidelong glance. Even if they were able to discover where the children were being kept, it didn't mean things would go smoothly.

Someone would certainly be keeping watch. It would be impossible to rescue the children without being discovered, and there was no way their captors would idly sit by and let it happen. It would also be incredibly dangerous if their opponent went for the children should fighting break out. So many of them had been captured that it would be difficult to keep them all safe.

If they rushed in with a large group, however, there was a large risk of them being discovered. They needed to do whatever they could to protect the kidnapped children from the worst-case scenario.

"You mentioned something about another skilled fighter still being around," Zig said. "How about asking them for help?"

Having one more capable hand would make a big difference.

But Isana's expression darkened at his question. Shuoh did mention something about whoever it was having a lot of issues...

"Him...?" she said. "Well, I think he'd be willing to help out, but..." she trailed off.

"Is there something wrong with him? You did say he's working, right?"

"He is—but as someone who claims bounties. A manhunter, if you will."

So that's why she looks so perturbed.

This guy wasn't killing to defeat enemies or opponents but to make money.

To those like Isana who embodied a warrior's spirit, he stood out as a problem child.

"That's not so different from me, is it?"

Zig could understand being disgusted by those who killed to make a living, but why approach him then—a man who had taken countless lives as a mercenary?

"You...have a point," she conceded. "But in his case, it appears that he...really enjoys killing."

Ah, so that's her hang-up.

"It doesn't make a difference to the person being killed whether their attacker is loving or hating it," he said. "I'm guessing he's decently capable?"

As long as this guy wasn't going around and turning his blade on innocents, Zig didn't really care what his hobbies were.

"Yes. He's still young, but he's a combat prodigy."

"Good enough. Let's ask for his help."

"I take no responsibility for how this turns out..."

With that, they seemed to be covered in terms of manpower. All that was left was to wait for Shuoh to get back in touch.

Zig looked down at the naginata he held. He had only been using a twinblade

recently, so his skills with this type of weapon might have dulled.

And he conveniently had a strong opponent in front of him...

"It's been a while since I last used a polearm," he said. "Isana, would you mind assisting me with breaking it in?"

It was an invitation to spar with him to test out his new weapon.

"Sure, that's fine."

With Isana accepting without any hesitation, they headed out to find an appropriate location. After a bit of walking, they came across a building that had a sprawling lawn...and on it they could make out several men striking at each other with swords.

It seemed like they had arrived at a training ground.

"They seem quite proficient," Zig remarked.

From a glance, he could see that the grounds were filled with capable fighters. Everyone here looked to be quite proud of their martial skills—they even seemed enthusiastic while training. It made perfect sense why the mafia were having difficulty facing them.

"I suppose," Isana said proudly, her ears perking up. "You can only rely on your own strength, after all!"

One of the men watching the sparring matches noticed Isana and hurried over.

"Miss Isana, you've returned."

"I just got back today. I'm going to use the corner over there."

"Of course!" he said. "Would you mind if everyone watched? I believe it would be excellent motivation for them."

"Well..." Isana looked at Zig, who nodded. "All right. Just don't let them get too carried away."

"Thank you!" The man gave Isana a polite bow before running off to inform

the others.

While he spoke to them in the background, Isana and Zig made their way to a corner of the training ground. Putting some distance between them, they turned to face each other.

Isana was so famous that even other proficient martial artists were eager to observe her; some of them even stopped in the middle of their own matches to come and watch.

"Go easy on me, okay?" Zig said.

"You're joking, right? I'm not going to disgrace myself with everyone watching."

"Good grief..."

Isana was already raring for battle. He had been hoping to have an easy match to get the hang of his new weapon, but it looked like that wasn't going to be the case. As they prepared themselves, the man who'd approached them earlier took on the role of officiator.

"Fight with honor and fairness!" he proclaimed.

Isana reached for the sword sheathed at her waist. Zig gripped a section of the naginata near the pommel with one hand and the middle of the shaft with the other.

The officiator, determining that both combatants were ready to go, clapped once, then lowered his arms.

"Begin."

At the signal to start, Isana immediately closed the distance between herself and Zig. She wasn't just dashing straight for him but leaning forward with relaxed knees, using the falling momentum to almost glide as she moved.

Her steps focused on staying relaxed and shifting her center of gravity—a high-level technique with unreadable movements that reduced the amount of energy her body spent. This was the skill Isana used as she approached Zig.

"Huh?!"

The moment Isana reached striking distance, the mercenary thrust the naginata at her before dodging to the right. However, he made no follow-up attacks of his own. Moving out of her reach, he merely stood there just observing her.

How could he have perfectly read my gait? she thought.

Aside from her uneven stride, she purposefully wore clothing that concealed the movement of her feet. He shouldn't have been able to see through her intent that easily. Then again, she had felt Zig's gaze often drifting to her legs since she stopped him earlier.

She figured it was just because he was being a man...but could he have been trying to gauge her stride?

"I really can't let my guard down around you," she growled.

He had another thing coming to him if he thought this was her only trick. Still, she was clearly at a disadvantage when it came to reach. She needed to get within striking distance.

Isana ran at Zig again—three strides and she would close the gap.

He did nothing for the first stride. During the second, he moved the handle just a fraction. On her third step, he jabbed at her with the naginata so quickly that his arm looked like a blur.

"Tch!" She clicked her tongue.

Without moving her katana, she used its sheath to deflect the heavy blow, propelling the tip of the naginata upward. No matter how proficient he was with a spear, he wouldn't be able to thrust it again at the proper angle unless he returned the weapon to the proper position.

Instead of dodging, she could get inside his guard faster by forcing him to pull the naginata back after she deflected it. However, she had no time to draw her own weapon. Using the momentum from her upward swing, she thrust the stillsheathed katana at Zig.

He let go of the naginata's handle to block the attack with his gauntlet. The momentum of his counter caused Isana to spin, and she decided to go for a side strike. Although she unsheathed the katana as she whirled around, Zig blocked her attack by positioning the naginata vertically.

She ran the edge of her sword up the weapon's shaft, aiming for his fingers.

"Now, now," Zig chided as he quickly released his grip.

Isana continued her upward swing, sweeping the blade back down directly over Zig's skull. Zig blocked the blow by moving the naginata up before Isana's momentum overwhelmed him.

They pushed against each other in a deadlock, one set of eyes never leaving the other.

"Not half-bad," Zig commented.

"I could say the same for you," Isana countered. "Are you sure it's been a while since you last used a spear?"

Despite her unpredictability, she didn't have the upper hand when it came to brute strength. Isana desperately fought to counter Zig's force as his weapon bore down on hers.

"You...!"

The moment she began to focus her energy on pushing back, the mercenary suddenly relaxed, causing her blade to fall forward. Isana, unable to recover from the sudden change in position, followed.

Zig crouched down, getting under her center of gravity. Their weapons were still crossed, but her katana began to slide down the naginata. Twisting his body, Zig used the momentum to toss Isana, her body spinning in a semi-circular motion before coming down.

Known as a "crossing throw," the technique used the force of crossed weapons to throw someone without having to physically grab them.

"Ngh!" Isana groaned, allowing herself to be propelled through the air instead of going against the momentum.

Keeping her distance from Zig, she tucked her chin in and rolled on her shoulder to limit the damage and land safely.

Zig remained where he was, still poised in a waiting stance. If he had taken the opportunity to strike after that move, she would have been seriously injured and likely incapacitated.

What he pulled off was an ingenious method of combat that looked for an opponent's openings and got inside their defenses, different from the style he used when fighting with the twinblade.

"Aren't you the clever one," Isana laughed aloud, not caring that her clothes were now filthy.

Unlike the first time she fought him when he had been wielding that junky iron blade, the difference in their power was becoming apparent now that they were both using weapons that could hit each other properly.

She wanted to best him with her swordplay alone, but it looked like that wasn't going to be the case.

Her unique brand of fortification magic began to course through her body. As this was only supposed to be a sparring match, she knew she shouldn't pull out all the stops, but anything besides her proverbial trump card was probably fair game.

Offensive spells were a little hard for Isana to control, and she was lacking when it came to using defensive magic; however, fortification was the one area where she really shined. Making personal adjustments to her lightning-based defenses so she could play to her casting strengths, her spells were different in both strength and efficiency from normal fortification techniques.

Sparks of lightning started radiating from her body, and her green eyes began to faintly glow.

This was a milder version of *that technique*—the one she used in her previous fight with Zig. It didn't require as much mana output, and for that same reason she could keep it up much longer.

Zig's expression tensed when he recognized the same type of fortification magic that she tried to use against him before.

"Aren't you getting a little too fired up?" he asked.

"I'm aware of that."

Zig was the first person around her age where she didn't feel the need to hold back. Isana was consumed by a sense of thrill...and a burning desire not to lose.

"The true fight starts now," she said.

She took a step back with her right foot so that she was facing slightly sideways toward Zig. She held the tip of the katana behind her, the blade angled diagonally and to the right—a stance known as waki-gamae.

Aside from making it hard to tell her striking distance, the stance also made it difficult to read what body part she was aiming for. Since she was facing him in a sideways position, not only would it be easier for her to dodge, but her stance specialized in counterattacking.

With her sword held behind her, it was easy to apply centrifugal force. Although it would be less powerful than the blade-drawing technique, she would still be able to land a powerful blow.

Zig already knew the length of her blade, so she didn't have the element of surprise, but this method was perfect for the current circumstances where the difference in spacing would give her a head start.

Isana carefully studied her opponent. Although Zig's body was locked into a stance, she still couldn't see an opening. Despite using a long-handled weapon, he still had an incredibly stable center of gravity. Trying to throw him off balance wouldn't be very effective.

Isana's speed was her main asset.

In their previous fight, he hadn't been able to keep up with her, but assuming things would go the same way this time around was too optimistic. Still, it would be a bad idea not to take advantage of her strengths.

She mentally began to construct her plan of attack.

"Okay," she murmured.

She had made up her mind. Tensing her abdomen, she prepared to strike him with all the power she possessed.

Beads of sweat dotted her brow.

She waited for the exact moment when Zig exhaled to launch her attack.

"Incredible!" Awed voices rose from the crowd, their eyes widening at how fast her attack was compared to the previous ones throughout the match.

Isana had honed her talent with a blade since her youth, growing into a master of her craft and the pride of her people—she had even been called a prodigy with the sword.

And now, they were seeing her going all out. The men watching the match were excited just to be a part of the audience.

Zig snapped to attention, but the almost inhuman speed of her footwork meant his counter was too late. She dodged the blow by moving her upper body without slowing down.

The thrust only clipped her hair; he had slightly misjudged his timing.

"Hah!" she screamed, slashing the katana pointed behind her upward and diagonally toward his right side.

It was a perfectly timed attack.

Everyone watching believed it was impossible to avoid.

Isana exhaled sharply.

Zig pulled back the naginata and blocked the slash heading straight for his torso.

"What?!" Isana was utterly shaken that he had been able to block the hit.

Impossible! she thought. He shouldn't have had the speed to pull it back in time!

How could he have managed such a feat?

Zig's earlier attack had only been a feint. There was barely any power behind the jab; just enough that he could go back to a defensive stance at any time.

If Isana had been paying attention, she would have been able to tell just from the sound how different that thrust was from his other attacks. However, she had been concentrating so hard on her footwork that she didn't notice.

Zig hadn't missed his timing; he'd only taken a jab at her to provide a distraction.

He used the rushing momentum of Isana's upward slash to parry and shove her behind him.

"Ngh!"

Isana was somehow able to keep herself from plunging forward, but her speed now became a detriment. Because she couldn't immediately move away, she left herself open for a moment—and the man she was fighting against wasn't going to let her get away with that mistake.

Keeping himself within proximity, Zig tried to side swipe her with the handle of the naginata. Isana parried the attack although she hadn't fully recovered. He had been too close to get much momentum behind the blow, so she had been able to block it.

The mercenary spun around, utilizing the active motion to swing the naginata at her once more.

"Just who do you think you're messing with?!" Isana roared, moving past the attack and launching her own counterstrike.

The naginata wasn't a weapon made for hand-to-hand combat. There were ways to ward off opponents who tried to approach the wielder, but it wasn't

ideal in close combat situations.

Does he really think so little of me that he's purposely choosing to engage from such a disadvantageous distance?

Isana slashed at Zig once more as the thought filled her with rage, but he easily dodged it and took another step back.

"You're not getting away!" she screamed.

It was too late for him to try to back away now. She rushed in and tried to slice him from the side, but Zig crouched and spun away from her to separate them further.

Between stepping back and advancing, the latter was always going to be faster. Isana did just that to keep the advantage of her close position. However, out of nowhere, he aimed at her lower half, thrusting the naginata toward her legs as he whirled to evade her.

"Crap...!"

Zig had Isana exactly where he wanted her.

This is why he continued engaging me in close combat!

Since she was still leaning forward, she had to make a split-second decision to leap in the air to protect herself from the incoming low attack—and leap she did.

"I should've known," she muttered.

Isana's strengths lay in her speed and agility; however, she couldn't use either of those skills while she was in the air, not to mention it made dodging even more difficult. By the time she realized she messed up, it was already too late.

It was the moment Zig had been waiting for, and he sprang into action.

He didn't waste his golden opportunity and waited until her katana was no longer in striking distance, staying out of range in case she did a last-ditch counterattack. He attacked the moment she landed, leaving the defenseless

Zig exhaled, finally letting himself relax as he mentally went through the events of the battle.

"Heh, looks like I've got the hang of it."

There was just something different about practicing with a weapon in what was, by all accounts, a real fight. He wouldn't have been able to knock all the rust off if he had only done practice swings or light sparring.

Zig hadn't wanted to take things that far, but Isana seemed determined to engage him in a bout that was only a step away from actual combat. That woman had a true warrior's heart. Losing the previous fight was probably eating her up inside.

The other martial artists rushed in to tend to her wounds. "Miss Isana? Are you all right?"

Zig had held his strength back slightly, so she shouldn't have any serious injuries, but everyone around him was still running about in a panic. They hoisted her up like she was a patient in critical condition and carried her inside.

The mercenary trailed behind the procession, a wry smile plastered on his face.

"It's been forever since I opened my eyes to this kind of scene," Isana said as soon as she regained consciousness.

Back when she was still wet behind the ears, she would get knocked out during sparring sessions and come to in this exact spot. As her skill level improved, she was the one that started knocking opponents out.

It had been a very long time since she'd last come here herself.

The man who had been acting as the officiator chuckled. He was the one

tending to her wounds and ensuring that all the other men—who were worked up into a frenzy—waited outside.

"It was an excellent fight. Everyone learned a lot."

"But I was completely defeated," Isana said dejectedly.

"It's a good experience, is it not?"

"Hmph."

Isana gave the acting master of the training grounds—who wore a meek expression the entire time—a sour look.

Despite his easygoing attitude, she still caught glimpses of how skilled he was. This was the man who had worked her to the bone when she trained here in her youth.

"Does this mean you were taken down a peg or two?" he asked.

"I never intended to let things go to my head, but...it hit me hard when I actually lost."

The master chortled at Isana's bitter confession and handed her a small wet towel. Isana thanked him and started wiping off the sweat and grime that covered her.

"'It's a big world out there.' I know I've said that till I was blue in the face, but to be honest, I didn't believe there was anyone around your age that could beat you."

Isana acknowledged the master's admission with a bitter smile.

"Isana, is everything okay?" Zig called from where he was waiting outside. "Shuoh's here. Seems they were able to narrow down a location."

I've been out that long? Isana thought, realizing more time must've passed than she thought.

"I'm fine. You can come in."

"I should be getting out of your hair," the master said.

"Sorry. Also, thank you for this."

The man stood up and gave her a bow as he took back the hand towel. He left the room only for Zig and Shuoh to immediately enter in his place.

"You good now?" the mercenary asked.

"Don't be sarcastic. I know you held back."

Zig nodded in approval. If she was back to cracking jokes, then there was nothing to worry about.

Shuoh seemed puzzled to see Isana lying down.

"Miss Isana? Why are you like that?"

"Just...reasons. I'm not feeling unwell, so don't worry about it, okay?"

Shuoh had his doubts, but since Isana claimed to be fine, he didn't press the matter further. Instead, he turned his attention to the reason he was there and gave his report.

"We found four likely locations. Out all of them, there were two where people have been seen coming and going lately."

They looked down at the two locations marked on the map. The Bazarta Mafia Family controlled the north, the Cantarella Family held the south, and the Jinsu-Yah operated on the east side of the town. The suspected sites were west and north of Jinsu-Yah territory respectively.

"What do you think?" Zig asked, wanting Shuoh's opinion on the two places as the man was more familiar with the land.

"I think the western location is unlikely," he replied. "Even if either mafia family tried to act, there's a high possibility another group would catch them. On the other hand, there's a strong likelihood that the Bazarta Family are involved if it's the one to the north."

His logic checked out. Operating outside of one's territory made the difficulty and risk exponentially higher. As long as there was no definitive proof that led

back to them, having the location relatively close wouldn't be an issue.

"Do you think this could be a collaborative venture between the two mafia families?" Zig prodded further.

"I can't say no for sure, though they've never joined forces to conduct a major operation before. Of course, there's a tacit understanding that they stay out of each other's business. However..."

Shuoh trailed off. Even though he said nothing more, it was easy to predict where his thoughts were going.

What if the two mafia families banded together to eliminate the Jinsu-Yah?

Due to their social status, they'd managed to make the tribe feel helpless just from a few kidnappings.

Neither Zig nor Isana pursued the notion. Zig wasn't personally involved, and Isana didn't want to even imagine it.

"Let's conduct some surveillance on the north location tonight," Zig suggested.

"Understood," Shuoh responded. "What should we do about personnel?"

"Since we don't know our enemy's evasive capabilities," the mercenary said, "we should keep our numbers limited. It's best to advance with a select few."

"So...that'll be me and Zig," Isana said. "You can help too, Shuoh...and we'll also bring Lyka."

Shuoh couldn't hide his shock when he heard the name.

"Lyka? But he's a bloodthirsty lunatic! There's no knowing what he might do..."

"I understand that, but we don't have enough manpower at the moment."

Shuoh was about to protest but, realizing that Isana wasn't going to change her mind, he kept his mouth shut. After a moment's hesitation, he finally nodded.

"All right. Let's meet at the elder's place later."

Without another word, he exited the room.

Once he was gone, Isana sighed and said, "I knew he wasn't going to be happy about that."

"Didn't seem like he's a big fan of the guy," Zig agreed.

"I doubt many people want to be chummy with someone who enjoys killing."

Aside from being a bounty hunter, this Lyka fellow derived pleasure from taking lives.

"But it's not all that uncommon," Zig said.

"I'm guessing that's just the case in your circles," Isana countered.

Zig couldn't argue against that. However, everyone harbored aggression to an extent—it wasn't unusual for it to manifest due to someone's environment or impulses. In Zig's mind, the problem lay in how they managed that desire. Nevertheless, his point of view was clearly fundamentally different from Isana and the others that lived in the area.

"Let's iron out the details until it's time to meet up," she said.

Following the swordswoman's suggestion, the two turned their attention back to the map and began going over the various routes together.

Once the sun began to set, Zig and Isana headed back to the elder's place. There was barely anyone out, likely due to the tense situation. They didn't see any children at all.

There was a sense of discomfort—knowing that something should be there but was missing—further strumming up the feeling of urgency.

"It's weird seeing a town with no kids," Zig muttered under his breath at the peculiar surroundings.

"You know what they say...children are precious," Isana said, quickening her

footsteps. "Something needs to be done about this as soon as possible."

Zig felt the urge to tell her not to be hasty but decided to keep his mouth shut. Such sentiments were easier said than done. At this stage, it was unlikely she would even heed his words—there were just some situations where logic flew out the window.

They soon arrived at the elder's house.

The old man glanced up as they entered. "Ah, you're here."

"Sorry for the wait, Elder," Isana said.

The rest of the group was already assembled. Aside from the elder, there were the men who had been with him earlier in the afternoon and Shuoh.

There was also a young man, standing apart from everyone else. He had a lithe frame, brownish-red hair, and looked to be in his late teens. He was by no means scrawny, with every muscle conditioned to the extreme.

So this is him, Zig thought. Lyka.

Even just standing there, it was easy to see he didn't leave any openings. Shuoh and the other men were glaring daggers at him like he was an utter abomination.

He was definitely a persona non grata, just as Zig had heard.

The young man didn't seem to care about their stares one bit and turned his empty gaze to Zig instead.

"Is this him?" the young man asked.

"Yes." Shuoh's expression remained stern as he responded to Lyka's question.

As soon as he heard the confirmation, Lyka's vacant eyes suddenly lit up with delight.

"Ah, it all makes sense now. I *thought* it was strange that you decided to reach out to me."

Lyka lightly chuckled as he approached Zig and the others with a slow and

deliberate gait that made him look like he was gliding. It was similar to Isana's movement, but there was also something different about it.

"I was surprised to hear we were turning to outsiders for help, but even more surprised to learn there was someone willing to step up to the plate. Just how much cash did they pile in front of you, bro? Did Isana help pay for some of it with her body?"

"Lyka!"

Despite Isana's outraged roar, the young man shrugged, maintaining his carefree attitude.

"I'm getting paid enough to account for the danger I'll face," Zig replied.

"And...this job is far too easy for me to consider Isana's physical compensation."

"Heh."

It was obvious that Lyka was trying to provoke him. The young man narrowed his eyes at Zig's breezy response. He had shifted from trying to evaluate Zig to trying to figure out his deal.

Zig held out a hand to formally introduce himself. "I'm Zig. You seem just as capable as I've heard. I'm expecting good things from you."

Lyka ignored Zig's outstretched hand and just continued to stare at him. It didn't seem like he had any intention of reciprocating the gesture.

"I'm sure you've heard other things about me too," he said. "What made you want to ask for my help?"

Lyka watched Zig's face warily, looking for any sign of a reaction. Having nothing to hide, Zig answered honestly.



"I decided that wouldn't be an issue."

"Just that? Is your head on straight, bro? I take pleasure in ending lives, ya know."

This again, Zig sighed internally.

He was getting a bit annoyed hearing the same story on repeat. These people, with their true warrior spirits, were far too straitlaced.

"Yes, yes. You like killing, right?"

"I love it."

There was no hesitation whatsoever. The animosity in the room grew even stronger. Even Isana, who was standing next to Zig, couldn't mask her discomfort.

"Well, it can't be helped, can it?"

"Huh?" Lyka froze at Zig's unexpected response.

The others also had similar reactions. Everyone turned to stare at Zig, collectively wondering if he had lost his mind.

"Even if you try to deny your preferences, it won't change the fact that you like to kill. The only issue that remains is how you handle *that* impulse."

"What in the world are you—"

Zig ignored Isana's outburst and continued to talk.

"When people become aware of *that*, they usually handle it in one of two ways: giving in to it or bottling it up."

The moment Lyka recovered from his initial shock, his demeanor completely changed. A quiet depth replaced his blank stare, and his expression turned serious.

Zig held up one finger. "The easiest thing to do is give in to it, kill indiscriminately whenever the impulse strikes. Whether it be women, children,

young, old—anyone and everyone alike."

Basically, the quickest path to joining the dregs of society. Zig held up a second finger.

"The other option is to bottle it up. It does depend on the intensity, but somewhere down the line, they reach a breaking point. Even if they normally don't pay attention to their homicidal impulses, it can apparently surge up all at once.

"Usually, it happens in times of intense emotion, like when they're sexually excited or experiencing an outburst of anger. Even if they lived like a saint until that point, they completely lose their senses. I'm sure you've all heard the line, 'I never expected they could do such a thing."

Everyone was hanging on Zig's words. Or to be more accurate, the difference in their values was so extreme that no one could interject.

"Sounds like you're screwed either way," Lyka commented.

"True. This issue leads to ruin for most people who deal with it, but there are still some who can handle it in an acceptable manner."

The mercenary then held up a third finger.

"You just have to make it your livelihood. There are plenty of people that no one would give a damn about if someone took them out. In fact, when it comes to some people, getting rid of them would be doing the world a favor. If you can combine killing those types for both hobby and profit, it's not going to bother anyone."

However, there weren't very many who chose that path. The reason was obvious: It meant that you needed to maintain your rationality while accepting your homicidal tendencies. It was despicable behavior that you couldn't discuss with anyone.

You simply had to accept yourself for exactly what you were.

"You're handling those impulses well for someone your age," Zig said. "You've

got impressive mental fortitude."

Lyka burst out laughing on the spot; he couldn't help but be amused by what he just heard.

"Bro, you must be crazy if a psychopath like me doesn't bother you."

"I always thought I was one of the saner folks I ran with," Zig said glumly, causing Lyka to laugh once again.

The young man glanced down at Zig's still extended hand. After debating for a moment, he finally took it.

"All right. Out of respect for your insanity, bro, I'll tag along at no extra cost. This is a problem affecting my people, after all."

"That would be great."

Besides Zig and Lyka—who seemed in questionably high spirits—everyone else in the room was slowly coming to one conclusion.

The elder stroked his beard thoughtfully. "We may have entrusted this task... to the wrong person."

But by the time they had come to that realization, it was too late to do anything about it. There was no one else for them to turn to, so they had no choice but to leave the job to these people.

Once they finished going over the plan of attack with Lyka, it was time to head out. For the sake of stealth, they would go with a minimal amount of armor. Zig wrapped a cloth around his face so that only his eyes were showing in order to conceal his identity.

"Our children are in your capable hands."

"Understood, Elder. Please look forward to hearing our good news."

Their preparations complete, Shuoh began to lead the group to their destination. The sun had already long past set, and no one else was on the streets.

The location was a considerable distance away, but since all four of them walked as swiftly as they could, they only took about two hours to arrive.

"This place sure is spacious," murmured Zig. "Almost like it was tailor-made for someone trying to deal in bad business."

The large building seemed dilapidated but showed no signs of collapsing—it was probably used as a factory or something similar back in the day. At first glance, it seemed completely deserted, but upon closer inspection of the premises, they could make out traces of recent activity.

"This has got to be it," Isana said.

"There seems to be a lot of people frequenting this place," Shuoh agreed. "There aren't any footsteps that look like they belong to children, though."

"They might've been carried inside," Isana suggested.

Zig mulled over how to proceed and decided it would be best to infiltrate the building in teams of two, with each pair looking for the children.

It was highly possible the perpetrators would also be inside, but the children were the top priority. Since there were so many of them, it would be difficult to rescue them as soon as they were found. Once they found the location of the children, one team would exit the building and report to the Jinsu-Yah rescue team that was on standby. The other team was tasked with keeping the children safe.

Instead of going through the front doors, they walked around hoping to access the back entrance. Unfortunately, they discovered it was locked. Zig stepped forward to try to pry it open, but Isana stopped him.

"Stand back," she said.

She silently unsheathed her katana and inserted it into the rusty, gaping door. Placing the middle of the blade on top of a bolt, she took a deep breath.

"Haah!"

Stillness turned to motion as she sliced downward while releasing her breath.

The bolt made a small, high-pitched noise as it split in two.

"The children's lives will be at risk if we're discovered," she said. "Please act with the utmost caution."

"Got it," Zig answered.

Once inside, they split into their two teams: Zig with Lyka and Isana with Shuoh. Isana and Shuoh both seemed repulsed at the thought of working with Lyka, so the groups had formed naturally.

The teams silently made their way into the building, investigating the rooms one by one.

Isana and Shuoh checked the fourth room. When it didn't seem that anyone was inside, they left and started looking for the next one.

"Miss Isana, can I ask you something?" Shuoh addressed her.

"Sure, but keep it brief."

Even if they didn't sense anyone nearby, they were in enemy territory and couldn't be too careful.

Shuoh continued in a hushed voice, "What is your relationship to that man?"

Isana thought hard about how to best answer that question; she had promised Zig she wouldn't tell anyone about his possession of illicit substances. It was imperative she gloss over that part.

"I attacked him over a misunderstanding while I was out on a job. I thought he was part of the mafia because he was trying to gather underground information..."

That was right around when the children started to go missing. She'd been searching for them when she found Zig talking with some lower-level mafia members and rushed straight into battle. Not only had it been a terrible mistake, but the fact that he defeated her was an even more bitter pill to

swallow.

"Miss Isana, wasn't the master always harping on you to fix that rash streak of yours?" Shuoh sighed, looking completely appalled at her story.

He was repeating the same line their master and the other veteran warriors of the tribe had told her a thousand times.

"Let's just leave that topic be for now," Isana said, hoping to move on from the sore subject. "So, what was it you were trying to say?"

Shuoh seemed unsatisfied with her response, but seeing that she wasn't willing to give any more information, he had to change his approach.

"You should limit your interactions with that man as much as possible. His way of thinking is far too dangerous."

Yeah, that's probably true, Isana thought.

"It's not that I don't understand what he was trying to say. If I...was born with homicidal tendencies...I'm sure I wouldn't be able to handle them well..."

Isana quietly listened to Shuoh's monologue. She could tell he was choosing his words carefully. He wasn't usually expressive, but his face was currently twisted into a scowl.

"I will admit he slightly changed my perspective of Lyka. I do feel some respect for the boy for not getting into any major trouble despite those impulses of his. However..."

He paused, his squinted eyes opening wide, clearly full of fear.

"That man is too strange. What sort of environment does one have to be in to develop a mindset like his? I've seen enough kinds of lunatics or scoundrels to last me a lifetime, but I've never encountered someone like him."

Shuoh's outburst struck a chord with her own thoughts. Their attitudes toward killing were too different. Although communication wasn't an issue, it was as if they were talking with someone from a far, far away land.

"Mark my words, one day that man is going to bare his fangs at us. No, he'll turn his sword on us even without having malicious intent."

"You're probably right."

Isana hadn't spent much time with Zig, but she was already well aware of what he was capable of—the only reason she was still breathing was due to a very lucky break. Zig had only left her alive because finishing the job would've put his employer in a bind.

"Since we don't know when he'll become our enemy, we should take care of the problem while we still—"

She kept her voice low, but her tone was harsh. "Enough!"

Finding himself interrupted and shot down, Shuoh looked perturbed.

"But..." he started again.

"Even if you have a point, it would be futile for us to initiate any aggression."

She had no doubt *that* would make the Jinsu-Yah people switch from enemy to extermination target in Zig's mind. If he was facing them as an opponent, some would live as long as he completed whatever he had been hired to do, but if he believed they meant to cause him harm...

"If we bungle it up, he'll use any means at his disposal to take every last one of us out."

That was the one scenario she wanted to avoid at all costs. Shuoh still didn't look convinced but slowly nodded in agreement.

"All right."

"As long as we don't make a move against him, he won't do anything reckless. I've also been keeping track of his move—"

Isana cut herself off and glanced around. As soon as Shuoh noticed her actions, he immediately switched gears. His pointed ears perked up, all his concentration going into listening.

It didn't take long to pick up on the sound.

"That sounded like a child, right?" he asked.

"I think so," Isana responded. "Let's go."

They headed in the direction of the voices as quickly and quietly as possible.

Slipping through the vast space in what seemed to be a workshop, they made their way to a heavy-looking door at the back of the room. It was locked from the outside, but Isana remedied that problem with her blade.

With another faint high-pitched noise, she cut clean through the door's lock.

They opened the door just a crack to get a peek inside, but it was so dark that they couldn't make anything out. It didn't seem like they were walking into an ambush and they couldn't sense the presence of anyone waiting behind the door.

Entering the room, which appeared to be a warehouse, they cast light magic on the tips of their fingers, taking care to control the brightness. A dull glow lit the space up.

"Could that be..." Shuoh gasped.

They could make out rows of something near the back of the room.

With their hearts pounding loudly in their ears, Isana and Shuoh approached the objects, illuminating them with the light emanating from their fingertips.

The sight made their blood run cold. Several children were sprawled on the ground.

They rushed over to immediately check their pulses.

"Thank goodness." Isana breathed a sigh of relief. "They're just unconscious."

"Looks like they were knocked out with sleeping pills," Shuoh observed, "but there seems to be a few more children than were reported missing..."

It appeared that the kidnappers had gotten their hands on even more victims since the last briefing. Isana bit her lip to suppress the anger that was

threatening to overwhelm her.

"Let's find Zig's team and bring the rescue squad in. There're too many for us to carry out on our own."

"Leave it to me," Shuoh replied. "You stay here and watch over the children, Miss Isana."

Shuoh met up with Zig and Lyka a few minutes after leaving the warehouse and brought them back with him. They began to go over their next steps.

"Seems like they're all accounted for," Zig said.

"Yes. Isana and I will contact the rescue squad. Keep the children secure until we come back. We don't know when the perpetrators will return."

"Got it," Zig agreed.

"Hm..." Lyka looked perplexed as he listened to Shuoh's explanation.

Lyka's reaction concerned Zig enough to ask, "Is something the matter?"

The question prompted the young man to look in Isana's direction. "You said you came here because you heard the sound of a child, right?"

"Yes, what about it?" Isana looked at Lyka dubiously, unable to follow where his line of questioning was going.

"They're all fast asleep, though. So, who was it that you heard?"

"What ...?"

Lyka's observation made Isana freeze. Zig also paused, silently trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

The air in the warehouse suddenly felt heavy and still.

"Um..."

A small voice echoed through the silence. The children all appeared to be asleep, but one of them was sitting up.

"Sorry, I wasn't really sleeping," the boy said.

Following his lead, a few more children also tentatively rose to their feet.

There were about seven of them that were awake. They looked uncomfortable, probably because Isana and the others were practically burning holes through them with their stares.

"We were here when we woke up," the boy continued. "We couldn't open the door, so we were talking with each other about how to escape."

"Okay," said Lyka, "so that's what they heard. But why would you pretend to be asleep?"

"We were scared at first. We thought the people who took us had come back..."

That was a sound enough explanation. Suddenly waking up in an unfamiliar place would put the young children on high alert. The fact that they hadn't fallen to pieces was also commendable.

Upon closer inspection, it looked like those who were awake were the older of the kidnapped children. A light clicked on in Shuoh's head.

"They must've made a mistake with the sleeping pill dosage."

"What do you mean?" Isana asked.

"Sleeping pills have a devastating effect on the bodies of young children. If given the wrong dosage, they could end up permanently injured or even die."

The perpetrators would be shooting themselves in the foot if they ended up damaging their goods, but their plan seemed to have backfired.

Shuoh gave the children a reassuring smile. "It's going to be okay now. We're going to bring help. Can you hold on for just a little while longer?"

Although he still looked nervous, the boy firmly nodded. Shuoh gave him a pat on the head before he and Isana left to find the rescue squad.

"How long is it going to take for them to get back?" the boy asked Lyka now

that they had some time on their hands.

"Hm? Let's see... Maybe about—"

"About an hour," a voice coming from behind Lyka cut in.

Turning back, he saw Zig going around and observing each child who was still asleep.

"Yeah, about that much," Lyka agreed.

"It'll take a while, huh?" said the boy.

"Yup, that's why we're here to protect you until then," Lyka answered as he moved toward the door.

He and Zig swapped places. Now it was the mercenary's turn to question the boy.

"Do you remember anything about who did this to you? Did you see their faces?"

"No, nothing at all. I was on my way home when suddenly everything went dark. The next thing I knew, I was here."

Now that he was done observing the children, Zig pulled a coin out of his pocket and began flipping it around in his hand.

"I see. Do you know all these kids? You seem to be acquainted with everyone who's awake, right?"

"They're my friends. I've seen the kids who are still sleeping before, but I don't know any of their names."

Zig ran the coin back and forth across his fingers. The boy watched the motion, almost mesmerized by it, as he answered the questions. Then, he turned his attention to Zig's face.

"Why do you have a cloth wrapped around your head?"

"Just...reasons."

His vague reply made it hard for the boy to ask any follow-ups.

"What's your take on all of this, bro?" Lyka asked.

Zig narrowed his eyes and continued to play with the coin as he voiced his thoughts.

"I'm certain the mafia has a hand in all this. Human trafficking is a lucrative business, but it's also an activity that requires a certain amount of organizational backing to find enough manpower and set up a distribution pipeline. It's too big of an endeavor for your common thug to pull off."

The little boy looked confused, not entirely grasping the subjects being discussed. Lyka and Zig ignored him and continued their conversation.

"If a few members of a migrant tribe go missing, not many people will make a serious effort to go looking for them," Lyka mused, shrugging in disgust. "They found a real sweet spot for themselves."

"Even so, they're taking on a lot of risks," Zig went on. "Even if their social status is low, the Jinsu-Yah are still a group of capable fighters. In the unlikely event that conflict breaks out, whoever is behind this would suffer immeasurable losses."

The thing about large organizations was the bigger they were, the easier it was to find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. It was difficult to authorize high-risk activities when you had more to lose.

"There are hard-line and moderate factions within the same criminal organizations," Zig concluded. "I doubt a moderate would be very forgiving of being so reckless."

"So, what you're saying is that one of the hard-line factions is getting ahead of themselves?"

"I don't know if it's about money or trying to score brownie points, but it's too shortsighted a measure to come from the top brass," Zig said, pointing out that all of this was only speculation on his part. "Going rogue just for money, huh? Is the mafia leadership really that weak?" "You think the mafia is a bastion of solidarity?"

Lyka chuckled. Despite sounding nonchalant, Zig's words rang surprisingly true.

"It's not really the time to be laughing about other people's problems now, is it?" Zig chided. "It might be possible to use this situation to our benefit and get them to show their cards."

"I get it. A lack of solidarity leaves the door wide open for those looking for opportunities to take down their rivals. If we leaked them information on these activities..."

"They won't have the luxury of time to mess around with your tribe in that case. Internal succession struggles within the mafia are no joke."

Once Lyka realized that what Zig was telling him had a direct impact on his people's future livelihood, his tone grew serious.

"Seems like finding ways to take advantage of those circumstances will be our path going forward."

Even though they shunned him, his heart was still Jinsu-Yah. Zig had been surprised by the young man's mental strength, and now, he was touched by how noble he was.

"I guess," Zig replied brusquely, hiding his positive impression of Lyka.

"You're a cold one, you know."

"None of this has got anything to do with me," the mercenary replied.

"I suppose you're right."

Lyka sounded like he was protesting, but it didn't actually look like he was perturbed by Zig's attitude. He was fully aware where Zig and his people stood.

Once again appreciating the comfortable distance Lyka kept, Zig ended their talk with a vague, "Anyway..."

He had gotten way more engrossed in that conversation than he expected.

I think we were talking for at least fifteen minutes, he thought, turning back to the children.

They looked up at him with lost expressions as they hadn't been able to follow the conversation.

"Get ready to move out soon. Help should be coming in about *five* minutes."

"What?!"

The boys' demeanors changed dramatically the moment they heard Zig's announcement.

"B-but didn't you say it'd take an hour not that long ago ...?"

"What's wrong?" Zig asked. "You're not happy about it?"

"Th-that's not it, but, uh..." the boy who had talked back faltered with his response.

Zig completely ignored him and instead turned to Lyka. "What do you think?"

"They're all in on it."

Zig responded with a shrug.

The children, still trying to smooth over their blunder, noticed how the two men were acting. The seemingly flustered boy—or whatever was taking that form—scowled.

His whole attitude changed in an instant.

"I never thought you'd catch on. How long have you known?"

The physical form that stood before them was undoubtedly that of a child, but the palpable bloodlust radiating from him exposed his true nature as a member of society's underbelly.

The boy pulled a knife out that had been hidden in his waistband and flaunted it in their faces.

In response, Zig grabbed the naginata strapped to his back. He swung the weapon to the side in a sweeping arc, preventing a shadowy form that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere from creeping toward the sleeping children.

The shadow tried to block Zig's attack, but the knife he carried wasn't enough to stop it, and the force of the blow sent him crashing into the wall.

The boy grew silent, not able to spare a glance at his slumped-over companion. Zig had seen right through his plan to cause a distraction while the children were moved elsewhere.

"You really think a professional is going to hold a question-and-answer session for no good reason?" Zig retorted as he kept the other enemy at bay with his naginata.

Realizing it was useless to try and buy any more time, the enemies dropped their ruse and quickly shifted into offensive stances. Lyka silently followed suit and drew his weapon.

No signal heralded the start of their fight. Both parties readied themselves for a battle to the death.

The boy before Zig was the first to act. He withdrew some small knives from the folds of his clothing and threw them at him. Two of his companions followed the projectiles in hot pursuit, rushing toward the mercenary.

Zig knew that if he tried to dodge the knives, they would hit the children behind him. He had to stand his ground and deal with the attack where he was. Deciding not to rely on his weapon, he deflected the incoming projectiles with his gauntlets and greaves using minimal movements.

However, this meant he wasn't in perfect defensive alignment, and his incoming attackers took advantage of this, slashing at him with their knives at different intervals, aiming for his fingers wrapped around the naginata.

They weren't trying to finish him in one blow, instead trying to steadily siphon away his ability to act.

It was too late for Zig to fight the men off with his naginata, being too preoccupied dealing with the projectiles. He dropped his weapon to dodge the incoming strikes, but one of his opponents saw through him.

The man instantly changed his tactics—and went for Zig's jugular.

How predictable, Zig thought.

Using his left hand, Zig grabbed his attacker's right wrist, halting the knife headed straight for his neck. He then used his right hand to press down on the depression below the man's elbow joint, causing his arm to pivot backward and aim the knife toward his own neck.

The counter took Zig's opponent by surprise—he hadn't been expecting to be attacked by his own knife. Still, he was a professional; he wouldn't make the rookie mistake of freezing in a panic.

The man caught his incoming right arm with his left, and the force of his two arms against Zig's one prevented the blow from connecting.

The mercenary then used the gauntlet on his right arm to parry an incoming side attack from the second man.

The momentum of the forward swing allowed Zig to follow through and finish the attacker in front of him—who still had both hands up from blocking the knife—by landing a devastating punch to the gut.

"Nghhh!"

The impact of the blow and force of his internal organs being crushed caused the man to give out a muffled cry as blood began to gush from his mouth. The punch was so strong that he flew into the air, the pressure snapping his ribs like dry twigs whose jagged edges pierced his lungs.

Without giving the crumpled form a second glance, Zig closed in on his other opponent.

Finding himself under intense pressure, the remaining man tried to put distance between himself and Zig by jumping away, but that action was to be

his undoing.

Zig picked up the naginata and thrust it at the man. Its impressive length was just enough to reach him as he tried to flee.

"Damn it! Gwaaaah!"

The man tried to deflect the naginata with his knife, but the difference in his and the mercenary's physical strength was too great for him to overcome the momentum. The blade speared through his torso, knocking him to the ground.

Zig made sure there were no loose ends, administering a *coup de grâce* to both fallen men before hulking toward the last opponent standing.

His enemy stood in stunned silence, desperately racking his brain for a way to escape from this man who had swiftly taken out two of his companions. He wanted to see how the battle nearer the exit was faring but didn't want to take his eyes off Zig for even a second. Only the sound of clashing swords let him know that his other companions were still engaged in combat.

Zig sprang into action just as the man made a run for it. He skewered one of the corpses with his naginata, lifting the body off the ground. The man's eyes grew wide at the sight of Zig's violent rampage as he braced for the incoming attack.

Having finished off the two attackers who rushed at him, Zig glanced over at Lyka.

He was wielding two swords and facing three opponents at once, taking advantage of the different lengths of his weapons to handle any incoming attacks. Although he was at a disadvantage when it came to the number of attacks his opponents could unleash, Lyka bested them in both speed and skill, and was slowly and steadily pushing them back.

The young man grunted loudly, exhaling as the impact of his blade echoed with a sharp clang.

Unable to keep up with Lyka any longer, one of the men found himself missing an arm as the severed limb sailed through the air. A follow-through attack with the same blade took care of his head—separating it from his body.

Lyka's expression was one of pure ecstasy as a torrent of blood drenched him.

"That's just about what I expected," Zig murmured to himself.

It looked like Lyka would have everything on his end taken care of shortly.

Since the remaining man before Zig seemed to be desperately looking for an escape route, his priority was to take that option away. Having decided his course of action, the mercenary stabbed into one of the men he disposed of earlier with his naginata, skewering the corpse.

It was an incredible feat to have the arm strength capable of lifting an entire person with a long object and dangling them off the end.

Taking full advantage of this extraordinary ability, Zig used the momentum he built up to hurl the corpse in the remaining man's direction with a loud grunt.

"Gaaah!"

Although the move caught his enemy by surprise, the trajectory of the corpse was slow enough for him to dodge it. However, the corpse sailed past the man, crashing straight into the backs of Lyka's two opponents.

"What the hell?!"

The surprised reactions of both Zig's opponent and his companions provided Lyka with an opening he gladly took advantage of.

"Die!"

In the span of one breath, his blades made multiple strikes, slashing both men's necks while stabbing them at the same time and ending their lives before they could even make a sound.

"That's revenge for the stunt you pulled earlier," Zig chided. "You really shouldn't have dodged, you know."

"You bastard!"

Earlier, the man had thrown a knife at Zig that he had to block in order to protect the children behind him. Zig had tossed the corpse using the same tactic, but since the man dodged, his companions were taken out. Now, he was all alone.

The only exit was the front door, and he would have to go through the two men who had easily disposed of all his companions to make it out.

Basically, he was a goner.

"Just give up, okay?" Lyka smirked as he wiped the blood from his swords.

"And why don't you cough up the motive for this act and the responsible party while you're at it?"

Seeing that twisted smile contorted with ecstasy, the last man standing realized he had reached the end of his road.

It wasn't long until Isana and the others returned. They had brought the rescue squad with them, and its members immediately started tending to the children. Isana, standing guard and watching the relief efforts out of the corner of her eye, heaved a sigh of relief.

"They're all alive and healthy, with only a few minor scrapes to speak of. Thank goodness we were able to rescue them safely..."

It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

"What about the man?" Zig asked.

"He'll be coming back with us so we can interrogate him. We've got plenty of questions for him."

"I doubt you're going to get any straight answers out of him," Zig said, "but good luck with that."

While the man and his companions were not incredibly skilled at combat,

they were professional criminals. Even if they used magic to change their forms, that alone wouldn't have been enough to evade the watchful eye of the Jinsu-Yah as they kidnapped children right from under their noses.

"Yeah, yeah, I know you don't care. Anyway, how did you see through them? Not many people can use shapeshifting magic, and I didn't take you for someone who was that well versed in spells..."

"It was just a hunch," Zig answered vaguely as he recalled the coin in his pocket.

He had planned to use it to reveal their true forms, but trapping them with his questioning had worked so well it hadn't been necessary. He had noticed that some form of magic was being used the moment he stepped into the warehouse, but since he couldn't pinpoint what type it was, he hadn't been able to immediately act.

Before the battle began, he had been checking on the sleeping children to confirm no magic was coming from them. Once the fight was over, he forced the prisoner to hold his coin, causing his magic to dissipate. That meant all the remaining children were real. While that was happening, the rescue squad arrived and transported out the last of the victims. Lyka and Shuoh joined them as escorts, just in case something happened on the way back.

Now that they were gone, there was no need to be on the lookout anymore.

"I guess we should get going as well?" Isana suggested.

"Yeah."

They were just about to start walking back, when—

"Who's there?!" Isana yelled, whirling around and reaching for the katana at her waist as she sensed someone else's presence. She stared straight ahead.

A lone man stepped forward from the dimly lit alley. He was wearing a gray trench coat and appeared to be in his forties.

"Good evening, Miss," the man greeted as he approached them, his face

illuminated in moonlight. "Isn't it a lovely night?"

His gaze was sharp, and his eyes seemed to radiate a chilling, dark glow. He had a cigar in his mouth and an off-putting grin plastered on his face. It was immediately evident that this was no respectable man.

"So you're one of them—the mafia." Isana glowered at him, remaining on guard.

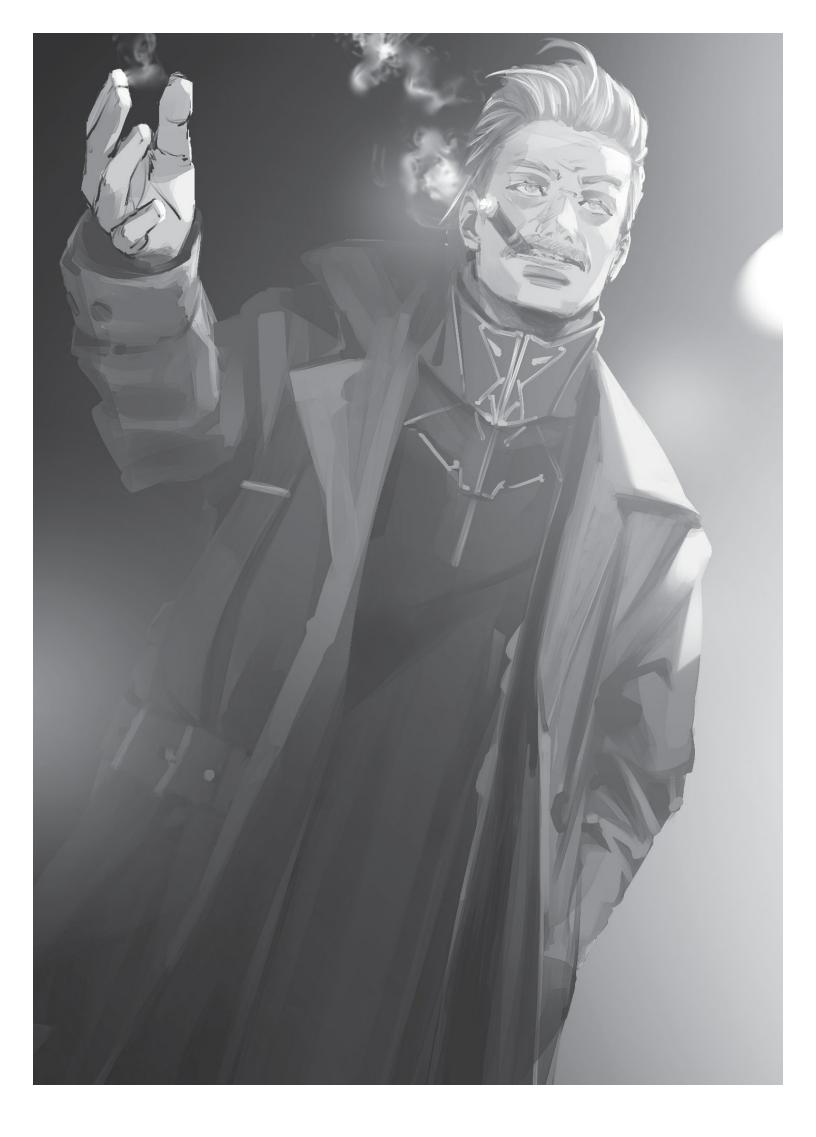
The man easily brushed off her burning gaze with a low chuckle. His attitude, his attire, and—above all else—the calmness he showed in the face of Isana's death stare was proof enough of his high status in the mafia.

Her wariness quickly transformed into murderous rage. "Are you the one who was behind all this? You've got some balls to come strolling back to the scene of the crime."

The man raised both of his hands in the air and calmly said, "Ooh, aren't you scary? You think I'd really do something that stupid? I've actually come here with an interesting proposition. I don't think it'd be a bad deal for you, so how about hearing me out?"

Isana paused to consider his request. She could simply ignore the man, but the Jinsu-Yah weren't in a very good position. Something would need to change —she just wasn't sure if he was the catalyst they were looking for.

"Speak...now."



"There you go!" the man guffawed as he took the cigar out of his mouth and trimmed the end with a cigar cutter before lighting it. "I like that boldness, Miss. I'm Vanno of the Bazarta Mafia Family, at your service." Plumes of purple smoke wafted from the man's mouth as he spoke. "As you might've guessed, I'm here to discuss none other than the perpetrators of this crime. What happened to the ones you caught?"

"We're bringing the one we kept alive back with us; the others are all dead. If you're planning to ask us to turn over our prisoner, that won't be happening."

"I see, I see. I would expect nothing less from the Jinsu-Yah. Those guys you were up against should've been pretty good; I guess you were all just better." The man laughed so hard his shoulders shook. "Still, I expect he'll be a tough nut to crack. Well, that's neither here nor there... What I'm interested in are the corpses."

"You want...the corpses?" Isana said, confused.

"I sure do. I've already got a good idea of who would be stupid enough to try and pull off a stunt like this. I just need proof."

"And those bodies will do the trick?"

"Depending on how I use them, yes."

His reasoning sounded sketchy, but there didn't seem to be any harm in letting him take what he asked for. Isana still felt wary of the man but was cautiously open to considering his proposal.

Zig quietly waited on the sidelines as Vanno and Isana talked. He noticed a pile of rubble a short distance away and went over to sit on it.

"I'm starving," he murmured under his breath. It was way past dinnertime.

Siasha was probably back by now.

Even though I told her I was going out, I doubt she'll be pleased that I'm returning this late.

He couldn't help but give a wry smile at the thought. It felt strange that he was starting to accept her presence as a normal part of his life.

How long has it been since I spent this much time with another person? he wondered.

Even during his days in the mercenary brigade, he didn't remember ever caring about another person this much. He was still lost in his thoughts as Isana and Vanno wrapped up their conversation.

Vanno then turned to Zig. "I've been wondering for a while now, but who are you? And that strange cloth you've got wrapped around your head, is that what's in style these days?"

"Don't mind me. I was just hired help," Zig responded.

"I see."

Vanno must've sensed something in Zig's curt response because he didn't pursue the matter any further.

"Anyway, Miss Isana, leave the cleaning up of this mess to me. I'll be in touch soon."

"Thanks. And don't forget your promise," she reminded him.

Vanno turned around and walked away. Isana didn't move until he completely disappeared into the alley.

"Okay, now let's actually be on our way," she said.

"Sounds good. I'm famished."

"Do you want to grab a bite somewhere? My treat."

It was a tempting offer, but he had Siasha to think about.

Zig shook his head. "I can't. Someone's waiting for me, so I'll head straight home once I collect my commission."

"Okay, but I'd really like to thank you somehow."

"Just the money is enough. Besides..."

We may not be on the same side next time.

Zig didn't say anything, but Isana understood perfectly what his silence implied.

She grew quiet for a moment and gripped the handle of her katana.

"We'll deal with that when the time comes."

Vanno walked through dimly lit alleyways, his trench coat fluttering as smoke drifted from the cigar in his mouth. Despite his somewhat weary appearance, his gaze was still sharp. He continued to make his way through the back streets before suddenly coming to a stop.

"So, what did you think of her? The so-called Princess of White Lightning."

It didn't seem like anyone else was around, but he heard a response to his question.

"She's above and beyond what all the rumors say. She was even aware of my presence."

The darkness of the alley, where the moonlight didn't reach, seemed to deepen as a humanoid shadow slowly appeared. It stood before Vanno, dressed all in black, its gender indiscernible.

Despite it being right in front of him, Vanno couldn't sense any signs of the shadow's presence. He chuckled before continuing.

"That's a pretty big compliment coming from you. So do you think you'd be able to handle her if it became necessary?"

"Highly doubtful if it's a straight-on attack."

"Then how about from behind?"

"Maybe a 50/50 chance, and only after careful preparation."

Vanno inhaled sharply at the assessment. It had been exceedingly difficult to get his hands on this resource, and they were incredibly skilled. Being too careless with them might lead the trail back to him, so aside from bodyguarding duties, he had only been using them sparingly for important jobs.

Hearing that this individual—who usually didn't falter when faced with perilous missions—was only somewhat confident they could best the swordswoman made Vanno's blood run cold.

"It was probably for the best to join forces for now," he finally said. "We wouldn't be able to deal with multiple people of that caliber."

He cheerfully took another puff of his cigar, pleased that he had trusted his gut.

There were three people vying to succeed the Bazarta Mafia Family, and he discovered early that one of them was starting to dabble in human trafficking. This wannabe successor had noticed how weak the Jinsu-Yah's social foothold was and hired some higher-level adventurer strapped for cash to spy on them.

Human trafficking was unquestionably a good way of making money, but that likely wasn't his true goal. The Jinsu-Yah were strong. Going after them posed far greater costs and risks than kidnapping common street children.

But although their swords were steel, the same couldn't be said for their hearts.

A village where children disappeared one after another would slowly become deserted. Even when the Jinsu-Yah asked for help, no one would heed their call, only turn a blind eye to their plight.

His true intention was probably to cause the Jinsu-Yah to fall into such a state of despair that they would decide to leave the town of their own volition.

It wasn't a bad idea, but the risk of failure was just too great.

There was a possibility that it could work, and right when he was about to step in and do something about it...this happened.

"That fool was far too hasty for his plan to succeed... Although, I'm a little concerned about how quickly the Jinsu-Yah acted."

That tribe was unparalleled when it came to fighting ability, but they weren't very good at dealing with underhanded tactics. Something felt off about how quickly they realized it was a human trafficking scheme and settled the situation without suffering any losses.

"I suppose people discover hidden strengths when they're backed into a corner?" he mused.

Another possibility was that the adventurer who was hired to spy betrayed his client. That could explain the presence of the large man who had accompanied the group. He was curious about what sparked their change in tactics, but holding the idiot responsible for this mess accountable came first.

If he used the false claim that the Jinsu-Yah were aware of who was behind the incident, he could end up with one less rival in the succession race.

Vanno's malicious smirk was wide as he mulled over his future plans when the figure in black asked, "May I say something?"

Usually, they just did as they were told without question, so hearing them speak up on their own accord was very unusual.

Vanno tried to hide his surprise. "Hm? Is there something that's bothering you?"

"Who was that man with them?"

"Oh, the big guy that was hiding his face? I don't know, to be honest. He said something about being hired...so he's probably an outsider. I see...maybe he's the one who was helping them out."

The fact that he had his face covered up meant he wasn't a member of the Jinsu-Yah. He was probably someone they thought trustworthy trying to keep his identity concealed from the mafia.

So does that mean she asked a fellow adventurer for help...?

That didn't make sense though. Even adventurers wouldn't get involved in issues facing a migrant tribe if there wasn't any concrete proof. Vanno was still deep in thought when the black-clad figure said something that set off an alarm in his head.

"That man could be dangerous."

"You think he's that strong?"

He figured the man had to be halfway decent if he was accompanying the Princess of White Lightning, but although Vanno had been in his fair share of fights, he wasn't a martial artist by any means. He'd sensed the man's strength, but he wasn't able to quantify his capabilities.

"There's no question that he's skilled. He ended up going off to sit down while you were talking, right?"

"Yeah, I guess he did."

That man didn't show any interest in the dealings between Isana and himself, choosing instead to sit on the sidelines and relax. Vanno figured it was because he was a one-time hired hand with no stake in the outcome and paid him no heed.

"He came to sit right next to where I was hiding," the black-clad figured continued.

"It could just be a coincidence?"

Even the Princess of White Lightning was only able to sense his helper's presence and couldn't pinpoint exactly where they were. The man's choice of seating being a fluke was certainly in the realm of possibility, but the black-clad figure shook their head, dashing Vanno's hopes.

"I can't say for sure, but I think he knew I was there."

Vanno felt like pulling his hair out; it was just one more hassle to deal with. He may have just given a man he knew nothing about a trump card. Now it was impossible to push aside his fear at what would happen if certain information

managed to fall into the hands of one of his rivals.

"He's going to be a headache if he can see through your stealth. Look into him... No, scratch that. The loss would be too catastrophic if he somehow caught on and I lost you. Thankfully, he stands out with that weapon type and build. It shouldn't be too hard to gather intel on him. I can handle that, so you just keep your eye on the movements of the Cantarella Family."

"Understood," the black-clad figure replied before melting back into the dark shadows.

Vanno was too preoccupied mulling over his next steps to give his underling a second glance. Some of the old-timers wouldn't be too pleased if they knew he was striking up deals with the Jinsu-Yah.

"The senior members are always so desperate to cling to methods of the past. They don't call us the 'bad guys' for nothing. I don't care if it's outsiders or whoever, I'll use whatever I've got at my disposal. Screw being satisfied with petty skirmishes... Mafia infighting isn't some rigged exhibition match."

Vanno was annoyed with the current state of the mafia. It was just a bunch of old farts who avoided fighting and neglected any type of reform while slowly drowning in their vested interests. Any conflict with opposing forces was just a formality, a farce that stemmed from backroom bargains. That was all well and good if you were talking about a respectable organization—but this was the mafia for crying out loud. A *criminal* organization that sucked away money from respectable people and endorsed harming others for one's personal benefit.

And now, they feared and even tried to eliminate risks that might bring in money in the pursuit of stability.

"How pathetic."

He would have to be the one to shatter all those ridiculous conventions.

Vanno was a man who only moved to achieve his own ambitions.

Two factions made up the mafia: the moderates and the hardliners. He might

act the part of a moderate on the surface, but at his core, Vanno was as hardline as they came.

The town was already asleep when Zig returned to the inn.

None of the food stalls were open by the time he got back, so he missed out on getting anything to eat and had to go back to his room hungry.

He tried walking as quietly as possible so that he wouldn't wake up any of the other occupants.

"Hm?"

Zig noticed a faint light coming from underneath the door to his room. He cautiously focused his senses, feeling the presence of someone inside.

Could be a thief, he thought.

Weapon in hand, he slowly opened the door...

The room was lit only by the soft glow of candles, and sitting on his bed absentmindedly gazing out the window...was Siasha.

Zig immediately relaxed and entered the room, the noise of his arrival causing Siasha to turn around.

Her pale pink lips curved into a smile. "Welcome home."

For some reason, the simple greeting struck an emotional chord within him.

It's such a common phrase, but how long has it been since someone last said those words to me?

"Yeah, I'm back," he finally replied.

"You're late."

"I had a job."

"You ended up working on your day off?" Siasha said with a half smile. "That doesn't give you much of a leg to stand on when you scold me." She

approached him. "You smell like blood."

"It was that kind of job."

"Did you get hurt?"

"Nope."

"That's good," Siasha said before walking away from the window. "You didn't eat yet, right?"

Using magic to light the room, she started to prepare some food, enough for two.

Zig was confused. "You didn't eat either?"

It was way past time to be having dinner.

Siasha gave a bitter laugh as she poured their drinks. "Well...no."

"You didn't need to wait for me, you know," Zig said.

"That wasn't my intention, but..."

"Zig's really late," Siasha muttered to herself.

It was dinnertime, and he still hadn't come home.

After she met the members of her new party, they decided to get to know each other better by eating lunch together and discussing things like the movements and recent sightings of various monstrosities along with methods of attack and their weaknesses. It was so awkward at first that she could barely get out a word, but once she adjusted her mindset, it seemed like they were starting to build the framework of an amicable relationship.

"Tomorrow's the first day of adventuring with the new party, huh?" Siasha said to herself. "Not that I've been going it all alone until now..."

The preparations for the next day were set; all she needed to do now was get some dinner and have an early night.

"I'm hungry."

It didn't seem like Zig would be coming home anytime soon. She felt a little bad about it, but she would have to eat without him.

Departing the inn, she headed straight for the shopping district. Since it was dinnertime, the streets were crowded with people as she walked along, deciding what to eat. Going to one of their usual restaurants was an option, but ignoring the desire to explore was against her principles.

"Looks like I'll be doing a little adventuring of my own today."

With her mind made up, she headed in the direction of the rows of food stalls, scrutinizing anything that smelled good.

"The best part of food stalls is the variety of offerings," she murmured.

She had her eye on several items but thought it best to start with a main dish.

"One, please," she asked.

"Oh, aren't you a pretty lady!"

"Flattery will get you nowhere," she said, casually bantering with the stallholder as she purchased her meal of vegetables and meat between flat pieces of bread.

She still wanted a few more things but figured she should at least get something in her belly first. Taking a seat on a bench, she took a big bite out of her bread.

"Hm?"

Something didn't seem quite right.

She chewed another mouthful to make sure.

"What's going on?"

It wasn't bland, nor did it seem like anything strange was mixed in with the ingredients.

In fact, this bread should've been delicious, the type of flavor she'd be ravenously devouring at any other time. But for whatever reason, it just didn't taste good to her *now*.

It almost felt like she was chewing on seasoned sand.

"What's going on?" she wondered out loud.

She still had no clue what was going on as she looked down at the sandwich, no longer having any desire to eat.

Zig mulled over everything Siasha had told him. "You still have a sense of taste, right?"

"Yes. I tried various things...salty, sweet, sour..."

The meal she was preparing was likely made up of the remnants of that taste test, as he spotted dishes from several different food stalls.

Zig grabbed one of the items—a meat skewer—bringing it to his nose and taking a whiff. The scent of the savory sauce had him practically drooling on the spot.

"It doesn't smell off," he remarked.

He took a small bite of the meat and chewed. It didn't taste weird or make his tongue feel numb, and there were no signs of contamination.

Once he examined it enough to feel assured, he swallowed the food down. It was absolutely delicious.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with it," he said.

"Which means I must be the problem..." Siasha fretted, unable to think of a plausible reason.

Her tone was serious; eating was one of the things she loved the most. It sent a shiver up her spine just to imagine what it would be like if her sense of taste never returned to normal.

"When did this start?" Zig asked.

"Ever since dinnertime."

"How was lunch?"

"It was normal, I guess? Although, the food there wasn't very good."

That meant the culprit was her physical condition. Even if her ailment was psychogenic, there was no clear cause.

"Hmm..." Zig thought to himself as he finished gobbling down the skewer.

He was so hungry that he polished it off in a matter of seconds—it tasted heavenly. Siasha stared at him, eyes full of envy, as he reached for the next piece of food. Just the memory of how she felt earlier stayed her hand.

Siasha's stomach rumbled as Zig slowly started eating his way through each dish without her. She was starving.

"Here," Zig said, handing her a piece of the chicken he was about to eat himself.

"I..." Siasha was fearful, but the glorious scent of fried chicken he was holding directly in front of her tickled her nose. She had never felt so conflicted.

"You don't want it?" Zig pressed.

Siasha didn't look like she was going to bite. It was only when he started to pull the tempting morsel away that—

She lurched for the chicken, grabbing it with her teeth as she let out an almost primitive wail. Unable to fight back against her empty stomach, Siasha tore into the meat, clenching her eyes shut as she remembered the unpalatable taste from earlier.

"Huh?"

However, that wasn't the flavor currently flooding her mouth.

It was a piece of perfectly chewy chicken thigh, dripping with oil and just enough salt and pepper to stimulate the tongue.

"This is delicious..." she said breathlessly.

"Glad to hear it."

Siasha had found the chicken she was looking for.

"It could've been from physical exhaustion or maybe a mental issue. Even if you *feel* fine, you're still in an environment that's considerably different from what you were used to before. You may have been building up stress without even realizing it."

"I shee..." Siasha said through a mouthful of food.

"Just focus on eating first," Zig chuckled as he took another bite himself.

They didn't understand the exact reason, but the problem seemed to be resolved. As the rest of the town slept quietly around them, Zig and Siasha continued to eat in silence.

Chapter 3:

Guilty Until Proven Innocent

N THE MORNING, ZIG ACCOMPANIED SIASHA TO THE guild as she prepared to work with her new party for the first time. Since it was the group's initial attempt at adventuring together, the plan was to see how things went and start off with a recurring job that they could complete by the end of the day.

Apparently, the plan was to exterminate some of the bug-type monstrosities Siasha and Zig had previously fought.

"Take care. Make sure to come back safe."

"Thanks. You too, Zig!"

Zig wasn't planning to do any adventuring type work, so that wouldn't be an issue for him. He thought about telling her as much, but remembering what had happened yesterday, he kept his mouth shut.

Siasha smiled at Zig as he saw her off and walked toward the area where she was meeting her new short-term party.

Over half of the members of this party were female adventurers. There were two male members as well, but it didn't seem like they were looking at Siasha with any ulterior motives.

"Both of them have girlfriends who are in the same party," Listy said as she approached Zig, seemingly able to read his mind, "so there's no risk of them trying to make a move on her."

She probably considered such details when she first introduced Siasha to this party. He had heard from Siasha that Listy also attended the first meeting and been an integral factor in making sure it went smoothly.

"I don't plan to stop anyone from making a move on her if she's not bothered by it," Zig said. "Oh, really?" Listy looked slightly taken aback. She hadn't been expecting him to say that. Considering how close the two of them seemed, she thought that his being her bodyguard was a facade for something deeper.

"If I tried to make a move on a client, my credibility as a mercenary would be brought into question. Besides, it would be too difficult for me to deal with every little thing that happens to her; some stuff she needs to handle herself. That being said, I appreciate you making these arrangements for her. It's been a big help."

"Well, I did want to pay you back for saving us by doing this much at least."

In terms of payment, the matter had already been settled in cash. But even though he had reminded Listy of that, she didn't seem satisfied and kept trying to lend them a hand in various ways.

It's getting to the point where I'm going to owe her one, Zig thought to himself before noticing there was a large group surrounding the reception desk.

A crowded reception desk wasn't unusual itself, as there were usually many adventurers coming and going in the mornings and evenings as they registered for jobs and reported them, but what was different this time was that a group of outraged adventurers seemed to be getting into a scuffle. Several adventurers were intruding upon the reception area.

"Like I've been saying!" one protested. "Just give us the damn information already!"

"I'm sorry, but we're not allowed to give out information on other adventurers without a valid reason. Please step aside."

The response came from the same receptionist that helped Zig with his application to accompany a guild member when they first began. She was handling the adventurers in an incredibly businesslike manner, without the slightest change to her expression, just as she had with him.

She didn't let a sliver of emotion show on her face, even when under threat

by rough-and-tumble adventurers. Even if she was aware they wouldn't lay a finger on any guild staff, that bold confidence spoke volumes about her temperament.

Zig couldn't help but feel impressed as he took in the scene.

"That one's got nerves of steel," he murmured.

"She's easily misunderstood but actually very nice," Listy responded. "She stepped in just now because a newer guild member was having trouble dealing with them."

"Oh yeah?"

Zig thought back to his previous interaction with that receptionist. She said things that he took to be incredibly blunt and scathing, but even if she told him what he wanted to hear, it wouldn't eliminate the perils that came with accompanying an adventurer.

With that in mind, it was probably in good faith that she presented the possible dangers and the fact that he would be ineligible for guild protection. Perhaps those words stemmed from the sincerity with which she conducted her work.

"Our companions were slaughtered! Is that not valid reason enough?!"

The shrill screams of the adventurer caused the crowd surrounding him to stir.

Still, the receptionist's expression remained stoic.

"There will be no changes to our current position unless those involved were caught in the act. We will be in touch after the information we've been presented with is reviewed and if the claim appears legitimate. Until then, please step aside."

"Why, you...!"

The man was so furious that some other nearby adventurers who appeared to be his companions had to restrain him from trying to grab the receptionist.

"Calm down!" one of them said. "We understand how you feel, but things aren't going to end well if you lash out at the guild!"

"Let go of me! I'm gonna knock this bitch out with one punch!"

The man tried to resist in vain before they dragged him off with his arms pinned behind his back.

Zig watched on as the remaining adventurers began to whisper among themselves.

The receptionist maintained her flat expression as she watched the man being pulled away before turning to one of her colleagues. "Anyway, I'll report this incident to our superiors. I believe you can handle the rest."

"R-right. Thank you for your help."

The receptionist was still as collected as ever, even with the threat of physical harm.

"Wow. It doesn't appear like she has any combat knowledge, and yet she's still so calm. Just what is that woman made of...?"

"I presume you'd be able to deal with a small incident like that with the same ease, wouldn't you, Zig?" Listy asked.

"That's because I could handle him if the need arose. If I had the same amount of fighting experience as she does, I doubt I'd be able to do much more than that rookie she covered for. That aside, you heard what he said, right?"

"I did. Sounds like some of his party members were killed...and by another adventurer at that."

It didn't seem to come as a surprise considering Listy's nonchalant response.

Maybe it's not an uncommon occurrence in the industry? Zig thought.

"Does that happen often?" he asked.

"To some extent."

Adventuring was a profession where the risk of sustaining injuries or dying came along with the territory—however, those risks didn't stem from encounters with monstrosities alone. Internal disputes over rewards sometimes culminated in murder. And at times, down-on-their-luck adventurers would take on massive debts and attack successful members of the same industry in order to repay them.

There was no shortage of reasons why adventurers might kill one another.

Since adventurers bought their equipment with the intention of using it to take down monstrosities, the items were quite expensive. It was one of the ugly truths that selling those could bring in more money than adventuring itself. However, highly skilled adventurers were the ones with better equipment, so there was a high chance of retaliation if one tried to target an individual with premium items.

"The best method of protecting yourself from attacks is simple—get stronger," Listy said. "Having the backing of a clan is also useful."

The stronger you got, the less likely you would be targeted. Just as she said, it was a simple enough strategy. But simple didn't equate to easy, which was why most adventurers chose the latter option.

By joining a clan, you were considered a comrade-in-arms, and the knowledge that an entire clan wouldn't quietly sit by if someone tried any funny business against one of their own was a good deterrent.

Of course, if you messed up as a clan member, there were sanctions or penalties, but unless you committed an outrageously egregious act, this was usually limited to paying compensation or a reprimand.

Rookie adventurers didn't have much of a leg to stand on when it came to haggling the percentages of rewards they earned for jobs with a party, so the transparency of clan policies was just one more thing that made joining one a desirable goal for many newcomers.

"So what you're saying is whoever got killed wasn't a clan member?"

"No. I don't know who the unlucky folks were, but those people who were making a big racket belong to one if memory serves correctly. If they're friends, they were probably all in the same clan."

"I thought being in a clan meant it was less likely you'd be attacked."

"True. There should be quite a few people like that man we just witnessed who are out to avenge their fallen comrades. The risk of attacking someone with friends is far higher than targeting a person who is alone."

But they were still attacked in the end, Zig thought.

"Does that mean they were attacked for a reason that superseded the risk of vengeance from their clan?"

"That's doubtful. It could've been an impulsive crime."

They had so little information on the incident that they wouldn't be able to reach a conclusion no matter how many theories they thought up.

"Adventurer-on-adventurer crime, huh..." Zig murmured.

There was a real possibility that Siasha could be targeted too. If that came to be, he wondered just how far he would need to go to handle it. Where Zig came from, killing your attacker instantly settled the matter.

Of course, if someone turned their sword on you, it was only natural to finish them off. Not a single soul would condemn those actions.

But this place wasn't like that.

It would be a different story if he was doing all this by himself, but if he killed thoughtlessly, it could negatively impact the livelihood of the person he was hired to protect. On the other hand, letting those who meant you harm go unchecked meant similar events were likely to occur.

"What a pain in the ass," he muttered.

There was even more for him to consider since he couldn't rely on the means he always had. He would rather boastfully declare that he wouldn't change his

working habits to Siasha and Isana, but it appeared he was going to have no choice.

Listy carefully watched Zig out of the corner of her eye as she remembered Lyle's words from the other day. He mentioned being struck with fear by Siasha because he couldn't get a good read on her.

The archer had also kept an eye on Siasha when she introduced her to the party the other day, but she hadn't picked up on the apprehensions Lyle spoke of.

For the time being, she was far more concerned about Zig.

She was well aware that he didn't come from Halian. It was unusual for a man of such skill not to be surrounded by rumors—not to mention he said he was a mercenary.

She hadn't heard of any nearby countries where mercenary work was booming. Most of the mercenaries in this city were adventurers who had fallen from grace—individuals that had been expelled from the guild for problematic behavior.

No one's goal was to become a mercenary; it was a job you literally fell into. That wasn't just Listy's view; many people believed the same thing.

It's not that skilled adventurers are never expelled, she thought, but those that are usually end up as bodyguards for the mafia or the head honcho of a group of thugs. I just don't get the sense that Zig is such a bad apple. It's strange...

Zig headed to the armory once he and Listy parted ways.

He had originally planned to stop by and window shop yesterday, but had to cancel on account of taking on that urgent job. Although he spent a small fortune on his new weapon and the indigo adamantine coins, his pockets were feeling nice and full again from the payments he received from Alan and Isana.

Since Isana was broke and couldn't pay Zig herself, his reward came from the tribe elder. He was slightly amused by how apologetic she looked with her ears drooping down in shame.

Once inside, he made his way over to the section that carried protective gear. While his weapon was good enough for now, his armor was severely lacking. There was only so much he could ward off with his recently purchased gauntlets and greaves.

Considering there would likely be more battles with monstrosities in the future, he needed to put together a better ensemble of protective equipment. Weight wasn't much of an issue, but he wanted to avoid things that would restrict his movement. Wielding the twinblade used his entire body, and it was important for him to have a good range of motion around his shoulders. Most armor was sold as integrated suits to improve efficiency, and those that weren't usually went for an astronomical price.

"Doesn't look like I'm having much luck..."

Unable to find what he was seeking, Zig aimlessly wandered around the shop when one of the clerks noticed and approached him.

"Are you looking for something?" she asked.

On closer scrutiny, this was the same woman who had assisted him before. It was a large shop, and she wasn't the only employee working there, but perhaps interacting with her was just meant to be.

She'd been able to help him find what he was looking for last time, so maybe she could work the same magic twice. Zig decided to tell her what he was looking for without sparing any detail.

"So you want something that's not too pricey but also has durability and won't affect your movement...?"

"Sorry, maybe I'm asking too much."

Hearing all those conditions repeated out loud made Zig realize the

extravagance of his request. Armor that was lightweight, durable, and cheap would be popular with everyone. The reason getting properly outfitted gave him such a headache was because items like that didn't exist.

"We have something that checks all those boxes," she replied.

"You do?!"

The clerk looked visibly taken aback at his surprised reaction. As his shock wore off, Zig quickly collected his thoughts, realizing that such an item was too good to be true.

"I'm guessing there's a condition though."

"You would be right. It's this one," the clerk said, pointing to a breastplate that seemed to be made of a carapace of some sort. It didn't *look* to be any different from those around it.

She launched into an explanation. "There are some monstrosities that specialize in defensive magic. This breastplate uses the carapace of one such creature. Although the carapace itself isn't that strong, the strength can be dramatically increased by imbuing it with mana. This piece is lightweight and reasonably priced in comparison to similar items. The only downside is that it does deplete a considerable amount of mana to use it, and it can easily break if you're attacked by surprise when mana isn't enhancing it."

Considering how superior weapons crafted from monstrosity materials were, Zig had no doubts that armor was the same. This piece was probably an attractive option for someone who had confidence in their amount of mana and didn't want to spend a lot of money.

However, he didn't expect the topic of mana to pop up here. Zig looked more and more crestfallen as the clerk went on.

"Is it not to your liking?" she asked, noticing his dour expression.

"Oh, no. That's not it. I realized I didn't tell you earlier, but I can't use magic items."

"If you're worried about your mana levels, we also offer portable potions for supplementing mana recovery." The clerk smiled softly as she offered a possible solution, but Zig just continued to sulk.

Seems like I've got no choice but to divulge a little about my circumstances if I plan to keep using this place, he thought to himself. Too little information may lead to crucial misunderstandings down the line. And I prefer to avoid my equipment being the cause of that as much as possible.

"Is something wrong?" the clerk asked.

After deciding the risk of keeping quiet was higher than that of speaking up, Zig finally said, "I'd like you to keep what I'm about to say just between us."

"Understood." The clerk nodded, sensing from Zig's tone that what he was about to reveal was important. "We keep our customers' information protected as long as it doesn't violate the law."

"I don't have any mana."

The feeling of having to sound so apologetic about something that felt like common sense was indescribable. While it was second nature to him, the same couldn't be said for the clerk.

"No way. That's..."

The information alone was enough to completely stupefy her. She clasped a hand to her mouth to prevent any other words from escaping. It was terrifying for her, who took having the capability to use magic for granted, to imagine how difficult life would be without it.

That wasn't the case for Zig, but unaware of his circumstances, she fully understood why it was something he would try to hide.

The mercenary waited quietly for her to calm down.

"I understand your reason, and with that being the case, I won't ask for any further details. We can select equipment based on the details you've provided me."

"That'd be a big help."

She was nothing if not a professional, trying to do her part without delving too deep despite being presented with unbelievable information by a customer. Still, she couldn't completely suppress her curiosity.

"Does this mean you're wielding that weapon without the use of any physical fortification magic?" she asked, glancing at the twinblade strapped to his back.

It was about the same size as she was and incredibly heavy—a weapon that would be difficult for even adventurers who used fortification magic to handle.

When Zig first came looking for a weapon, she showed him one other blade: the green one that emphasized sharpness. It was probably possible to handle that one based on ability alone, but in addition to double-edged sword users being rare to begin with, it was likely that only a handful of people could properly wield the weapon he chose.

"That's right. I rely on my own strength."

"I...see..."

That statement was even more mind-boggling than the fact that he didn't have mana. She felt the urge to tell him as much but was able to mentally beat back her astonishment and focus on the job at hand.

Zig and the clerk went back and forth for a while, discussing and trying new items, but there was no *aha* moment. It was more of a *damned if you don't* situation.

To purchase a decently priced piece of armor, he would need to sacrifice either mobility or durability. And while weight wasn't a problem for Zig, it was basically a contradiction to find a piece of heavy armor that was also light.

"You can't avoid having to choose from mostly larger pieces if you really want durability at this price point," the clerk said.

"I guess I'll need to increase my budget..."

"I'm terribly sorry," the clerk apologized, bowing her head.

She was doing all she could, and Zig—who was aware from the get-go that his request was unreasonable—felt slightly guilty.

"No, don't be," he said. "Look at it this way: At least I was able to find something good for my companion."

Armor wasn't the only type of protective gear that could be strengthened by imbuing it with mana. There were also many similar items suitable for magic users like vestments and robes. Instead of hardening, a few of them even formed a barrier of some kind around the user.

Zig thought about how he would have to come back with Siasha soon when he noticed the clerk's grim expression. It looked like something was bothering her.

"Protective equipment for magic users isn't very strong to start with, so most of them consume a lot of mana. If the user's offensive and defensive mana isn't allocated properly, it could put them in a very dangerous predicament. Will your companion's mana supply be all right?"

"Hm... I think she'll be fine," Zig responded.

Now that he knew why the clerk looked so worried, he covered his face with his hand to hide his grin, knowing it would be rude to smile when she had been so concerned.

"If I recall correctly, you said she was the one who defeated that plated boar you brought in before. I suppose she's quite confident in her mana, then?"

"I haven't asked her about it much myself, but I've never seen a time when it seemed depleted."

Although he kept the details vague, Zig got across the point that Siasha's mana levels were just fine—that was one thing she didn't need to worry about. Even on this continent where magic was the norm, she was still a witch, an entity different from everyone else.

While she hadn't specifically mentioned anything to him, he could sense there

was a difference between her magic and the magic that people here used just from what he had seen.

Having her mana consumed in a slightly inefficient manner probably wouldn't be a big deal for her. Even if he was hired to protect her, raising her defenses was a priority.

"I think that'll about do it for now. Next time I'll bring my companion along so she can take a look for herself. Sorry about today."

"No, I wish I could've been more helpful. I'll keep an eye on the inventory we have for female magic users so I'll be prepared the next time you come in."

This clerk really was impressive. The excellent customer service this shop offered was probably one of the reasons for their booming business.

Zig thanked her for her kindness once more before leaving the armory. He then stopped by a general store to pick up some more supplies—he needed to make sure that he had plenty of thick socks. Due to the nature of his work, he often found himself walking around areas with uneven ground, so it was necessary to make sure his lower extremities were also properly outfitted. The mercenary spared no expense, knowing firsthand that if he tried to cut costs in that department, he would regret it.

"You're the first person I've met that's this passionate about what goes on his feet," the boy tending the store piped up, seemingly curious as to why Zig was scrutinizing the shop's wares so carefully. "I thought adventurers only cared about their weapons and such."

The boy had mistaken Zig for an adventurer, but it would be too much of a nuisance to correct him, so he just went on browsing the products.

"What are you talking about? This type of equipment is much more important than a shoddy weapon."

"R-really?"

The boy was immediately skeptical. He had a hard time believing this man

thought shoes were more important than a blade. Zig chuckled dryly, recalling how he had also thought similarly when he was first starting out.

"Think about it. You can still fight without a weapon; you can still run away without arms—but you can't do either if your legs are out of commission."

"That's...true."

"If you're stuck, you're either waiting to be rescued or waiting to die. And I'm not so optimistic as to hedge my bets on waiting for help that may never come."

Protect your feet at all costs—the only thing more important is your life.

One of the veteran mercenaries Zig worked with repeated that until he was blue in the face.

"As long as your legs work, get the hell outta there yourself! How many men d'ya think it takes to drag away a guy who can't walk?! If you can't move, just do us a favor and die! That way we're only down the strength of one man!"

The way he phrased it wasn't pleasant for sure, but that veteran's reasoning did make sense. At the end of the day, a mercenary who couldn't walk was just a burden to everyone else.

Once Zig finished selecting the items, he handed them over to the boy along with the payment.

"Thanks. You're...going to take them with you?"

After counting out the money with a practiced hand, the boy realized Zig hadn't included the delivery fee.

"Oh, no, I want them delivered. Have them sent here..."

Zig requested the boy send his items to the inn where he was staying.

"They should arrive before the evening. If you're not in your room at the time, we'll leave them with the landlady."

"Got it."

After replenishing his stock of general goods, Zig headed for a back alley he visited before with the goal of striking up a deal with an informant. The last time he went looking for one, he was rudely interrupted by Isana and dealing with her had taken precedence. He had put it on the back burner after that since he wasn't able to find the time. That last request of Isana's had taken up a whole day.

"That woman always seems to find a way to take the wind out of my sails. Maybe the reason everyone keeps their distance from her is just because she's a troublemaker."

Since Isana wasn't around to defend her honor, Zig felt free to say his piece as he glanced around the area. There was a decent number of people mulling about, but he didn't spot anyone he knew.

Laughing at himself for being such a worrywart, he kept moving toward his destination, when—

"Ah, there you are. Good, good. I'm glad I caught you. Sorry, but may I have a few moments of your time?"

Zig froze. A man, who had clearly addressed him, was walking in his direction. Fed up with being distracted from his purpose once again, he gave the man a once-over.

He had a charming smile and didn't seem the type who had a lick of combat experience. However, judging by the fact that the mercenary's annoyed glare didn't seem to faze him, he obviously wasn't some average Joe.

Zig had no idea why this man was calling out to him.

"What do you want?"

"I apologize for the late introduction. My name is Kasukabe. I'm the administrator of the Wadatsumi Adventuring Clan. And you are Zig Crane, I presume?"

"That's me."

His lack of fear checked out. If this man was associated with a clan, he was probably used to being around rough types. Zig wasn't surprised that the man already knew his name—it's not like he'd been keeping it a secret. It was information that anyone could immediately uncover if they asked around a bit, but it did mean this man was approaching him with a specific purpose in mind. Zig just couldn't think of any reason why that would be.

"Our clan proactively scouts promising new recruits. As such, we'd be delighted to extend an invitation to Miss Siasha in light of her recent impressive accomplishments."

Ah, so he's trying to recruit her.

Thinking back, the receptionist had mentioned something like this might happen. Putting aside her actual age, Siasha appeared to be a young and highly capable worker to any outside observers—not to mention she was a treat for the eyes. She could practically serve as a walking billboard for a clan.

The more people who joined in order to get close to her, the larger the scale they could operate on. And the person who sealed the deal and got her to join would have a bigger voice within the clan itself.

Which was why it seemed odd that more of them weren't reaching out to her.

"Isn't it customary to reach out to the invitee directly?"

This guy had to be aware that Zig wasn't an adventurer himself. It felt a little strange that they would be coming to him, the guy who was only hired to protect her.

Kasukabe's smile had a slight awkwardness to it as he answered Zig's question.

"Yes, we asked her, of course. But she said these types of inquiries needed to go through you..."

"It's not like I'm her manager."

Zig had previously belonged to a mercenary brigade, not an adventurer's clan.

When it came to judging the pros and cons of joining one, he was an amateur. He didn't feel comfortable with the decision being pushed on him.

"You can stop by and look around if you like. That way you can interact with some of the adventurers that work for us and learn more about the clan's financial support and other benefits we offer on joining."

His proposal was enough for Zig to consider the possibility that it wouldn't hurt to go and check the place out.

It would probably be better than leaving it all up to Siasha, since she's never been part of any group before.

The mercenary debated turning the offer down but eventually decided to hear them out. He wanted to get a better idea of the advantages and disadvantages of joining a clan, so seeing one in real life would be helpful. In particular, he wanted to know to what extent the clan restricted member behavior and how much of a deterrent it might be against unwanted acts. There were many things it would be impossible to judge unless he saw them for himself.

"All right. I'll go as long as it's just to hear you out. Are you sure it's okay that the invitee herself isn't present?"

"That's not a problem. If she's interested in what you have to say, you're welcome to bring Miss Siasha back with you later. Please, this way."

Zig did as Kasukabe asked and started following the man. He continued to trail him for a little while—it appeared they were heading toward the western side of the shopping district. He noticed that the farther in they went, the more general stores selling everyday sundries were replaced by shops selling equipment and other items that catered to adventurers.

Nestled among them, a large two-story building came into view.

"Here we are. This is the Wadatsumi clan house."

"You even have dormitories inside? This is a fairly big place... Is this one of the

more prominent clans?"

"Generally speaking, I'd say we're upper-middle class," he explained. "One of the characteristics that distinguishes us from the rest is that we provide rookie adventurers with comprehensive support, so our survival rate is dramatically higher than that of other clans.

"We do have some highly skilled veteran adventurers among the ranks, but in all honesty, they're one step behind those who belong to top clans because we often assign them jobs that involve backing up the younger adventurers."

Since the clan was focusing on new member growth, the older ones ended up having to play second fiddle—but Kasukabe stated that fact with pride. There was no future for an organization that couldn't effectively develop a new pool of members. That was a commendable accomplishment. However, one thing troubled Zig.

I wonder if there's a sense of frustration that's festering within the old guard.

From what he was hearing, the emphasis on new members seemed to be putting the seasoned veterans at a disadvantage. It wouldn't be unreasonable to think that some of them were probably unamused at having to halt advancing their own careers so they could be assigned to watch the newbies' backs. Not everyone would be willing to accept actions that solely focused on the organization's future.

Zig was still mulling over his thoughts when Kasukabe invited him in. Some of the Wadatsumi clan members were chatting among themselves.

"It's surprisingly tidy in here."

Since this building also had residential spaces used by adventurers, Zig didn't have high hopes for the state of hygiene, but the inside was so clean that it was possible to even serve meals there.

"Our leader is a bit of a neat freak," Kasukabe informed him. "We have a longterm contract with a cleaning service." "Clean is good," Zig replied.

Due to the nature of his work, Zig encountered many people who weren't concerned with their personal appearance or grooming, so this was a pleasant surprise.

One of the adventurers noticed them and approached Kasukabe.

"Welcome back, Kasukabe. Is this him...?"

"Yes. Make sure and treat our guest with the utmost courtesy."

"Understood. Sorry, sir, but may I have your weapon please?"

Zig doubted he would be able to wheedle them into letting him keep it. He wasn't thrilled with the situation, but he admitted defeat and handed the weapon over.

"Be careful," he warned. "It's heavy."

"Okay... Whoa!"

The adventurer buckled under the weight of the twinblade. Zig figured that would happen and calmly helped to support it.

"Do you need a hand with that?" he asked.

"I-I'll manage," the adventurer said, readjusting the weapon so he had a better grip on it. His gaze was intently fixed on the mercenary's twinblade.

"Is there a problem?" Zig asked.

"No, I was just thinking you wield quite a rare blade."

Zig was slightly puzzled; the adventurer's reaction to seeing an unusual weapon seemed a little too over the top.

"Let's head up to the second floor," Kasukabe said.

The mercenary complied with the man's request and followed him upstairs, dropping the matter. The second floor seemed to be where they shared information on large-scale jobs and welcomed guests and clan higher-ups.

He got the impression someone was waiting up there for them—maybe the person who would give him information about the clan? As they ascended the stairs, Zig looked back at the first floor, realizing that there weren't many adventurers down there.

"Considering the scale of your operations, I'm surprised at how few people are around."

"That's probably because everyone is out on jobs at the moment. During this time of day, it's usually only the members who are taking a break that are here."

"You don't have anyone stationed here at all times?"

Mercenary camps and the like always left some people on duty in case of unforeseen events during off days.

Kasukabe lightly chuckled at Zig's question as he continued up the stairs. "Of course, we always have members posted. We need to be prepared if something happens."

Zig was relieved that his instincts weren't wrong, though he also felt a twinge of suspicion at what those words meant.

"Which means there's been some sort of incident?"

Kasukabe continued to laugh as they walked. "Why yes, there has. Actually, I've been tasked with looking into it. We're in the middle of handling the matter as I speak..."

"Oh yeah?"

They reached the top of the stairs. Several adventurers with drawn weapons were waiting for them on the second floor. Judging from the unbridled hostility radiating from them, it didn't appear like they'd come for a pleasant chat.

A glance behind him showed that the adventurers who remained downstairs were securing the staircase and all exits.

Now that Zig was trapped like a rat, Kasukabe turned back to look at him, his

smile unchanging.

"Before you hear what we have to say, I'd like to ask you something first."

The adventurers surrounding him seemed like they were ready to pounce at any moment.

Zig lightly shrugged and looked back at Kasukabe. He still had that goodnatured smile plastered across his face, but he was undoubtedly the mastermind behind this situation.

A sigh escaped Zig's lips as he addressed the man. "Can I ask *you* something first?"

"And what might that be?"

"Am I oblivious or are you just that good of a performer?" he asked, still feeling slightly stunned. "Which do you think it is?"

Kasukabe's expression darkened at the question. "Perhaps we'd both feel better about it if the answer was the latter."

"You bet." Zig smirked sarcastically. His voice became ice cold as his smile faded away.

"So, what do you want to know?"

"You're the one behind everything!"



It wasn't Kasukabe who responded to Zig's question but one of the adventurers. He was unable to control his anger and glared at Zig through bloodshot eyes. Zig glanced over at him before turning back to Kasukabe.

"I don't really understand what's going on here..."

"Don't you dare play innocent!" the adventurer screamed out once more.

"Now, now, Cain, let me handle this." Kasukabe attempted to appease the furious adventurer—Cain—who looked like he might pounce at any moment.

The words didn't abate his anger, but they did make Cain aware that the interrogation wouldn't progress if he continued to lash out, persuading him to hold his tongue. He nodded at Kasukabe in understanding so that the clan's administrator could get back to talking to Zig.

"Some of our clan members were attacked yesterday. They were still young but skilled adventurers who had a promising future. Among the five of them, three were killed and two were critically injured and still unconscious."

Something about his story sounded familiar.

There was all that racket at the guild this morning, Zig thought.

He recalled observing that kerfuffle involving adventurers being killed.

"And?" he asked.

Kasukabe's expression changed for the first time as Zig prompted him to continue. He was still smiling, but there was a piercing sharpness to his gaze.

"This morning, one of them regained consciousness. It was only for a moment, but we were able to ask him for information about the assailant."

Kasukabe was intently focused on Zig's face, determined not to miss even the slightest twitch.

"It was a single attacker, and they had to be considerably strong to take on five people and still escape unscathed. But, the most important clue of all was... that this man wielded a double-edged sword." Kasukabe continued to observe Zig's expression as he spoke. However, he didn't get the reaction he was looking for.

"Heh. I know it's an uncommon weapon, but I'm not the only person who wields one," Zig retorted.

Nothing about the mercenary's demeanor had changed at all. There were no signs of him trying to hide any trepidation.

If this is an act, it's a damn good one, Kasukabe thought. However, would someone who couldn't even see through my trap be able to put on such a high-skill performance? Either way, I need to press him further.

Now having learned that he was their number one suspect, all Zig could do was shrug.

"So you think I committed this crime."

"We only have circumstantial evidence, but we believe it's very likely. Am I wrong?"

"Yes, you are."

"I don't believe there are many people who check the boxes for being both skilled and wielding a double-edged sword though."

"I understand where you're coming from, but it's not what you think it is."

To a group that was already regarding him with suspicion, Zig just looked like he was trying to feign ignorance. The hostility the adventurers felt toward him grew even stronger.

Kasukabe tried his best to placate them while he continued his interrogation.

"Then I'd like you to answer my questions to settle this misunderstanding. I do hope you'll help us out."

The man made it sound like he was asking for Zig's cooperation, but it was no different from a threat. That didn't seem to bother Zig much, and he nodded in agreement.

"I don't mind. I'll tell you as much as I can."

"Let's get started then. First off, what were you doing yesterday?"

"Going around to a few shops."

Zig wasn't lying, but he was also omitting a considerable amount of information, something Kasukabe wasn't going to let him get away with.

"That's not all you did, was it? I went ahead and had your movements tracked."

After seeing Siasha off to the guild, he bought something at a shop that dealt in magic implements. Once he left, he ran into someone who seemed to be an acquaintance and disappeared into a back alley after chatting with her for a bit.

"If you checked up on me, then why bother asking?"

"That's all the information we were able to get. We have no idea what happened after you stepped into that alley, and that's what we want to know—what in the world were you doing at the time?"

"A job."

It was a simple answer. Kasukabe and the others waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't provide any more details. Finally, the clan administrator's patience ran out, and he demanded additional information.

"What kind of job?"

"I can't say. I'm not going to run my mouth about something I was paid to do. I presume it's the same for adventurers."

Not only were Zig's movements unaccounted for once he disappeared into the back alley, but he also wasn't willing to share information about the job he was doing at the time.

Kasukabe responded to Zig's suspicious answer with a dramatic sigh. "Zig, do you really think that's going to be enough for us, considering the circumstances? To be perfectly blunt, we're willing to use force to get the

answer out of you."

"I'm going to lose credibility if just being threatened with violence is enough to get me to spill the beans."

"I'd advise you to refrain from making such rash remarks. You might want to reconsider if you think this is just a *threat*. Considering what befell their companions, there's a limit to how much I can hold this group back with my words. I don't want this to come to violence unless it's a last resort."

It was basically the same as telling Zig he was willing to use those means if necessary. That was the reality of the situation, and the Wadatsumi adventurers were already on the verge of exploding.

Zig wasn't sure what was going to happen if he further provoked the large group while surrounded and weaponless.

"Let me be clear: We'll kill you if we have to, but instead of taking you out, we'd rather figure out who hired you in the first place."

If the Wadatsumi clan didn't avenge their fallen comrades, they would be ridiculed and scorned by the other clans. During negotiations, others would see them as foolish entities that couldn't even settle a vendetta. This would cause the clan's credibility to also plummet in other areas, and members would realize that clan members couldn't be protected and start to leave.

"You're a mercenary, right?" Kasukabe continued. "In other words, you also take on jobs that involve killing?"

"Not exactly."

The other man frowned. "Not exactly...how?"

I can't wait to hear whatever pathetic excuse he comes up with, he thought.

I'll listen to what he has to say and drive him into a corner once and for all.

"I don't take on jobs that involve killing, I am a killer."

Being a mercenary was his profession, not some side gig, and mercenary work equated to taking lives.

Zig explained all this quite matter-of-factly, prompting only an "I see..." from Kasukabe.

He was willing to say all that regardless of the circumstances he found himself in.

The clan administrator's smile faded into a vacant expression, the face of someone who had made up his mind.

"If you give up the person who ordered the hit, I think I can still convince them to spare your life. This is your best and final chance. Tell us who hired you and what the job entailed."

The tension in the room reached a crescendo as Zig finally spoke.

"Nope."

At the mercenary's response, Kasukabe squeezed his eyes shut in exasperation.

His face remained expressionless as he gave his orders and stepped back. "So that's how it's going to be. You all can handle the rest. Just make sure he's still able to speak."

Quick to take his place was the explosion of raw hostility that the adventurers had managed to hold back until then.

"We're gonna fuckin' kill you!" Cain screamed as he rushed at Zig, prompting the others to follow his lead.

Unable to resolve the misunderstanding, Zig found himself at a disadvantage both in terms of numbers and weapons as the brawl began.

Ignoring Cain's charge, Zig dashed over to a round table and kicked it over so that it lay on its side before the adventurers could get the jump on him. He grunted as he kicked it again with all his strength, sending it forward and colliding with a group of adventurers trying to surround him.

"Gwaaah!"

Since they hadn't been expecting the attack and were all clumped together, they were unable to avoid the incoming table. The force was enough to take a few of them down with it.

Zig quickly closed the distance between himself and another adventurer who had been distracted by the table attack. The man brandished his longsword at Zig, but he grabbed the man's wrist and used the momentum of the swing to spin him around.

"Wh-wha...?!"

The spin turned into a throw as Zig launched the man in the air before running after him.

The two adventurers that had been standing on either side of the man tried to dodge as he was tossed in their direction, but Zig spread both of his arms wide, using them to knock the men to the ground.

They almost appeared to spin over his arms in a perfect circle, falling unconscious as their heads hit the ground.

Zig didn't give them a second look before moving on to his next opponent.

"Don't push your luck!" Cain yelled, charging at him.

Zig dodged a few swings of Cain's longsword before grabbing onto the man's arm so he could attempt the same spin and toss he just performed. However, Cain resisted, stiffening his body so he couldn't easily be thrown.

"Look at you," Zig remarked.

"Go fuck yourself! How the hell do you think you're gonna pull this off without a weapon?!"

"You make a good point. I suppose I'll have to get my hands on one."

"Over my dead body!" Cain was not going to let Zig take his blade.

But that wasn't the weapon Zig had in mind.

As Cain focused all his energy on resistance, Zig relaxed and moved to the

side, causing him to fall forward as he lost his balance. He tried to regain his footing, but the mercenary tripped him and grabbed his legs.

"Found myself a weapon!" Zig remarked.

Cain screamed in confusion and fear as Zig firmly gripped his legs and spun him toward the rest of the adventurers who had been waiting for a chance to ambush him while the two were locked in combat. They hurriedly jumped out of the way.

"Hold up! You're gonna smash Cain's head!"

Some of the adventurers who weren't able to get out of the way in time tried to protect themselves with their weapons or shields, but quickly lowered them before Cain made direct impact as Zig swung him around.

Cain tried to protect his head by covering it with his hands, but his elbow slammed into the head of one of his allies. There was no way someone was going to walk away unharmed after being struck by the full force of a grown man's weight, and the unlucky soul immediately crumpled to the ground.

The adventurers were at a loss of what to do now that Zig was using a fellow clan member's body as his weapon. They couldn't block the attacks, and swinging at him recklessly might hit Cain.

Zig paid their plight no heed and used the man to take one individual down after the next. Cain had been moaning and groaning when Zig first started swinging him around, but his reactions were starting to weaken.

Looks like he's probably reaching his limit, the mercenary thought.

His hands limply dropped from where he had been trying to protect his head, and figuring that he had lost consciousness, Zig tossed him aside.

Wrongly assuming that Zig let go because he was losing his strength, the remaining adventurers closed in. They observed that he was skilled in hand-to-hand combat, so they kept their distance and attacked from just within striking distance of their weapons. It meant they would need to take wide swings, but

the risk that came with doing so could be mitigated by an immediate follow-up attack from an ally.

It was also possible for Zig to dodge his way closer to them. However, his only option was limited to a single blow timed between the consecutive attacks. He was facing off against the final three adventurers standing, so going on the offensive would be difficult.

I want to grab a weapon, but I doubt they'll give me the opportunity to do it.

The three adventurers he was fighting were all highly skilled warriors who had been able to avoid Zig's attacks—any reckless action might prove fatal.

After dodging one of their strikes, Zig staggered forward and fell to one knee.

The adventurers were not going to let such a golden opportunity pass.

Working together, they went in for the kill, swinging at him in perfect synchronicity. They were preventing him from taking advantage of an opening by striking in succession, but now they went for a simultaneous attack.

Zig leapt into action from his crouched position. Taking advantage of his low stance, he started to rush forward as if propelled by springs. Falling to one knee had all been a feint, and now he had a flying start. Pushing off so hard that he nearly dented the floor, he ducked past the adventurers' blades until he was right up in their faces, slamming his fist into one's side. The blow landed in an unprotected area, and the man winced in pain before collapsing.

Not letting any of his momentum go to waste, Zig followed up the punch with an upper roundhouse kick. His target tried to back away, but his foot managed to strike the man's head, and he toppled to the ground like a puppet with severed strings.

"Damn you!"

The last man standing swung his longsword down directly at Zig's head. As he raised both his hands above his head, Zig delivered a two-punch combination to his torso. The man staggered but was able to withstand the blows thanks to his

armor and sheer willpower. He once again attempted to strike Zig in a last-ditch effort.

"Impressive." The mercenary offered a word of praise before catching the weapon as it came toward him.

He struck the adventurer's skull with the flat of his own blade, sending pieces of the weapon scattering as the last man fell.

"You've got to be kidding me..." Kasukabe could hardly believe what he was seeing.

He completely turned the tables on them?! This group may not have included our top members, but he didn't even have a weapon. No, even with a weapon, it's not a situation one just gets out of! Who is this man?! And more importantly...how do we deal with him?

The unexpected outcome sent Kasukabe's mind racing, but he couldn't come up with a solution to their current predicament.

Zig was still on high alert. After confirming there were no other signs of movement, he turned his gaze on Kasukabe. He wasn't fully unscathed, but all he had were a few minor cuts and scratches.

"So, what's your take on how this situation played out?"

The good news was even after everything that had happened, Zig still seemed willing to negotiate. It made the clan administrator wonder just how accustomed he was to these types of conflicts.

Although every fiber of Kasukabe's being screamed at him to run away, he forced himself to stay put and answer Zig's question. That he was able to keep his voice from quivering was a testament to his mental strength.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"It would be simple to kill all of you here and now, but I purposely made the effort to leave them within inches of their lives," Zig said with what almost seemed to be a casual shrug. "I would like you to understand that was my

intention."

The realization hit Kasukabe like a ton of bricks. Even without a weapon, he was *this* adept.

There was a total of ten adventurers on the premises—mostly mid-ranking members with a few veterans mixed in—and the large man that stood before him had taken out every single one.

If this was the man who attacked those five up-and-coming adventurers, regardless of how promising they were, would any of them have been able to escape?

Not a chance...

The rational side of Kasukabe immediately rejected that possibility. If he had intended to kill them, all five would be dead. Even if killing them wasn't the goal, there would be no reason for him to leave two alive.

"It really...wasn't you...?"

His strained question was met with a sigh of disgust.

"That's what I've been telling you from the start."

Still, Zig couldn't completely fault him for the misunderstanding. Aside from twinblade users being uncommon, his actions on the day of the incident were far too suspicious. He wasn't one to discuss the nature of his jobs in the first place, and there was no way he was going to tell them he accepted an offer from the Jinsu-Yah.

Even if they had no concrete evidence, it was natural they would suspect him.

If I was in the same boat, I'd probably assume I did it too.

But the mercenary wasn't so magnanimous that his understanding of the situation meant he would let them go. If this happened back home, he would just kill them and be done with it. However, taking that course of action here would lead to more headaches. He would need to be compensated in some form or another.

I don't know how much to ask for, though.

Up until now, all Zig had known was that debts were settled with lives, so he had no idea what was the going rate for these types of situations. If his asking price was too cheap, they might be insulted and attack him again, but if it was too expensive, there might be disputes over whether they could pay.

But it wasn't like Zig could just come out and ask how much they were able to pay, so he said nothing.

The clan administrator was unaware of the mercenary's internal conflict, so the prolonged silence just filled him with fear. Neither man spoke—Zig because he didn't know how much to ask for, and Kasukabe because he was terrified of saying something that would cause the situation to deteriorate.

Both remained silent at the behest of their thoughts. However, the quiet atmosphere didn't last for long, and it was more than enough time for things to go from bad to worse.

The stifling silence was broken by the sound of someone kicking open a door, followed by the footsteps of multiple people rushing into the building.

"Reinforcements, huh..." Zig groaned as he realized his mistake. "Guess I wasted too much time."

If this is what he's been aiming for the whole time, he's quite a force to be reckoned with.

Zig couldn't help but feel impressed as he glanced over at Kasukabe, but the man's expression had turned grim, as if he was worrying about something. It didn't seem like this was a planned wave of reinforcements.

Quite contrary to what the mercenary was thinking, the clan administrator was overwhelmed with anxiety.

Damn it! We almost certainly got the wrong person, and to add insult to injury, the clan's credibility will be called into question. I have to stop them!

It was bad enough that they already attacked someone over a

misunderstanding—it was imperative that he prevent any further sullying of their reputation. He immediately tried to call out to the owners of the footsteps, the sounds signaling that they were dashing up the stairs quickly.

"WAI-"

"Get out of the way, Kasukabe!"

"Gaaah!"

Unfortunately, he was a moment too late.

One of the newcomers who made it to the top of the stairs grabbed him by the collar and tossed him to the side. Kasukabe found himself an unfortunate casualty in the emergency situation, the adventurer's strong grip on his collar practically collapsing his throat right when he was about to speak.

He tried to catch himself as he started to spin around but struggled to control the momentum of his body. There was a possibility he would die if he fell down the stairs.

Still unable to breathe, he started to tumble forward when someone else broke his fall. Even though he had a relatively slight build, no sane person would try to catch a falling grown man like it was nothing.

But this was an adventurer, and one who excelled at physical fortification.

The blue-haired woman who caught Kasukabe lowered him to the floor, checking to make sure that he wasn't injured before she glanced back up. Her companion who ran ahead appeared to already be engaging the enemy.

Considering the heavy sword blows she was hearing and the skill level of her companion, she could tell this wasn't your average opponent. She needed to go and provide backup immediately.

"Are you all right? Leave the rest to us and get out of here," she told Kasukabe.

The man was still spluttering. "W-wai..."

"It's going to be okay. We'll take care of it."

Kasukabe tried to stop her as she went to join her companion, but he was still coughing violently due to his collar being yanked and couldn't force the words out.

"We'll make sure to avenge our friends."

"N-no..." Kasukabe did all that he could to stop her, but his voice wouldn't cooperate.

She was already racing to the top of the stairs. All he could do was watch her disappear as the blood drained from his face. His heart began to sink with despair, but he prayed that he would make it in time as he forced his aching body off the ground to follow them.

"Wow! You were amazing, Siasha! I heard you were good at magic, but I didn't know you were that good!"

"Thank you for saying that, but I couldn't have done it without your help, Lindia."

Siasha and her new party discussed the results of the day on the way back from their job.

It was just their first day working together, and while they'd only taken on a simple monstrosity extermination job, things had gone pretty well. From Siasha's point of view, the party members still had some room to grow, but she realized that it was because of the person she was comparing them to. Objectively speaking, Lindia and her party were certainly talented for adventurers that were around the same class as Siasha.

"No, no, no..." Lindia said, scratching her head. "We're just muddling through. Actually, no, I lied. I think we're doing well compared to others our age, but there's always someone better! We still have a lot of hard work ahead of us..."

She wasn't being sarcastic; it was clear to Siasha that that was what she really

thought.

"If you're up for it," she continued, "how about we go out together again someti—huh? What's with all that racket?"

As they continued to chat while making their way to the reception desk, a bustling crowd caught their attention. Although there was quite a clamor, it didn't seem like the racket was due to any conflict or fight—it was more like the reaction that people made when they stumbled upon some shocking news.

"Did you hear?! The Wadatsumi clan house is under attack!"

"Which clan do you think's behind it? Maybe Fugaku? They've always had some bad blood."

"It's not another clan! Apparently, one guy is taking them on all by himself!"

"Is he insane?! They're gonna beat him to a pulp!"

"You'd think so, but that's not what's happening at all! It sounds like he tore them to shreds. They just called Milyna and Scecz for help, so they hightailed it over there piping mad!"

"You're kidding, right? You'd have to be at least third class to pull something like that off. It might even be difficult for a second-class adventurer. Who could it be?"

"No one knows. But there are reports that a large middle-aged-looking man with an unusual weapon was seen entering the Wadatsumi clan house..."

"Is there even someone like that in the guild?"

It was utter chaos. All the adventurers that were milling about didn't have a stake in the fight—anyone related to the Wadatsumi clan had already run off in a panic the moment they heard the news.

"Whoa... Trying to take a whole clan on by yourself is nuts. And Wadatsumi is a decently well-known one to boot. What on earth could he be think—uh, Siasha?"

Lindia noticed the witch wasn't reacting negatively to the scene at all. In fact, she seemed to be amused.

"He's really not able to just patiently wait at home, is he?" She happily giggled to herself, her beautiful smile so radiant that just witnessing it could cause goosebumps.

"Get out of the way, Kasukabe!"

Zig was already on the move when the man was tossed aside. Taking a step back, he grabbed a longsword off the ground and used it to parry the incoming adventurer's weapon. He managed to dodge and deflect the series of blows that followed, avoiding a slash aimed at his torso and repositioning to put some distance between them. Turning his back to the staircase, he finally got a good look at his attacker.

She was a young woman, probably no more than twenty years old. Her red hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she radiated with strength as she glared at him through narrowed eyes, searching for an opening.

Heh. She's good.

In comparison to his previous opponents, this woman was a cut above. Just from how she held her slender longsword, he could tell she was already an experienced swordswoman despite her age. Judging from that stance alone, Zig knew this wasn't an opponent he could take down if he was holding himself back like before.

I guess it can't be helped. I wanted to avoid getting into a conflict with the clan, but it's not worth losing my life.

In the worst-case scenario, he could ask Isana to verify his alibi, and if he left Kasukabe alive, his testimony would be enough as a witness. After all, they were the ones who attacked him over unproven accusations. If he legitimately had to kill them out of self-defense, it was unlikely he would be charged with a

crime. That thought was enough for Zig to put aside all reservations and steel his resolve to kill this attacker.

The ease with which he decided to end his opponent's life was at the level of making the rather unfortunate choice to switch from eating meat to fish for dinner.

The red-haired woman sensed something about him had changed, but she couldn't put her finger on what. He didn't seem any different on the surface; he was just keeping his longsword low and didn't look to be planning anything.

She felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

This might be...trouble?

Although her rational side was telling her everything would be fine, her intuition was raising red flags—and her experience and quick-wittedness told her to rely on her gut. Vigilance raised, she kept a close eye on her opponent's movements so she could react the moment he tried anything.

The decision saved her life.

Zig struck as soon as she blinked. It was only intuition and luck that allowed her to reflexively parry the blow heading straight for her neck.

She gasped as she desperately deflected his blade, countering with her own strike to try and ward him off. However, he stepped in closer, seemingly unintimidated by her attack.

It was unimaginable that a man of his size could handle a slashing attack at close range with such ease. He bent his knees, leaning forward with his left shoulder, and reading the trajectory of her weapon and ducking at such perfect timing that the blade almost shaved some of the hair off his head.

From his squatting position, he twisted at the hips and aimed at her torso.

"Ngh!"

The woman quickly moved her longsword upright so she could block his strike from the side. She increased her fortification magic to force the blade's

trajectory to change. Her body was already paying for it, but by ignoring the pain and pushing through, she somehow managed to block in time.

Her eyes widened in surprise as she noticed Zig's stance: He was holding the longsword with only one hand.

The mercenary took his hand off the handle and made a fist before hurling a punch that swerved around their weapons.

Although the woman was able to block Zig's blade by holding her longsword upright, she couldn't prevent the incoming punch from the side. His fist slipped behind their locked swords and made direct impact.

"Gaaah!"

The air escaped from the red-haired woman's lungs as she catapulted back. It was too shallow—Zig could tell from his opponent's reaction that the blow didn't have much force. If a punch like that was right on target, she would've immediately crumpled to the floor, not dramatically jumped away.

The moment he made contact, the red-haired woman had purposefully flung herself back to dull as much of the impact as she could.

But what made even more of a difference was her armor. It looked like normal leather armor at first sight, but it was made from the skin of a strong monstrosity, and she was hardening it by imbuing it with her mana.

What terrifying strength, and this was after the hit landed on my armor...

The woman was horrified to realize that if she had taken that blow directly, her insides would have been crushed. Even though her armor had absorbed most of the shock, she was injured enough that immediately getting back up and fighting would be difficult.

Her bones and organs were fine, but being unable to breathe properly was a matter of life and death. There was no way that man would let such an excellent opening pass him by.

The woman's mind was racing as she collided with a table and some chairs

and fell to the ground.

Zig was about to run over so he could put an end to her before she regained her footing; however, he had to pivot to avoid an incoming attack from his rear.

"Damn it."

Without seeing what was coming, he swung his blade, sufficiently parrying the blow. The saber that attacked him was wielded by a blue-haired woman radiating with palpable hostility.

He slightly grimaced at the appearance of his new foe, quickly shifting his attention to her. He needed to launch an all-out attack at this blue-haired adventurer to avoid being caught in a pincer attack and readied his longsword to make quick work of her.

However, this was no ordinary opponent, and while dodging his slash, she had cast a spell.

"Well, aren't you clever?"

It was incredibly difficult to get a spell off while engaging in melee combat. Zig had read that in one of Siasha's books, and he couldn't help but be impressed by his opponent's skill. She was likely at the same level or above that redhead.

Zig could feel the cold air radiating from the bolts of ice she launched his way. He shifted the longsword to one hand and kicked up another weapon that lay at his feet, grabbing the scimitar as it flew through the air and using it to deflect the incoming ice.

The blue-haired woman looked on in shock before starting to conjure another batch of ice bolts. The mercenary used the curve of the scimitar's blade to deflect her rapid onslaught of projectiles, causing them to shatter around him.

Wielding the scimitar in one hand for defense, he continued to swing his longsword at the blue-haired woman with the other. She was having an increasingly difficult time dodging his attacks. The volley of exceedingly heavy blows Zig stormed her with were draining her strength.

She was knocked out of position by an incredibly powerful strike and launched more ice bolts to try and cover the opening she left.

"Predictable."

"Huh?!"

Zig had anticipated the move and slashed at the projectiles, sending them flying straight back at her as they spun through the air. Having lost her footing, she couldn't dodge and instead had to resort to blocking them with her saber.

That was her fatal error.

She should've tried to put some distance between them even if it meant taking a hit from the ice bolts, but she was so caught off guard by having her magic directed back at her that she didn't even consider it.

Using every last bit of his strength, Zig swung his sword down at her from above.

I'm not going to be able to block it.

Resignation flooded through the blue-haired woman, but she still didn't give up and tried to parry the blow with her saber.

Zig didn't hesitate for a moment as he brought down his sword. However, he had to change course in the middle of an action once more.

"And I was just about to put her out of her misery."

"As if I'd allow that!"

He parried the redhead's attack with the scimitar as she jumped back into the fray. The move took enough momentum away from his longsword strike that the blue-haired woman was able to block it with her saber. She was pushed to the very limit of her strength but was somehow able to stave off the blow.

Narrowly escaping death, the blue-haired woman increased her physical fortification as much as she could, bounding out of the way as she swung at Zig.

So I've got to handle the bluehead and her saber with the longsword and the

redhead and her longsword with the scimitar?

Zig grimaced as he staved off dual attacks from his front and rear. The two women bore down on him, seemingly used to fighting together from the look of their seamless coordination. He soon found himself stained with blood from pieces of his flesh being torn away by slashes he couldn't block.

But those still weren't enough for the two women to finish him. Even though they had an overwhelming advantage, their anxious expressions never softened.

Who is this freak?! How can he withstand all this?!

The red-haired woman mentally jeered at Zig as she continued to slash at him. She swung once again, but Zig caught her sword with the curve of his scimitar, pulling it in and kneeing the flat of the blade so that it flew up.

He was about to slide the scimitar down her sword toward her stomach, when he had to whirl around to dodge the blue-haired woman's saber that was heading straight for his own flank.

Without her companion's well-timed assist, the redhead knew she would've been done for. The reality of the situation sent chills racing down her spine, but she never let up on her attacks.

He's not an adventurer... How could someone of this prowess go unnoticed? the blue-haired woman wondered after saving her companion from certain death.

To be fair, she knew nothing of this man. She had heard something was going down at the clan house and came running only to stumble upon the grisly scene of her partner nearly being killed before rushing to her aid.

But even with the strength of two people, it wasn't enough.

"Huh?!"

The blue-haired woman parried Zig's longsword with her saber, but he snaked his blade around the weapon and deflected it upward—a soft and subtle move

unlike his barrage of heavy blows.

She couldn't keep up with the drastic change in tempo, and while she still maintained a grip on the saber, his attack left her wide open. Fully aware she was putting herself in the line of attack, the red-haired woman lunged forward to slash at Zig and prevent him from taking advantage of the opening.

The mercenary knew he was going to be at a disadvantage if he was fighting two at once, so he had no choice but to shift his attention to the redhead instead. However, he was still trying to cause injury with each blow he made.

This is no time for overthinking, the blue-haired woman told herself. This man isn't the type of opponent you can beat if your attention is focused elsewhere...

Zig patiently managed their attacks, scanning for an opening and waiting for the exact moment when one of them would give him the right opportunity. He already let several perfectly timed chances slip by.

Not yet, don't get impatient.

These women wouldn't let him get away with any hasty decisions. Even if he killed one, he needed to make sure he had enough energy left to take care of the other. If he was using the twinblade, he could take down both women without having to worry about defense, but it was no use crying over spilled milk in these circumstances.

All he could do was wait for the moment to present itself.

The redhead was the first to give him what he was looking for. That punch she took earlier seemed to be gradually wearing her down. Her movements had been strenuous, and they were starting to slow as her stamina came up short. She faltered when parrying the scimitar, greatly relaxing her stance and creating an opening for Zig.

This is what I've been waiting for! he thought.

He unleashed everything he had on the blue-haired woman who rushed in to

cover for her companion. He'd been splitting his attacks between the two of them, but now he focused all his attention on her.

He baited me!

By the time the blue-haired woman realized it, it was already too late—her head was sticking out too far. He blocked her saber with the scimitar and tried to crack her skull open with the longsword.

The blue-haired woman used all the leg strength she could muster in a desperate attempt to get out of the way, but she was a little too late and the tip of the sword headed straight for her head. Considering Zig's strength and the force with which he swung the blade, even the slightest contact with the tip would probably be enough to kill her.

It's over.

The woman waited for the inevitable end.

But at that very moment, an arrow flew through the window, shooting straight for them from the side, and smashed into Zig's weapon. The arrow, magically hastened and programmed for a set trajectory, shattered the longsword.

"What?!"

Zig quickly jumped back as the impact sent the longsword flying out of his hands. He missed his golden opportunity, but now he had a bigger problem.

I didn't smell any magic. Was that a long-range attack?

The mercenary grimaced at the thought of yet another companion joining the fray. Even if he had a handle on the current situation, he wouldn't be able to take on any further reinforcements.

He reluctantly decided it would be best to retreat.

"That's enough! This ain't goin' any further!"

A man's deep voice echoed out. Zig was about to ignore it, but something

about the voice was familiar enough that he stopped in his tracks to glance over.

Climbing up the stairs with Kasukabe in tow was a tough-looking man he recognized: Bates, the adventurer he met at the guild with Siasha. Despite his rugged features, he flashed a charming smile at Zig.

"I heard everythin' from Kasukabe. How 'bout ya leave the rest up to ol' Bates?"

"Finally, a reasonable person arrives," Zig sighed, slipping out of battle mode, realizing combat would no longer be necessary.

In contrast to Zig's quick uptake of the change in situation, the two women were still on high alert.

The only thing they knew was that Zig not only went on a violent rampage in their clan house, but he was also a dangerous individual who had been trying to murder them until moments ago.

"What's the meaning of this, Bates?" the red-haired woman demanded, still brandishing her weapon as the blue-haired woman silently moved into a more advantageous position.

Not paying attention to either woman, Zig started taking account of the injuries he'd sustained, sighing at the state of his tattered clothes and overtaxed protective gear—this was going to mean more unnecessary expenses.

Bates laughed, amused at how concerned the women were starting to look since Zig was paying them no heed despite their overt vigilance.

"Put down your weapons to start," Bates said. "We'll save the details for once we get this mess cleaned up. Priority goes to tendin' to the wounded. Kasukabe, help out with gettin' the table righted."

"Fine," said the red-haired woman.

"You owe us an explanation after this," her companion insisted.

Both women reluctantly started to move at Bates's insistence. They still were

on alert, but it felt almost silly for them to be so agitated while Zig tended to his wounds and equipment without a care in the world.

They carried the defeated clan members downstairs and called for a doctor to examine them. Thankfully, no one was dead or critically wounded; they would all be able to make a full recovery with enough rest.

The news was a great relief to both women.

"Hey, we're done over here!" Bates called out. "How 'bout we get started?"

"Be right there!" said the blue-haired woman.

"Oh, would ya mind grabbin' the weapon that's propped up back there. It's an unusual one, you'll know it right away, I reckon."

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"Hm...? Okay..."
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The women went to grab the weapon, both gasping when they saw what it was.

"Wait. Isn't this ...?"

"What in the world is going on?"

It was the same type used by the assailant who'd attacked their clan mates. Confusion was plain on their faces as they puzzled over why it was there. It didn't seem like they would be getting any answers until they brought it with them, so they carried it up to the second floor.

"This is so heavy..."

"There ya go! Take a seat, but give Zig back 'is weapon first, okay?"

The two women instinctively braced themselves as Zig, having finished tending to his wounds, approached. They knew just how dangerous this man was, which was why it took some willpower for them to give his weapon back. However, they had no choice but to hand it over at Bates's silent urging.

Now that Zig's weapon had been returned to him, he propped it up against himself as he took a seat in one of the chairs. Though Zig wasn't as relaxed as he

looked: The double-edged sword rested on his dominant side, his right arm dangling down so he could grab it at a moment's notice.

Once Bates had confirmed everything was in order, he finally started to explain.

"Lessee, where should I start? I'm sure y'all know that some of our clan members were attacked. And that assailant used a double-edged sword."

Everyone silently nodded.

"There ain't too many out there capable of wieldin' a weapon like that," Bates continued, looking over at Zig. "So, of course, that makes narrowin' down the perp easier. And that's how suspicion fell on Zig here."

He was a new arrival in Halian and wielded an uncommon weapon—the double-edged sword—and rumors lauded him as a highly capable fighter. Those three points alone were more than enough to put him in someone's crosshairs.

"And that's exactly what Kasukabe, the man tasked with lookin' into this incident, thought. But when ya put the pieces of a puzzle together too quickly, and then lure someone in to talk 'bout it, you're bound to end up with a tale that sounds suspicious. I'm pretty sure Kasukabe was convinced he'd found a guy who was rotten to the core and would spill his guts with a little prodding. Well, ya can see for yourselves how that ended up..."

Bates gestured around the room.

"What do you mean by a suspicious tale?" the red-haired woman asked.

"Oh, that? I ain't heard the details yet myself."

"W-well..." Kasukabe couldn't help but stutter.

He glanced over at Zig, but the man seemed to be wholly uninterested as he gazed out the window. Unable to withstand Bates's silent pressure, Kasukabe relayed the conversation he had with Zig.

"Interesting," Bates said, stroking his beard with a slightly pained look.

"That's more than just suspicious!" the red-haired woman protested as she slammed a hand on the table. "Anyone who heard that alibi would believe he fucking did it!"

She was so furious that she openly cursed in front of a senior clan member.

Kasukabe started to get nervous as the woman jabbed a finger at Zig but found he wasn't too bothered as she continued to indignantly put him on the spot.

"All of this could've been avoided if you were honest from the start! Does that not bother you?!"

"I don't know about adventurers, but mercenaries lose credibility if they go yapping about their job."

"Even if it puts their own life in danger?" the blue-haired woman butted in.

Zig glanced over in her direction, meeting the woman's gaze. Figuring that trying to speak with someone who was calm would go better than dealing with a hothead, he paused a moment before answering.

"Depends to what extent. If the situation calls for it, I can ask for the client's permission."

"And you didn't think that was necessary this time?"

"Not until you two showed up."

It had been a breeze to handle all the adventurers that Kasukabe threw at him with no threat to himself. Although Zig didn't say that out loud, the clan administrator could read between the lines and lowered his head in chagrin.

Bates smiled wryly as he gave the man's shoulder a few rough pats.

"Oh, right. I forgot to make introductions. The one with the red hair is Milyna, and the one with the blue hair is Scecz."

"I'm Zig."

Milyna turned up her nose at Bates's introduction, while Scecz gave a slight

bow.

"All right, Zig," Scecz continued, "would you mind telling us now?" "I'll pass."

From how he spoke earlier, Scecz figured he was more willing to talk, but her brow furrowed as he immediately shot her down.

"May I at least know why?"

"I believe I've been cleared of suspicion already. There's no need to explain myself."

"And what proof do you have to say that's the case?" Scecz's dubious expression prompted Zig to shoot Kasukabe a silent glance.

The mercenary's look got the message across, and Kasukabe started to explain his reasoning to everyone else.

"I believe it's highly unlikely that Zig is the perpetrator. When I ordered the clan members to attack him, he didn't kill any of them and tried his best to leave them only with minor wounds."

"He might have just been trying to win your trust." Milyna's voice dripped with suspicion as she raised that point.

Bates chimed in before anyone else could speak. "The two of ya fought with him. How'd it go?"

Both women winced as they recalled what happened earlier. Milyna was still grimacing, so Scecz answered on her behalf.

"He was strong. I would've been done for without any help."

They had fallen short even with the tide of the battle seemingly in their favor, and it was even more frustrating considering how confident they were in their abilities.

Bates chuckled as he watched their reactions.

"Seein' as you've been able to experience a little taste for yourselves, d'ya

think Zig's the type who'd fail to finish off five talented greenhorns?"

"Th-that's..."

Impossible.

Even five promising young adventurers wouldn't hold a candle to this man if he attacked them when the conditions were just right. They had the misfortune of experiencing that firsthand in their earlier battle.

"So? With that bein' the case, how 'bout you try not to be so hard on 'im, eh?"

Milyna couldn't understand why it sounded like Bates was groveling, but Scecz went pale as she put two and two together.

"What's wrong, Bates?" Milyna asked. "Why do you look so serious?"

"Milyna..." Kasukabe said.

"Wh-what is it?"

When he realized that she wasn't getting it, Kasukabe's face turned solemn. He then proceeded to explain the gravity of the situation.

"If Zig's not the attacker, not only did we cast suspicion on him, but we committed several crimes against him including abduction and confinement, forceful interrogation, and attempted murder. All it would take was him rushing to the military police or the guild and the Wadatsumi clan would be in serious trouble. At the very least, those involved would be stripped of their adventurer status and incarcerated."

If Zig were an adventurer, the guild might have some luck urging him into reaching a settlement. But in this case, considering just how far they pushed things with an outsider, even the guild wouldn't have the power to save their skins.

Being both young and very talented, Milyna and Scecz were highly regarded by their peers. It would be a huge blow to the clan if the two of them were involved in such a scandal. Even the young adventurers they nurtured so carefully would be disgusted with them.

The color completely drained from Milyna's face as she finally came to grips with the severity of the situation.

All the Wadatsumi clan members present looked at Zig with ghostly pale countenances.

"So is there any possibility ya did it?" Bates asked the question that was their only glimmer of hope.

"I can't go into too much detail, but there's a trusted member of the guild who I could ask to verify my alibi."

The mercenary's statement quashed any optimism the clan members might have clung to, sending them crashing back to reality.

"Zig, if I may be so forward, how much compensation are you seeking?"
Kasukabe asked, having made up his mind that it was time to start negotiating toward a settlement.

It was more like trying to convert an instantly fatal injury into a critical wound —but...it was better than doing nothing. His question was the equivalent of waving a white flag, and the rest of the clan members were unable to hide their shock.

"Compensation?" Zig repeated.

"Yes. As I mentioned earlier, one word from you could land myself and anyone else who acted dishonorably toward you behind bars. However, we were single-mindedly trying to take down the individual who assaulted our companions. I humbly ask that you take those circumstances into consideration."

Their actions hadn't stemmed from any malice, only out of a desire to avenge their friends.

Kasukabe's attempt at an appeal just added to Zig's headache. He didn't really care what happened to the clan members, but there was a possibility of

retaliation from others who might hold a grudge against him if they were arrested.

On the other hand, if his demands were too unreasonable, they might just throw the towel in and try to eliminate him. Although the scope had changed, the problem of not knowing how much to ask for left Zig in the same predicament he found himself in earlier.

This really is a pain in the ass.

If he had taken the chance and killed the two, they probably could've called it a draw. He gave them a precarious look as the thought entered his mind, eyeing the attractive women as the talk regarding compensation came up.

Milyna and Scecz's danger senses began to tingle, but the two other men completely misunderstood the meaning behind Zig's gaze, resigning themselves to the unfortunate but ruthless decision. To them, this was the only way.

Kasukabe gave a grim nod. "Understood. I'll get the preparations underway immediately."

"Huh?! Kasukabe?!" Milyna yelped.

"I'm sorry, girls," Bates continued, "I'm ashamed of myself for askin' this of ya, but it's for the sake of the clan. I hope you'll understand."

"Bates, please tell me you're joking!" Scecz gasped.

Both women were distraught that their companions offered them up as human sacrifices. But after weighing the two women against the rest of the clan, it was an unfortunate but unavoidable decision that Kasukabe and Bates had to make.

Everything around him seemed to be happening so fast that Zig couldn't keep up.

"Uh, what's going on here?" he asked.

"Isn't it obvious? You'll be getting both of them."

"I don't follow..."

"Yes, yes, I understand. You don't need to say a thing. Consider this a token of our sincerity, if you get my drift."

Kasukabe tried to make it obvious that he knew what Zig wanted even if he wasn't saying the words aloud. Bates looked on meekly as he stood with his arms crossed.

"I know I'm not in the position to make any demands, but they ain't bad girls. Be good to 'em, okay?"

"I think you've got the wrong idea here. I—"

Zig finally picked up on the unfavorable direction the conversation was headed and tried to put a stop to it—but he was too late.

"What are you getting your hands on, Zig?"

The voice was pleasantly calm, but everyone froze the moment they heard it. Zig somehow mustered the energy to turn his head in the direction from which it came. He didn't know how long she had been there, but Siasha was gripping the rail of the stairs as she grinned at him.

"So what's the big transaction? Don't leave me out of the fun."

She started walking in his direction, her footsteps light and happy. He couldn't smell any magic coming from her, but the mana surrounding her was so dense that he could *feel* it.

The scene seemed to shimmer and swirl like a mirage as everyone else looked on.

"W-well met, Siasha! This is, ya see—"

Beads of cold sweat dotted Bates's face as he tried to come up with an excuse, but one quick glance from Siasha froze him in place. Paying him no more attention, Siasha slowly made her way to Zig and put a hand on his shoulder. She gazed up at him with a smile so beautiful and sweet it could put a blooming flower to shame.

But the air she was giving off was anything but happy.

"...You're back early. How was your job today?"

Zig didn't meet her gaze as he somehow forced the words out. It was only thanks to his extraordinary courage that he managed to speak normally.

"We accomplished the task with no setbacks to speak of."

"I see. That's good."

"Yes, it was a beneficial experience," Siasha replied with a tinkling laugh.

The mercenary tried to respond in kind, but all he could manage was a weak grin.

"So, back to my question."

Zig paused to think. A poor attempt at deception would only serve to shorten his life span, so he decided to come clean.

"The people here attacked me over a misunderstanding and said they'd offer up these two women as an apology. I tried to refuse, but they wouldn't listen since they're in too deep for me to not accept some sort of payment."

Although it was a slightly abridged version of the events, he was able to express the most important parts. Once he finished his explanation, Siasha slowly turned toward Kasukabe and the women, causing all three of them to silently recoil.

Bates still hadn't recovered from the earlier look she had shot his way. They all felt like they were being pulled into her seemingly bottomless blue eyes, unable to look away.

"Zig is here to protect me; he doesn't have time to be picking up women. Is that clear?"

"...Yes."

The response that escaped from Kasukabe's throat sounded more like a raspy breath than words, but it must've conveyed his intentions well enough because

the witch gave a little nod of satisfaction before finally releasing him from her stare.

"Let's go, Zig," she said, grabbing his arm and pulling him up from the chair. "I'm hungry."

It wasn't an aggressive gesture, but Zig silently complied without asking any further questions. Siasha linked her arm through the mercenary's as they walked past the still-frozen clan members and started heading down the stairs.

"You owe me one."

Zig barely squeezed out the words as he left, closing the book on the Wadatsumi clan's near brush with disaster.

Zig and Siasha headed straight for their lodgings as soon as they left the Wadatsumi clan house. They were still arm in arm as they walked down the road, neither of them saying a word.

She sure seems to be in a foul mood...

Well, it did make sense. Even if it was his day off, she'd stumbled across the man she was traveling with as her hired protector trying to acquire the services of two women. While he didn't let it show on his face, Zig was racking his brain for a way he could brighten her spirits. Unfortunately for him, he didn't have much experience cheering up women, so nothing was coming to mind.

Siasha gave a little cough. "Was that good enough?"

"Wh-wha?"

He was so confused by the question that all he could muster was a foolish-sounding response, which prompted Siasha to glance up at him with a bemused look.

"You seemed to be in a bit of a bind back there. I thought I'd put on a little act to give you a reason to leave. Did I go too far?"

"O-oh... No, you were a big help. Even though it was their way of apologizing, I don't know what I would've done with those two women."

She must've realized it was a misunderstanding. No, of course she did. Siasha may be a bit naive when it comes to how the world works, but she's as smart as a whip.

To think she utilized that aura of hers to come to his aid... Siasha sure had grown.

"I figured as much. There's no way you'd purchase a woman for her services, right, Zig?"

"Huh? U-uh, right..."

He could still feel faint traces of that pressure she was radiating before, but he dismissed it as being all in his head.

Now that Siasha was back to her normal self, she caught a whiff of blood.

"Did you get hurt again? Seriously, is there ever a time you're not injured?"

She almost seemed giddy, promising to help him recover from his wounds later.

Zig sighed dejectedly. "I'll have you know that I'm never the one to start these things..."

Whether it be his scuffle with Isana, the fight with the kidnappers, or the misunderstanding with the clan, the mercenary had never taken the first strike. He only fought back when the other party meant him harm.

"Oh yeah? By the way, that didn't seem like it was a job. What exactly got you in that mess? It seemed pretty drastic."

"Do you remember all that ruckus at the guild this morning? The victims were members of that clan...Wadatsumi, I guess. Apparently, they considered me to be the prime suspect."

Zig explained the basic details of the incident to Siasha: There had been one

attacker, wielding a twinblade, who took on a group of five people, killing a few of them. Because Zig had been off on a semi-covert job when everything went down, nobody could account for his whereabouts. And since he couldn't go blabbing about what he had been doing on the job to other people, he had to remain silent. This made the Wadatsumi clan even more suspicious, and when they tried to use violence to get him to talk, he responded accordingly.

He even told her how, after the misunderstanding had been cleared up, they tried to negotiate compensation for the damages he'd incurred. By the time he was finished with his spiel, Siasha looked conflicted.

"It's true that the circumstantial evidence would lead anyone to believe you did it."

"I felt the same way. That's why I tried my best not to kill any of them while I was defending myself. Although I was planning to take out the two that showed up later."

"Are you sure I didn't overstep my boundaries...?" Siasha made an awkward expression as she realized she'd completely ruined Zig's chance to negotiate reparations.

He would've been able to obtain a great deal of money from the Wadatsumi clan if he were so inclined. No one could fault him for being furious at the missed opportunity, but he wasn't that bothered about it.

"It's fine. I was actually struggling with what might constitute a proper payment."

Where Zig came from, it was common knowledge that debts were settled with the offending party's *head*. Here, replicating that system would just lead to *headaches*. So he ended up leaving the matter of compensation in the clan's hands, and so hopefully they'd come up with something that would fairly compensate all the damages. And thanks to Siasha's performance, he didn't have to worry about them trying to lowball him.

Perhaps it was because humans and witches were fundamentally different

creatures, but the intimidating aura she gave off was incredible.

"Still, if it wasn't you, who could've done it?"

"Who knows? It's strange that he'd use such a conspicuous weapon; maybe it's different from the one he usually wields. Either way, it's got nothing to do with us."

"True."

No matter how many adventurers this guy mowed down, the problem wasn't relevant to either of them. Maybe they would step in if he was trying to slaughter someone right in front of them, but outside of that, they weren't planning to get involved.

Concluding their discussion of the incident, they moved on to talking about adventuring-related topics.

Siasha's temporary party planned to take the following day off. The original pace she and Zig had been keeping wasn't the norm—most adventurers rested around the same number of days that they worked.

Thanks to her participation in the recent extermination squad mission, Siasha had moved up a class and several more locations were now open to her. She gave Zig an overview of the new monstrosities they might encounter as they delved into their next plan of action.

"Personally, I'm interested in going to an area that has lizard-type monstrosities."

"Why's that?"

Is she particularly fond of lizards or something?

Siasha's eyes sparkled as she began to extol the benefits of lizard hunting.

"Apparently, some species of lizard monstrosities use unusual types of magic. The magic items and implements you can make out of materials obtained from them seem pretty interesting too."

Although hunting them wouldn't have as big of a payout as other monstrosities, they were an easy way to earn income on the side. Siasha, however, seemed to be more interested in seeing their "unusual magic" rather than making some extra cash. While Zig was unable to use magic items, he was interested in unique magic implements, so he had no objections.

"Okay, let's do that next."

"I can't wait! I've been dying to get my hands on a lizard-skin robe," Siasha said breathlessly, already thinking of ways to use the materials they could collect.

Her statement jogged Zig's memory.

"Do you mind stopping by the armory? My breastplate was utterly destroyed. I need to replace it."

His armor had already been on its last legs before the previous battle and had now reached the end of its usefulness. Milyna and Scecz's attacks had worn his already scarred breastplate down so much that it was practically unrecognizable. He needed to buy a new one before they went adventuring the next day. Kasukabe had told him to invoice the Wadatsumi clan for any damaged protective gear, so he wouldn't have to worry about footing the bill himself.

"Sure, let's go." Siasha immediately changed direction, practically pulling him through the shopping district until they reached the armory. They caught a fair share of attention from passersby along the way but paid them no mind. After all, it was par for the course since they came to town, and they were used to it by now.

Inside the armory was the usual crowd of adventurers who were finished for the day, but since they were there a little early it wasn't too busy—the perfect time to visit.

The clerk who helped them several times before noticed their arrival and went to greet them.

"Welcome! I appreciate you coming back so soon, but I'm afraid I haven't finished putting together a selection of armor for your companion to choose from..."

"No, we're here for something different now. My armor's busted. I need to get an urgent replacement. Do you think you could bring out the pieces you showed me this afternoon?"

"Certainly. Please give me a few moments."

The clerk was alarmed to see his armor—which had looked perfectly fine just a few hours earlier—reduced to tatters in such a short time, but she didn't let it show on her face as she gave instructions to the staff behind the counter.

I thought he said he was taking the day off because his companion wasn't around. That must mean he did some non-adventuring-related fighting... But that damage doesn't look like it came from a monstrosity. Maybe there's some truth to the gossip after all...

She had heard rumors from a certain source regarding this man, and his appearance seemed to corroborate them. That being the case, she wondered what the best course of action would be.

Even if they didn't do anything, supplying a criminal with weapons would damage the reputation of the shop, but if they kicked him out and the rumors proved to be false, the result would be just as negative.

More importantly, something about what she heard wasn't sitting right with her—he was almost *too suspicious*.

Regardless of whether or not it was a crime of impulse, it felt incredibly convenient for so many clues to point directly at one person. Not to mention, would he come waltzing in the shop if he truly was the culprit?

"You mentioned the armor being out of your budget this afternoon. Would you still like to see the same pieces?"

It was an indirect way to ask how he had gotten his hands on the funds.

Unexpectedly, she got a very candid reply.

"I didn't come into any money. The party who broke my armor said they'd compensate me for it. The Wadatsumi clan mistook me for the person who attacked some of their members, so there was a bit of a scuffle."

"Is that so?"

She figured the Wadatsumi clan would've heard the rumors too, but she didn't expect them to jump into action so soon. And judging from how casually he was acting about everything, it seemed the matter was already settled.

I'm glad I didn't act carelessly. Rumors are just rumors, after all.

Invigorated by the double windfalls of not driving off a promising customer and learning he could afford something a little more expensive if a clan was footing the bill, the clerk began to select pieces of armor that would satisfy all of Zig's conditions.

However, Zig immediately poured cold water on her plans. "You don't need to pick anything that's too expensive."

"Are you sure? If the clan will be covering the costs, I don't think they would begrudge you for buying a slightly more premium item."

"If I use stuff that's beyond my means, it'll be hard to go back once it's gone. I want to keep it within the range of something I can purchase on my own."

Regardless of how nice it was, armor was still a consumable item. Having to go back to cheaper pieces after getting used to the high-quality stuff would be maddening. That's why Zig wanted a piece that he could afford to replace with his own earnings.

The appropriate tool for the appropriate job.

The words of his master rang through his head as he explained his reason to the clerk.

"Understood. I'll bring them right away."

Although Zig's unusual line of thinking threw her for a loop, she went straight to work without letting her true thoughts show on the surface. She had never met an adventurer who wasn't thrilled at the prospect of getting their hands on an item that would normally be out of budget, especially if they weren't the one paying for it. It was a little disappointing that she would miss out on making a big sale, but she was still in high spirits because of the useful information she'd gleaned.

What an interesting way of looking at it, she thought. Still, I don't think he'll be dying anytime soon, and having him alive is better for business in the end.

With that in mind, she selected a piece of armor with no sharp edges that had left a good impression on Zig earlier in the afternoon.

"How about this one?"

"Not bad. I'd like to have some modifications made to the shoulder area. Would that be possible?"

"We'd be happy to. Come this way."

Satisfied with Zig's positive response, the clerk and the mercenary proceeded to discuss the particulars. By the time they'd finished making the adjustments, the shop was filled with adventurers.

"I really dislike crowds..."

Siasha sounded like she was completely fed up as they fought their way through the throngs of people.

"Sorry, that took longer than I expected."

"Oh, no. Don't worry about it. I'm glad you were able to find something you liked."

"How about you? See anything good?"

While Zig was selecting his new armor, Siasha had wandered off to check out some of the protective gear with magical properties that he'd told her about. She looked very content; maybe something had caught her eye.

"Ooh! Lots of things. I tried imbuing some of them with mana, and the required consumption doesn't seem like it'll be a problem at all. Now I have so many choices!"

Zig should've expected as much; the witch seemed to have an overwhelming supply of mana at her command.

"You can also bring in your own materials and have a custom order made! It requires a bit of coin and time, but you can get your hands on much cheaper items that way. If we find a monstrosity that uses interesting magic while we're out tomorrow, let's make sure to hunt it down!"

As they made their way back to the inn, Zig couldn't help but chuckle at Siasha's excitement. They bought dinner from one of the food stalls and brought it back with them to eat. Once the witch healed the mercenary's wounds, they both turned in early so they would be ready for the following day.

Chapter 4:

Consequences of a Chosen Path

ZIG WENT OUT ON HIS USUAL RUN A LITTLE BEFORE sunrise. To keep his running route fresh, he chose a different path depending on how he felt that day. He had gone around most of the shopping district, so lately he'd taken to running in the outskirts of town to get a better feel for the local terrain.

Since Halian was made up of many back roads, there were a lot of shops and other facilities tucked away out of sight. Familiarizing oneself with the layout was a common practice among mercenaries, and it just so happened to align with Zig's hobby of patronizing various backstreet establishments. It made his daily run even more worthwhile, and he would keep a steady pace while checking out any shops that had an eye-catching atmosphere.

"It's probably about time to head back."

When Zig sensed he had gone the usual distance, he doubled back, taking a different route home. Since he was running at the same pace and stride and he knew the approximate direction, distance wasn't a problem. As he ran, he noticed someone ahead of him doing the same thing.

Judging from the resonant intervals and speed of their steady pace, whoever it was seemed to be training through long-distance running, just like him. The echo of their footsteps sounded light—it was probably either a woman or a diminutive man. They were moving at about the same pace, but due to Zig's long stride he eventually caught up to the other runner.

The person running alongside him called out a friendly greeting. "Good morning! Working up an early morning sweat too, I see!"

There was a boyishness to their tone, but the voice definitely belonged to a woman. Something about it sounded familiar to Zig.

"Yup, g'morning," he replied, trying to remember that voice.

The woman seemed to recognize his voice too, because she glanced over at him.

"Huh? Gaaaah!" she yelped as Zig turned to look at her as well. "You're the guy from yesterday!"

Running next to him was the Wadatsumi adventurer he had been locked in mortal combat with only a day before. Her red hair was tied back and bounced with each step.

"You're...Milyna, right?"

"Sorry about yesterday...Zig," she said, grimacing, almost reluctant to speak his name.

Milyna, having yet to come to terms with her blunder from the previous day and the emotional fallout accompanying it, was having a hard time deciding how to act toward him. Just recalling the battle still sent chills down her spine, even if both parties had already reached a resolution.

After all, logic and emotion were two different beasts. Settling the matter didn't make it any easier to interact with someone you had previously been fighting to the death.

She chose her words with the utmost caution as she tried to quell her inner panic. "I truly apologize for what happened."

"It's all in the past now. And you can drop the formalities around me."

In contrast to Milyna's concerns, Zig didn't seem to be too bothered about what had transpired. His attitude came as a relief, but that didn't stop her from trying to come up with a plan to get out of there as soon as she could.

But not only was it rude to run away from someone once you recognized them, she was the one who greeted him first—not to mention the Wadatsumi clan was deeply in this man's debt.

She couldn't afford to act carelessly.

I'll just make some small talk with him and be on my way, she decided as she

thought up a seemingly harmless topic.

Since they were both running, it felt like the obvious choice for a conversation starter.

"Do you run often?" she asked.

"It's part of my daily routine. How about you?"

"Me? Um, well... There's something on my mind..."

She already found herself being evasive in response to his casual question. The battle from yesterday reminded her of her lack of stamina, but her pride in her abilities made her hesitate to admit it.

Zig could guess as much from the way she clammed up, so he continued to talk to her as they ran.

"I think you're quite skilled."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"No."

The mercenary's words could've been mocking depending on interpretation, so Milyna shot a resentful glare his way, replying a little too sharply. Quickly realizing that she might've messed up, she gave Zig a nervous look, but he just spoke nonchalantly without disrupting his breathing.

"Your skill will increase quickly if you're talented, but the same doesn't go for strength. It's based on accumulation, not talent. The more talented you are, the harder it is for your strength to keep up."

Everyone was different, of course, but there were no shortcuts when it came to building physical strength—it was a difficult road paved with many taxing efforts.

Prodigies who learned quickly tended to slack off on these measures since they could manage some of the hurdles they faced with talent alone and because there was a gap between their physical strength and their ability to rise to the next level. It wasn't uncommon for talented individuals to plateau because they didn't want to make those efforts. That's why Zig believed that Milyna—who acted as soon as she realized her strength was lacking—certainly had the potential to grow.

"I appreciate the compliment, but there's always someone better than you."

Her voice barely came out as a whisper, and he glanced over to see her with her eyes downcast, looking somewhat resigned. After a brief thought, Zig gave her the same advice his master had told him, along with some of his personal experience.

"I won't tell you not to keep aiming for the top, but if doing that causes you to lose motivation, I don't think it's necessary. In the end, all it comes down to is whether you're willing to go the distance or not."

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"Is that really all it is?"
"Yup."
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The conversation trailed off as they continued to run, the only sound being the constant rhythm of their footsteps.

Milyna looked at Zig. He was wearing different gear than her and looked ready to jump into battle at a moment's notice. And yet, he still maintained a straight posture while keeping his breathing steady.

On the other hand, the swordswoman had been running for a long time, and her breathing was starting to become irregular despite the light clothing she was wearing.

"Accumulation...huh," she said under her breath.

They continued for a little while longer. The mercenary's advice was convincing enough for Milyna to add running to her list of the training activities she did every morning. Unbeknownst to him, the people that lived on this continent didn't do much basic training since they could strengthen themselves through magic fortification. Practicing magic, and not physical training, was

what the inhabitants believed to lead to better results.

In fact, it was thought that too much training could result in unnecessary muscle mass that would inhibit movement—and there was some truth to that. Since magic could reinforce specific body parts as much as necessary, efficient actions were possible without relying on any bulky muscles.

However, even with the application of reinforcement magic, a person still needed to move around. Leftover mana didn't mean a thing if your stamina was depleted. This was known by many people, but there were very few that were willing to forgo using magic to improve something they had been managing all this time. It was because they used physical reinforcement that the people of these lands tended to have superior explosive power but low endurance.

After parting with Milyna, Zig washed away his sweat and got ready before waking up Siasha. He knocked before entering her room to find her sprawled across the bed. There was something slightly eerie about seeing her lying face down with her long hair fanned out all around her. He gently shook her shoulders, causing her to languidly sit up and look at him through sleepy eyes.

"Hey, it's morning."

She mumbled something incoherent in response—Siasha had never been a morning person.

Averting his gaze from the dangerous sight that was her disheveled underclothes, he placed a wet towel on her face.

"Ngh..."

She seemed to slowly wake up as she mumbled random syllables. He decided to do a few stretches to kill time until she was finally ready. Maybe it was because they were fighting monstrosities lately, but he was feeling fatigue in more parts of his body than usual.

It wasn't that the creatures were harder to fight than humans or vice versa,

just that he was moving in different ways than he was used to. He made sure to carefully condition his body so he was completely prepared if push came to shove.

"Sorry for the wait. Shall we get going, Zig?!"

He had just enough time to loosen up his muscles before departing for the guild with an oddly enthusiastic Siasha.

The early morning guild was bustling with adventurers.

"Okay, I'll be back soon!" Siasha called out as she pushed her way into the crowd that was trying to claim the best available jobs for themselves. Any adventurers who tried to protest her butting in seemed to shrink back at Siasha's gaze and let her through. It seemed like she had a handle over how much pressure she could exert, because unlike yesterday, it wasn't enough to cause everyone in the room to freeze. She actually had a fair bit of trouble figuring out those adjustments, but it wasn't something she would ever admit.

"Looks like she's in her element." Zig nodded to himself, feeling strangely moved by what he was witnessing.

Although she had been overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the other adventurers at first, now Siasha was making her way through the crowd with no hesitation.

"I wonder if making those faces is why people assume you're older than you actually are."

"That's rude." Zig scowled at Isana, who had greeted him impertinently.

Thinking just for a moment that she might have a point, he couldn't muster any sharpness in his retort. His reaction made Isana giggle as her white hair fluttered around her.

"So, are things going okay on your end?"

The mercenary tried to redirect the conversation by bringing up something else. Isana decided not to pursue the topic any further and played along. The

subject being sensitive, she couldn't go into too much detail, but she would be able to convey enough.

"Yes, it seems like things will settle down reasonably for now," she said with a bright expression. "They won't be in a good place to mess with us for some time."

Whatever negotiations they were making, it seemed to be going well. Even if he completed his task, Zig wasn't completely uninterested in the aftermath. Since they had sufficient evidence and a firm hold on the perpetrators, it was unlikely that the discussions had been too difficult. The biggest challenge would be how to persuade the other members of the tribe and, by extension, the elder. It was hard for him to imagine that a proud warrior people like the Jinsu-Yah would accept dealings with the mafia, but somehow everything seemed to have worked out in the end.

Zig felt a slight wave of relief wash over him, and he smiled. "At least you're making progress without running into any obstacles."

"The elder asked me to tell you that he was grateful for your help and that our people will be there for you in your time of need."

"Did you tell him about me?"

Zig's brow furrowed at the elder's message. He helped them because it was a job, but depending on what other offers came his way, he could be facing them as an opponent next time. It didn't sound like the elder understood that.

But Isana just shrugged and laughed. "Of course I told him. You might be our enemy next time, right?"

"And what did the old man say to that?"

"He said, 'That's that and this is this. We'll deal with it when the time comes,' or something along those lines."

"I see."

Wizened leaders have a reputation for being hardheaded, but this old guy

seems rather open-minded for some reason.

The elder's proactive cooperation probably also played a large part in getting the rest of the tribe on board as well. If he was willing to respect the line Zig had drawn, then Zig had no complaints.

"All right, then. Tell him I'll consider taking on another job depending on what's in it for me."

"So you'll help us out again?"

"If I feel like it."

"Got it." Isana's shoulders shook as she giggled before remembering something and glancing back at Zig. "Oh, right. I heard about yesterday. You ended up wreaking havoc at the Wadatsumi clan or something?"

"It's complicated..."

Zig was filling Isana in on the details when Siasha returned after successfully obtaining her job request. Judging from her satisfied look, she probably landed a good one. Noticing the swordswoman was also present, Siasha greeted her.

"Good morning, Isana."

"Morning. Do a good job out there today."

"Will do! There's a lot I want to accomplish."

Siasha's unbridled enthusiasm filled Isana's heart with nostalgia and warmth, but she swallowed it back, remembering how she teased Zig for the same thing earlier.

"Just remember not to overexert yourself, okay?"

"Okay!" Siasha replied.

Having delivered her final words of advice, Isana headed off to start her own job.

"We should get going too," Siasha urged.

"All right."

After checking that all their preparations were settled, they completed their administrative procedures and used the transportation stone to set off for their destination.

This time, they were being transported to the hinterlands in the forest they visited when Siasha was first starting out. Unlike the area where they began, which was roamed by many smaller beast-like monstrosities, this area was populated by a plethora of lizard-types. Beast and insect-type monstrosities could be found here as well, but it was usually the rare big game with no smaller ones to be seen.

"These monstrosities should be stronger than the ones we've faced so far, so it says to be careful," Siasha advised as she thumbed through a book entitled *The Adventurer's Companion*.

Zig kept a cautious eye on their surroundings as he listened to the rest of her explanation.

"From now on the monstrosities will actively use magic, so the difficulty will be on a higher level than dealing with just a simple increase in strength. This seems to be around when an adventurer's adaptability and decision-making skills are challenged—in other words, it's the line in the sand that divides who can and cannot progress further."

"Interesting. So I guess this place is make or break for adventurers."

Siasha was currently on a seventh-class-equivalent request. Since most adventurers were seventh class and under, it did seem like this area could be seen as the threshold. Siasha obviously did not intend to have her adventuring career plateau at seventh class, so Zig followed her as she moved forward without a hint of trepidation.

They noticed some other adventurers nearby. This was slightly annoying but not unexpected considering the size of the eligible population.

"Let's go in a little deeper. If we stay here, the other adventurers might try and interfere."

Not wanting to compete with anyone else for their quarry, Siasha started to walk further in where there would be less people. It was when they proceeded far enough in that no more adventurers could be seen that Zig reacted to the faint sound of vegetation being trampled.

"One incoming from two o'clock. It's pretty big."

The noise had been fairly small, but the deep, sinking sound of the footsteps told the mercenary they belonged to a creature that was trying to keep its heavy body quiet as it moved. He drew his weapon, holding it loosely so that he could act at a moment's notice.

A single monstrosity, with a length of about sixteen feet, emerged from the thicket. It resembled a large lizard with slimy, dull-looking scales and a tongue that kept flicking in and out of its mouth. Its eyes, resembling jewels directly inserted into its eye sockets, darted back and forth in alarm as it took them in.

"Here we go! Encountering a crystalline lizard right from the get-go is an auspicious start!"

"It's coming."

For a few moments, the lizard tried to intimidate them by appearing to be imposing. But seeing that Siasha and Zig held their ground, it judged them as enemies and attempted to eliminate the obstacles in its path.

Zig caught a whiff of a pungent smell, and Siasha felt the flow of mana, both realizing through different means that their opponent was about to attack.

The crystalline lizard let out a hoarse, screechy growl, and as if in response, small shards of crystal formed in the air before careening straight toward them. The sight was beautiful yet deadly as they sparkled and glinted in the sunlight.

Before Zig could react to the projectiles flying their way, Siasha made the first move. She summoned up part of the ground that lay between her and the

crystals, forming it into a rectangular earthen shield that was big enough to fully cover one person.

The projectiles smacked straight into it, a battle of earth versus crystal. The winner was so obvious that it wasn't even worth comparing the two. However, the characteristics of objects produced by magic depended on the mana they were imbued with and the skill of the user, their original properties aside. As such, the crystals disintegrated upon impact, while Siasha's earthen shield only had part of its surface shaved off.

The crystalline lizard continued to send out crystal showers, but the shield prevented any of them from getting through. Realizing that its attacks were being rendered ineffective, the lizard stopped and seemed to tense up.

The monstrosity was afraid, but neither Zig nor Siasha sensed it was trying to flee the battle. In fact, it was preparing to use more magic. Zig noticed something starting to form on the surface of its body and squinted to get a better look.

"What is that?"

It was covering itself with crystals, slowly at first, but gradually gaining momentum until its body was practically enclosed in crystalline armor with a large horn growing out of its skull.

It vigorously shook its head before charging with its horn pointed straight at them. Relying on its tail for balance and using all four legs, it ran quickly despite its size.

"Interesting. So it's a contest of strength you want?" Siasha flashed a fearless smile at the rapidly approaching monstrosity as she infused more mana into the ground to produce a couple more earthen shields.

She now had three in total and layered them on top of each other to meet the crystalline lizard's charge attack. The glittering horn rammed into the earthen shields at full force. After a moment's resistance, it pierced through the first and halfway through the second, but that was as far as it got.

Unable to pull out its firmly stuck horn, the lizard came to a full stop. It flailed its legs around wildly, trying to somehow free itself, but the shield had already regenerated, solidifying around the horn.

Siasha further bound its limbs with more earth.

"You were a big help." She grinned at the still-struggling monstrosity as she placed a hand on the earthen shield. "I was worried how we'd be able to harvest your materials without damaging them, but I never imagined you'd trap yourself."

The monstrosity began to thrash about even more violently at the sight, but its restraints were steadfast, and it couldn't move. A carefully aimed earthen stake imbued with mana easily penetrated the crystalline armor, piercing through its soft underbelly.

"Oof, crystal sure is tough."

Siasha was having a difficult time using her knife to remove the monstrosity's eyes after defeating it. Zig could see her struggling with the task as he stripped off the creature's scales. He examined one of the gray scales that shone with a dull luster.

"So what kind of materials can you get from this thing?"

The scales were lighter than he expected, somewhat soft too. They didn't seem like they would provide much protection in this form, but that was obviously before any mana was involved.

"The...umph...crystalline lizard can manipulate crystal... Yes! Got it!"

She finally scooped out the jewellike eyeball and held it up for Zig to see.

There was what looked to be a bunch of nerves still dangling from it, making it a rather grotesque sight.

"The scales can create crystals, while the eyes can manipulate them.

Apparently, both the right and left eyes control different types of magic."

"Oh, yeah? Are they used to make weapons...or more for protective gear?"

"The scales are used as protective gear, but the eyes can be used for weapons or magic items. I heard you can even create a weapon that produces as many blades as you like, given you have the mana for it."

"Whoa. That's pretty impressive..."

Weapon wear and tear was one of the biggest problems sword users faced. Something that solved those issues would be incredibly reassuring. It was times like these that Zig truly regretted that he didn't have any mana.

Witnessing the mercenary's excitement give way to gloom was admittedly a little amusing to Siasha.

"They consume a lot of mana, though, so they're not as useful as they sound. But they're an interesting material, if anything. It's especially difficult to get your hands on an undamaged eyeball, so they fetch quite a high price."

They could either sell the eyeballs for a handsome sum or use them as materials to make magic items. Siasha was pondering how to make the best use of them when her head shot up like she had a eureka moment.

"That's it! Bagging one more of them would solve everything!" she exclaimed before starting to pry out the second eye. "Now that's settled, let's finish harvesting this one."

With a hint of a wry smile at Siasha's heavy-handed resolution, Zig carried on with his own task. After wrapping up, they continued hunting monstrosities, but they didn't encounter any more of Siasha's prized crystalline lizards. They seemed to be one of the rarer species because they matured slowly and often stayed hidden while they were growing. That in mind, they had decided to prioritize going after the monstrosities required by Siasha's request.

Zig grunted loudly as he brought the twinblade down against the collar-like protrusion that surrounded a lizard's head, quickly stepping away before a heat ray landed exactly where he had been standing.

The lizard, now with an unfurled collar, chased after the mercenary, spewing heat rays at him. However, it couldn't catch up as he darted around at high speed, using the trees as shields. When it finally stopped emitting rays as if it were out of breath, Zig approached and cleaved through its torso with one clean blow. Known as incandescent lizards, these were characterized by their ability to gather and release mana using their collars. They were one of the more powerful monstrosities, but it took them some time to amass mana and they weren't adept at tight turns. They also had poor stamina and tired quickly, so fighting a single creature wasn't much of a threat; however, they could be exceedingly dangerous if encountered in packs or if they showed up in the middle of a fight with a different species.

While there were always requests to exterminate them, not only did their materials not sell for much, their extermination fee also wasn't particularly high. The guild did give them a high evaluation value, however, so they were actively hunted by adventurers looking to advance their rank.

"Why are the prices for their materials so low?" Zig voiced his thoughts to Siasha as he cut off the lizard's collar as proof of the kill. "They sure seem to use powerful enough magic."

Siasha wrapped string around the collars Zig handed over to tie them all together.

"First of all, they have poor cost effectiveness. A normal magic user would burn through their mana in no time, and even if you did have enough mana to utilize them, it would be much more effective to rely on your own spells."

She placed the bundled-up collars onto the magic dolly, which, unlike normal ones, didn't have any wheels. Since it was engraved with levitation magic, it floated in the air around waist height when imbued with mana. These dollies were convenient items that could be pulled along as they were unaffected by the terrain, making them popular with common people and adventurers alike. Although they weren't cheap, plenty of vendors rented them out, making them easily accessible.

"The other reason has to do with regulation of function. The lizards' propensity to always fire at maximum output prevents any fine-tuning. That makes them too dangerous to be used as magic items."

"So not only are they not particularly strong, they're a worthless thorn in the side if left alone."

It was no surprise that the value of their materials was low and that adventurers disliked them.

"They're perfect for people like us who want to quickly go up in the ranks," Siasha's said longingly, as she glanced around the vicinity once more. "I was hoping we could take down at least one more crystalline lizard..."

However, their dolly was getting so packed that it would be difficult to add anything else to the pile.

"I think we should call it a day for now," Zig said. "We're not going to be able to carry much more."

"That's disappointing... It'd be nice if we could buy a big one of these for ourselves."

They were currently using a rental dolly. It was a reasonable item, for better or worse, provided at a low cost by a vendor who worked with the guild. The guild would cover some of the recuperation costs if they broke, but the adventurer was also responsible for shouldering some of the burden, not to mention there was a limit to how many could be rented out. If you wanted to bring even more items back with you, the only solution was to get your own. The dolly rentals were an assistance measure put in place to help adventurers who were just getting their feet wet, and the guild barely made any profit from lending them out. Once an adventurer started making a certain amount of money for themselves, it was considered good manners for adventurers to acquire a dolly of their own.

Having obtained all the materials they needed, the pair started to pack up their belongings to go home.

"But what makes the expensive ones different? Beyond the carrying capacity, I mean. I understand that much."

"Apparently, high-performing ones can record the mana wavelengths of their owners and move by themselves. They can even make deliveries on their own as long as you specify the coordinates."

"Wow... They can do all that?"

"I'm truly amazed by the inquisitive spirit with which humans approach technology."

Chatting about magic items as they got ready to leave, Zig and Siasha headed back down the road they came from.

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"Hey, isn't that...?"
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"Hm? ...Wh-whoa!"

The adventurers they passed by on the road did a double take when they saw the dolly heavily laden with monstrosity materials. It was still quite early in the day to be going home, yet the two of them had already achieved outstanding results.

There wasn't a small number who felt green with envy at the sight.

Most of the materials were from incandescent lizards, but when they noticed the excellent condition of crystalline lizard pieces buried among the items in the back, their whole demeanor changed.

Crystalline lizard materials sold for a premium, and these were so well preserved that selling them would net one enough money to fool around for a considerable amount of time. It was more than enough of a sum to drive a money-strapped person crazy.

A few of the men exchanged silent glances before dispersing to move out and surround Zig and Siasha.

"Wait."

Someone grabbed a man by his shoulder, and the rest turned around in surprise.

"Oh, it's you, Cain," the man said, relief flooding through him as he recognized the man who stopped him as an acquaintance. "Don't scare me like that."

One of the others peered at Cain with a sneering smile.

"Oh, did you want to get in on the action? Sorry, but we saw them fir—"

But Cain spoke over him. "Those two are..."

Even though they were all adventurers of the same rank, the group was starting to get irritated with the younger man's actions. Cain made sure they were paying attention to him before he clearly spoke out.

"Those two are not to be trifled with."

A fragile tension began to permeate the air as the men realized Cain's words were not a request.

"You know, Cain, acting all high and mighty is one thing, but don't go getting too big for your britches," the man said, glaring at Cain as he grabbed him by the collar. "Sure, you may be talented, but there's no reason for you to be gratuitously ordering us around."

Cain's expression remained unchanged despite the intimidating gesture. This riled the men up even more and they moved to threaten him, but the next words that came out of his mouth completely threw them for a loop.

"I'm saying this on behalf of the Wadatsumi clan. You understand what that means, right?"

"Wh-what?! That's ridiculous! Those two aren't even in a clan! Why are you lot butting your noses in?!" the man demanded.

"I'm not obligated to explain why."

They gave Cain dubious looks as he coldly told them off, showing not even a

trace of agitation.

Is he bluffing? I can't imagine a clan would stick their neck out for a random person. Even if he was trying to entice a talented newcomer to their ranks, wouldn't it be better to curry their favor by playing hero once we attacked?

Logically speaking, there's something up...but he's such a goody two-shoes, if not overly emotional. If he was lying to try and save his friends, it'd be a little more obvious, right? But the fact that he's being so stoic...it's highly likely that he's being forced to do this by the Wadatsumi clan or doing this against his will.

The man may have only been an untalented adventurer doomed to obscurity, but he wasn't stupid. From Cain's attitude and his own speculation, he was about as near to the truth as he could get.

He glanced back over at the rookie adventurers. It would be a shame to miss out on crystalline lizard materials, but it wasn't worth provoking the Wadatsumi clan's wrath.

But her, on the other hand...

The man's eyes glossed over like he was mentally licking his lips as he gazed at the black-haired woman. Now that was a beauty you didn't come across very often. She was too good of a woman to be allowed to go off adventuring...or anything else for that matter.

Even if it'd piss off the Wadatsumi clan, if I could only get my hands on her...

The man snapped out of his thoughts as Cain broke the silence.

"Consider this a piece of well-intentioned advice." He must've been able to tell what the man was thinking from following his gaze. "Whatever you do, don't mess with that woman."

"Excuse me?"

The man looked at Cain suspiciously, not understanding the meaning behind his words.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"I can't say anything else. You've been warned."

Cain shut his mouth for good, silently telling them he had nothing more to say. The man looked at the ground as if he was deep in thought, but eventually turned back with an annoyed click of his tongue.

His disgruntled companions had no choice but to follow suit.

Cain watched the men disappear from sight and turned to cast one more glance at Zig and Siasha before walking away himself.

"Good work on successfully completing the incandescent lizard extermination request. Seems like everything went smoothly for you in the new hunting area."

"It wasn't anything we couldn't handle."

"I wouldn't have expected any less. Still, you mustn't let your guard down."

Siasha handed over the materials she brought back as proof of her kills to the receptionist. She had decided not to sell the pieces they obtained from the crystalline lizard. There were other ways to make money, but it wasn't so easy to get your hands on rare materials, so many adventurers would opt to keep them unless they were incredibly short on cash.

Zig casually glanced around as he waited for Siasha to finish her business at the reception desk.

"Hmm..."

He didn't *feel* the heat of anyone's gaze. It was puzzling, almost like his expectations were let down. He was intimately familiar with the type of stares they were getting earlier and assumed an attack to rob them of their prizes was imminent.

I thought they'd try and set a trap...but that group ended up being more coolheaded than expected.

Cautious opponents were the most troublesome. If they made a move, he

would be free to handle them without hesitation. With that on his mind, he glanced around warily until finally noticing someone looking at him.

Without turning his head, his eyes sought the source of the gaze. The person looking his way was so unexpected that he had to hold back his surprise so that it wouldn't show on his face.

Saying something brief to her colleague, she started to walk straight toward Zig, her regular stride and clocklike footsteps almost a perfect representation of her personality.

"Do you have a moment?"

The guild's brusque receptionist was asking Zig for his time. Her beautiful yet stoic face was as unmoving as ever. The mercenary eyed her suspiciously; he couldn't think of any reason she needed to talk to him.

"Do you need something from me?" he asked back.

His question was met with a sudden bow. She bent forward at the waist, and although it was an expression of sincere apology, there was nothing subservient about her attitude.

Still maintaining her position, the receptionist said, "I would like to offer my deepest apologies for how a family member of mine treated you the other day. I will instruct them to be more careful in the future so that a similar incident will not occur again. I humbly ask for your forgiveness."

The unexpected apology completely took Zig by surprise.

"What are you talking about? I don't recall anything you need to be sorry for."

"I apologize for the delayed introduction. My name is Aoi Kasukabe. My foolish little brother, Akito Kasukabe, is the administrator of the Wadatsumi clan."

"Oh, you're his sister?"

Now it all made sense. However, a guild receptionist and a clan administrator being siblings seemed to be a rather odd connection in quite the peculiar place.

It did explain why she was apologizing on his behalf, though.

"I heard it was because of his misunderstanding that you ended up suffering injuries. Customarily, he would need to be punished for those actions, but due to your kindness I heard that did not come to be. I offer you both my apologies and gratitude regarding this incident."

"Lift your head. It's already been settled. And I didn't let him off out of the kindness of my heart—we made a deal. Bringing it up over and over is just a bad look for everyone involved."

Mercenaries hardly ever rehashed past incidents since it was normal for friend and foe to vary day by day on the battlefield depending on who was footing the bill. Zig didn't particularly enjoy anything that was a done deal being shoved in his face time and again.

Aoi couldn't have understood the exact reason why, but she did realize that pressing the matter any further would offend the mercenary, so she raised her head and met his gaze. Her face was clear of all expression save for her businesslike smile.

Although it was in different ways, both siblings seemed adept at not letting anyone read their motives. Zig wasn't dimwitted by any means, but even he was completely fooled by Aoi's performance.

"I don't know if you've heard, but there were situations at play that made your brother's miscalculation almost unavoidable. Don't be too hard on him."

Aoi shook her head at Zig's attempt to cover for her little brother. "Even if it's a 99 percent possibility, one should always assume that the unlikely event of the 1 percent will occur and refrain from acting precipitously. That's what separates adults from children; my brother's inexperience showed."

The receptionist's harsh assessment of her younger brother made Zig wince. Because she was usually so stoic, it was a little surprising that she couldn't conceal the outrage she felt at her family member. Her eyes, brimming with silent anger at her little brother, turned to him.

"You mentioned this matter was settled upon making a deal. That concluded your business with the Wadatsumi clan, but as a relative of the person who wronged you, I believe appropriate compensation is required for the trouble he caused. What do you think?"

"He's not a kid, you know. He should be able to clean up after his own mess."

"But—"

"If you're working at the guild as a receptionist, you're going to have a lot of adventurers—including my client—relying on you. I'm expecting you to do a good job when it comes to that. Is that enough to ask?"

Aoi seemed to ponder his statement for a moment before giving a somewhat reluctant nod.

"Of course. Please feel free to consult with me if you have any problems. Just to be clear...you're not coming up with some vague request just to get me off your back, correct?"

"Of course not!"

Beads of cold sweat began to dot Zig's forehead as the receptionist spelled out his plan exactly. But whether she was aware of that or not, Aoi gave him another bow before heading back to the reception area.

I thought she was supposed to be apologizing to me, so why am I the one feeling flustered? Zig mused as he made his way over to Siasha, who had finished with her administrative procedures.

"Did something happen, Zig?" she asked.

"Nope, nothing at all. How about you?"

She beamed with pride at his question. "The reward money wasn't much to speak of, but I earned a lot of evaluation points. If I keep going at this rate, it won't be long until I'm able to move up to the next class. Oh, and I want to stop by the shop that sells magic items. I want them to take a look at this and tell me what they can make with it."

Siasha's eyes lit up like a child's as she held out the jewellike eyeball. Zig couldn't help but laugh at the sight as they exited the guild.

"Oh, I heard that a bounty got posted," Siasha said.

"A bounty? For whoever attacked those adventurers, you mean?"

"No, they're still looking into that case because there's not much information. I'm talking about a bounty for a monstrosity."

Bounties were sometimes posted for monstrosities as well. Adventurers that could take down a monstrosity the guild considered a priority for extermination were rewarded with ample money and evaluation points. The targets of these requests varied and could cover one or multiple creatures, but what made them different was that they were rated by the target's degree of danger and damage, and not just raw strength.

There were usually a lot of low-level adventurer casualties when a dangerous monstrosity showed up in a place where it normally shouldn't, but it was hard to prevent them from going to work there since they relied on the income. Therefore, large bounties were posted for out-of-place monstrosities to get rid of them as soon as possible. Since they were high risk but high return, they often turned into a hunting competition among skilled adventurers. The early bird usually caught the worm in these cases, but creatures that had a bounty were so dangerous that sometimes parties worked together to take them down.

Clans were somewhat reluctant to pursue bounties, as the task often held various uncertainties, and only took them on if they judged the estimated profits of defeating the monstrosity outweighed the likely costs and danger level of facing it. If you were a member of a clan who didn't plan to act on a bounty but wished to participate, you would need to work as part of another party that combined members from different groups.

"An eyewitness apparently reported seeing a double-horned blue beetle."

"That name sounds familiar. I think that the weapon I'm using is made from

their materials."

Learning that it was the same monstrosity as the one used for his twinblade piqued Zig's curiosity. He was quite satisfied with his current weapon, so getting a peek at the monstrosity that contributed to it would be interesting.

"It's not just a regular adult either. It appears to be a veteran beetle that's survived for many years. It should be significantly more dangerous than a normal individual of its species."

"So bugs get stronger the more experience they have?"

From what Zig knew, beetles didn't get significantly bigger after they reached adulthood.

"Monstrosities obtain mana from those they kill, so usually, the longer they live, the stronger they get. Insect-types are no exception. Double-horned blue beetles are powerful to begin with; even seventh-class adventurers are no match for them."

If a monstrosity like that appeared, it was only natural that a bounty would be put out for it.

"Which means, there should be an increased number of adventurers roaming around starting from tomorrow."

Plenty of adventurers were motivated by the bounty money despite the high risk, and many more were likely to start dropping by as soon as the next day to keep an eye on the situation.

"What do you want to do? Should we reschedule our plans?"

"Hm... I don't think those conditions will let up until the bounty is claimed, and we can't wait around until then. I think we should just try and deal with it even if there are more people around than normal."

"Got it. We can head out a little earlier than usual if that's any consolation."

"Thanks for your help every morning."

Siasha knew very well she had trouble waking up, but she had been living that way for over a hundred years, so it wasn't something she could easily fix.

Knowing she was causing him unnecessary trouble, she thanked Zig with an uncomfortable expression.

He gave her a pat on the shoulder before starting to walk. Siasha softly giggled and said nothing else as she trailed after him, a spring in her step.

It was nice to have someone around that was okay for her to inconvenience a little—she never realized that until now.

"You can't do it."

"Do what?"

Early the next morning, there were more people around than usual. Judging from their demeanor, it was likely they were there because of the bounty.

Zig and Siasha arrived at the guild early to select a request for the day and were about to go through the administrative procedures at the reception desk when the receptionist laid into them right away.

"I'm talking about the bounty, obviously. I'm sure you've been plotting a way to accidentally encounter and defeat that monstrosity, am I right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about..."

There wasn't a trace of deception in Siasha's slightly confused expression, but the receptionist noticed Zig's composure waver for just a moment.

"Even if you play innocent, it's not allowed. I've heard that you were going around and asking about the bounty quite eagerly. I've also confirmed that you borrowed the *Encyclopedia of Monstrosities* which lists information about double-horned blue beetles from the reference room."

"Urk!"

The receptionist looked at Siasha like she was cornered, prompting her to

groan when she realized the evidence was so neatly stacked against her that deception was impossible. Indeed, she had been planning to secretly try and claim the bounty herself, but unfortunately, the receptionist had figured out her scheme and was trying to put a stop to it.

"Attempting something so dangerous is unacceptable!"

"B-but what if we accidentally encounter it...?"

The receptionist smiled at Siasha's desperate attempt to make an excuse. "Run away with everything you've got."

"But then..."

"If you are deemed to have engaged the monstrosity after repeated warnings from the guild, you may be subject to disciplinary action and even demotion. You've been officially warned as of right now—I've even made a note of it."

"Th-that's..."

Any excuse or loophole she might've tried was out of the question. If she forcibly attempted to defeat the monstrosity now, rather than winning favor, she might find herself being punished.

Considering that she was trying to increase her rank, it was a terrible blow she couldn't shake off.

The receptionist sighed at Siasha's dejected response. "Listen, you're still only eighth class. Do you really think someone in that position would be allowed to mess around with a bountied monstrosity that's shown up in a hunting ground for seventh-class adventurers? For this double-horned blue beetle, we're making the minimum requirement sixth class. No doubt about it, you're talented, Siasha. And I'll admit that it's possible you could even claim the bounty in your current state."

The serious tone of the receptionist's voice prompted Siasha to look up.

"However," the receptionist continued, "what if other people saw you and thought they could bend the rules as well? Can you take responsibility for that

too?"

"[..."

"You can't, can you? Because it's the guild's responsibility, not yours. If we turn a blind eye to one person's recklessness, there will be plenty more who believe the same applies to them—and many of them will die. That's the reason the guild has rules in place. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes."

Rendered helpless by the receptionist's flawless argument, Siasha walked away from the reception area in a daze. After watching her leave, the receptionist turned her eyes to Zig, who hadn't said a word.

He maintained his silence as they held each other's gaze for a few moments. The mercenary shrugged and then followed after Siasha. Seeing this, the receptionist sighed and went back to her work.

After taking the transportation stone to the forest, they headed deep inside to the place they were in the previous day. As expected, there were more adventurers around, so they had to go in quite far to find a hunting spot that didn't overlap with anyone else's.

"Well, that was disappointing." Siasha's voice was laced with bitter regret as they made their way past the trees.

Rather than trying to start a conversation with him, it sounded more like the words had spilled out of her involuntarily, which made Zig chuckle a little.

"Looks like you're going to have to give it up this time. She's got a point, you know. The one who's on the hook if anything happens is the guild. Even if there's emphasis on self-responsibility in this line of work, they can't allow it to turn into complete pandemonium. After all, it's them that'll lose out in the end."

"Special exceptions for this time only" that applied to numerous people would almost certainly cause the system to fall apart. Eventually, it would become the

norm as people demanded even more. The guild must've been aware of this, which was why they had to stand firm.

But even if there were no special exceptions, there were still *exceptions to the rule*. If an outsider, namely Zig, were to defeat the monstrosity, there shouldn't be a problem. Or rather, they had no grounds to punish him.

That's why the receptionist had stared at Zig, as if to keep him in check so he wouldn't try anything out of line. The mercenary had never given her a yes or no, but he had no intention of trying to kill it.

Not only was the strength of this bountied monstrosity an unknown, but he didn't want to incur the displeasure of the guild's staff.

And I don't really want to let the goodwill of someone who's looking after Siasha go to waste. Not to mention nothing good will come of angering the person who's in charge of all the administrative procedures.

He recalled that after he did something that made the administrator of his previous mercenary brigade upset, it had been a huge ordeal to get back in his good graces. For powerless mercenaries, opponents that couldn't be defeated by martial prowess were the worst kind of people to anger. That was why Zig didn't mention the possibility of that loophole to Siasha.

"I do understand, but..."

"Did you want to defeat it that badly? Does it have some sort of material you're looking for?"

Siasha shook her head before glancing around. They had walked quite a bit by this point, but she was still catching glimpses of other adventurers in the vicinity. They seemed to be trying to secure makeshift bases of operations, clearing out any pesky monstrosities here and there that might get in the way.

"This is the exact situation I wanted to avoid. It's bad enough that this place was already a crowded hunting spot..." she said.

[&]quot;I get that," Zig replied.

The more adventurers competing for the same prey, the harder it was to get the job done. More accomplishments were needed as well as the guild requiring more evaluation points to progress the higher you got in the ranks. This wasn't going to be another blade bee situation where Siasha was immediately able to move up to the next class.

There was also the fact that these hunting grounds were the most efficient location for her to keep progressing.

"Not like we have any other choice," Siasha said, raising her head and shifting gears. She knew it was pointless to keep complaining about the situation. "We just have to hope that someone takes down the bounty as soon as possible."

She seemed to finally be getting motivated. Her entire body radiated with magic, and even her long black hair seemed to float as mana coursed through it.

"I'm planning to go all out today, so you can take it easy, Zig."

"Sounds good. You don't need to worry about your rear, so have at it."

Siasha grinned, satisfied at his response as she looked ahead. Holding out her hands, she began to weave together a spell, launching a rock spear that decimated everything in its path to pierce into a monstrosity that was hiding in the shadows.

The power and strength of the rock spear, formed from her condensed magic, was nothing less than astounding. The monstrosity didn't even know what hit it, dying instantly as a giant hole was left in its torso.

As if its death were a signal, other creatures suddenly rushed to attack her from above. Pointing a finger to the sky, she launched an earthen spike that skewered one in midair.

A winged lizard came flying into the fray. Using its mobility, it dodged the spikes and approached her, but the ground itself began to rise as Siasha clapped her palms together, forming two plank-like walls of earth that bore down on the monstrosity. Now that it faced an area attack instead of a targeted one, the

monstrosity couldn't get out of the way in time and was crushed.

A group that attacked as a pack were taken out by an even more ferocious barrage of magic projectiles.

There was no need for Zig to protect her rear. Not a single creature in the area stood a chance against a serious Siasha as she annihilated everything in sight with no regard for her surroundings.

Corpses of various monstrosities piled up in the blink of an eye. The damage they sustained was so severe that most of them weren't even recognizable.

"Wh-what the hell is that?! Is she a monster or something?"

"You've gotta be kiddin' me. C'mon, let's find a new spot. We don't wanna end up as collateral damage."

The other adventurers scurried away, not wanting to get caught in the crossfire of Siasha's destructive and intimidating magic. The air itself seemed to shudder with each swing of her arms, and cracks formed in the earth with each stomp of her feet.

The sight of a witch going on a killing spree with abandon was just as chilling as the stories foretold.

Some monstrosities responded to the chaos by fleeing, while others rushed to attack. It wasn't long until all those in the latter category were eliminated.

The ground fractured wherever she passed, uprooting the trees and toppling them over. But these were trees that sustained themselves with the blood and compost of monstrosities, and their growth was remarkable. It wouldn't be too long until the forest fully recovered.

Siasha stood among the chaos she had wrought. Her previously intimidating aura completely vanished as she gazed toward the sky. At times like these she looked no different than any other girl.

"Are you satisfied now?" Zig asked as he approached her.

At his voice, Siasha turned to face him. The mercenary could make out a hint

of trepidation in her eyes, but he kept his composure. When she saw his response, her anxiety slowly disappeared, and she gave a soft smile.

Maybe I overdid it...

Siasha was filled with worry over the very real possibility that she scared Zig off. In the past, any human who witnessed the witch's true power fled, their face contorted in fear. They couldn't help but imagine what would happen if such a force were directed at them—it was almost instinctive to feel the fear of that dreadful power.

Anyone who didn't feel that way was probably broken in some aspect.

"Is something wrong?" Zig asked.

"No, nothing. Actually, it felt refreshing to go all out for the first time in a while. Thanks for that."

"I see."

She didn't sense any rejection in his succinct response. Smiling, she reached up to stroke his cheek with her palm. Zig seemed puzzled by her actions, but he didn't say or do anything, allowing her to touch him with the same hand that had just wrought utter death and destruction.

Basking in her relief, Siasha remained motionless for a while, just staring at him, and although the mercenary was mystified at the situation, he let her do as she pleased.



"I definitely overdid it."

It was the second time that day Siasha found herself sighing with regret. She may have torn countless monstrosities to shreds, but the guild required certain parts to be brought in as proof of her kills.

She was in the middle of stripping down the corpses for that purpose, but they were in a horrible condition. The bodies that were ripped to pieces weren't so bad, but anything that had been crushed to death was basically unrecognizable and just appeared to be clumps of flesh with no semblance of their original form. The guild was fairly lax about the condition of the parts that were turned in as proof, whether they were worth anything or not, but even they wouldn't be able to do anything about indiscernible mince.

These decimated corpses were strewn all over the place, the pools of blood they lay in mixing with dirt to form a black sludge. The odor was already so bad that her sense of smell had gone numb.

Due to the nature of Siasha's magic, she made a lot of area attacks. She normally relied on stakes and the like, but she was lashing out this time and cast her inhibitions aside, resulting in the predicament she now found herself in.

The area had been pummeled so badly that there was no need for them to be on guard, and since the fallen trees cluttered their visibility, she and Zig split up to collect the parts they needed.

"Hm, this is pretty bad."

The scene was so ghastly that even Zig, who had witnessed his own fair share of horrific battlefields, felt slightly disturbed. Due to who they were, Zig and Siasha were able to endure, but any normal adventurer would have vomited on the spot.

"I should probably add a few more spells to my repertoire..." Siasha solemnly murmured.

She never had to consider the type of damage her magic left on its targets

until now, so her current options were limited.

I figured this day would come eventually; looks like it's already here.

She had been thinking about the idea for a while now, but it was probably time for her to start working on it earnestly.

"Zig, I'd like to take the next two days off."

"All right. You've been busy with work the last few days, so make sure and get some rest."

Siasha and Zig had been doing their own things recently, with her constantly going out on adventuring work. It didn't seem like the chaos was going to die down anytime soon, so a day or two off sounded pretty nice.

"Thanks. It'll be a good opportunity for me to think about my magic. And it might be a lucky break if someone claims the bounty in the meantime."

"True. Repeating today's performance whenever we go out probably wouldn't be very efficient."

Siasha responded to Zig's banter with a wry smile before continuing to harvest more parts. In the end, they were unable to collect parts from about half the monstrosities she killed, but their dolly was still overflowing with various materials.

Knowing they wouldn't be able to bring back anything else, they finished their adventuring for the day.

"You're back early today! And it seems like you've brought quite the haul with you. How did you find this many at once? Were you swarmed?"

"Uh, something like that," Siasha replied vaguely, knowing that there was no way she could admit to going on a rampage and inciting them to come to her. "They caught us off guard and...boom."

The receptionist could tell Siasha was clearly acting differently than she had

that morning, but she took the story at face value.

"If you were able to kill all of these safely, that's wonderful. I apologize for nagging you so much this morning; I just didn't want you to do anything reckless."

Siasha laughed awkwardly. "I appreciate your concern. I think I got too ahead of myself."

"I'm so happy you understand! I'm certain you'll be able to get to the top, so please keep doing your best!"

"Okay."

The receptionist smiled with delight, but Siasha was so filled with guilt that she couldn't look at her straight. Zig had to hold back a chuckle as he watched Siasha avert her gaze, her face twitching as she tried to maintain a fake smile.

She returned to his side once the administrative procedures were complete.

"I'm not a big fan of being talked to like that."

"You just gotta deal with it sometimes."

Witnessing Siasha's growing pains was a bit amusing to Zig.

"I'm going to be out late shopping from now, so you can go home first," she said.

"Got it. What about dinner?"

"Sorry, but let's eat separately tonight."

Zig watched a somewhat dejected-looking Siasha walk off in the direction of the guild's reference room. She planned to borrow books and other materials to help her devise some new magic the following day.

What would happen when efficient magic stemming from human research was combined with the mana supply and manipulative ability of a witch?

As he glanced around the guild, a thought crept up on Zig. She might come up with something completely absurd.

It was still just early afternoon. Since most people were out working at this hour, there were very few adventurers around. There was also a fair amount of those who looked to be non-combatant types coming and going from the reception area. They seemed to be bringing in various goods and asking for signatures, so they were most likely common vendors. The receptionists busied themselves handling their various inquiries.

"I guess adventurers aren't the only ones they deal with," Zig mused.

He figured they would have a lot of downtime in the afternoon, but now he realized that had been a rude assumption. He was sitting in a chair, watching them work as he wondered about what to do for lunch, when someone approached him.

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"Well, if it ain't Zig!"

"Hi."
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Glancing in the direction of the two voices, he saw an amicable middle-aged adventurer with a muscular body and a bald head. Milyna stood by his side.

"Oh, Bates. Not working today?"

"A man's gotta rest sometimes, ya know. Besides, we're technically on the job right now."

"That's right! I'm sure you've heard about—oww!"

A hollow thud rang out as Bates knocked Milyna on the head with his fist right before she could spill the beans. Her eyes started tearing up when he looked her way with a sigh.

"Ya really should be..." he began. "Oh, whatever. Say Zig, join us for lunch. The food here ain't too bad."

"Now that you mention it, I've never eaten here before. I guess I could try it."

He walked with them toward the attached dining hall that was often used by the guild's staff. As it turned out, the food served at the guild didn't really mesh well with Zig's preferences. The meals didn't taste bad. If anything, they were quite decent considering the price.

There was just one fatal flaw he could not overlook.

This isn't nearly enough...

The amount of food was less than satisfactory. The guild's dining hall, which was primarily there to serve its employees, was mostly patronized by women. Because of that it served a wide variety of contemporary dishes...but the portions were tiny.

"I'm surprised this is enough to sustain you, Bates."

Zig highly doubted the food could satisfy an adventurer who was so reliant on keeping his body in shape, but Bates glanced down at his stomach with a melancholic expression.

"I'm havin' a little trouble keepin' my waistline trim these days..."

"Don't say that, Bates, you sound like an old man," Milyna said tactlessly when Bates voiced his concern.

To be fair, the portion size was only a problem for Zig. The average adventurer would consider it more of a light meal that was perhaps slightly lacking. It would cost so much for the mercenary to satiate himself at this place that it wasn't worth it.

I'll make sure to eat an early dinner, something hearty, he decided as he sipped his tea.

He was sitting there relaxing with the others, when—

"Good afternoon, bro!"

Two things happened at the same time: A voice from close by called out to Zig and a presence made itself known.

Bates's eyes grew wide as he was caught off guard, realization dawning on him that someone had gotten so close without triggering his senses. Milyna followed with a gasp a moment later. The voice was like the aural equivalent of having a knife stroked across your neck—just hearing it made their hair stand on end.

Although adventurers didn't specialize in fighting other people, neither Bates's nor Milyna's capabilities were inferior compared to Zig's. And yet they didn't notice their visitor approach until he called out to the mercenary.

This man was so versed in the art of stealth that he could've killed them if he was so inclined.

"Lyka, I'd stop surprising people like that if I were you," Zig warned, tilting his cup as Lyka Liullone shrugged in response. "You'll have no right to complain if someone takes a stab at you."

The young man had brownish-red hair and piercing eyes that seemed to have an underlying hunger. He wore a robe in flashy colors that exposed his chest, carried two short blades at his waist, and pointed ears topped off the look.

"That's rich coming from you. You didn't even flinch."

Even though Lyka had called out from behind Zig, the mercenary's posture remained undisturbed—he didn't even turn around. Despite the other two adventurers looking almost ready to jump into combat, Zig only seemed a little annoyed as he chided Lyka.

Lyka's stuck out his lips in a pout as he rested one of his elbows on the two swords cinched to his waist.

"That's not true," Zig said rather nonchalantly, causing a twitchy smile to spread across Lyka's face. "If you'd taken another two steps in my direction without announcing your presence, I would've cut you down."

"Heh."

It didn't sound like a threat at all. If anything, it seemed like he was making small talk. That was how Lyka knew Zig was just stating facts—his previous warning hadn't been a warning at all.

"When did you realize I was there?" Lyka asked.

He cleared his throat before he noticed *it*—Zig's right hand, the one that wasn't gripping his cup.

Although he appeared to be in a relaxed position, his arm was hanging down so that he could immediately pull out his weapon. And the swordsman only realized that now.

It had been his intention to keep an eye on Zig, but he didn't even know when Zig shifted into that position.

"Probably around the time you tried to get into my blind spot."

The mercenary still was on his guard as they spoke. While his tone sounded casual, his gaze and awareness were on high alert. He was prepared to handle an incoming attack at any moment.

Shivers ran down Lyka's spine. This mercenary terrified him just as much as the two adventurers who were still on edge.

"I thought it was called a blind spot because you couldn't see it?" he asked.

"If you're so blatant about trying to avoid someone's line of sight, they'll notice even if they don't want to."

The unconscious hypervigilance was already second nature to him. Aside from combat strength, he'd adopted various tactics to survive a turbulent war. No matter how strong you might be, a pitiful death was the only option if you found yourself surrounded by men stabbing at you with their spears.

Don't let yourself get surrounded or isolated. Maintain a broad line of sight that covers the entire battlefield and not just the enemies before you. Be sensitive to movements happening behind you or that try to take advantage of your blind spot.

These were the skills mercenaries had to develop.

"Gotcha..." Lyka said with a nod, thrusting an arm into the folds of his flashy garments. "I'll keep that in mind going forward."

Although his expression never wavered, the almost imperceptible wiggling of

his ears showed that he wasn't as composed on the inside.

"Don't tell me, are ya the one they call 'Lyka the Blade Whistler'?" Bates asked, still obviously wary and about to rise to his feet.

Milyna was also halfway standing up, her right hand reaching for the longsword at her waist and ready to strike at any time. However, Lyka didn't seem to be bothered by their caution as he regarded Bates with an air of indifference.

"Heh! I didn't realize even adventurers had heard of me. That's pretty cool."

He seemed quite satisfied that they knew who he was; bounty hunters usually weren't as well-known as adventurers. This was partly because being a bounty hunter was scorned as a profession and partly since there weren't many who specialized in it.

Unlike adventurers who needed to register with the guild, bounty hunters were just paid for bringing back wanted people's heads. Sometimes adventurers or mafia members would come across bounties by chance and collect them. It also wasn't uncommon for those who felt confident in their combat skills to do it as a side job.

But there wasn't always a plethora of good bounties available, so those who specialized in the profession either really enjoyed it or had something to hide.

"And what business might a lowly bounty hunter like you have here?" Milyna threatened in a low voice, her hand still on her sword.

Some adventurers had a severe dislike for bounty hunters or other adventurers who moonlighted as them. Usually, bounties were placed on people who had committed crimes deserving of such a penalty, and no legal action was taken if they happened to be killed. But there were always people who didn't believe in killing other humans outside of self-defense.

Actually, that was a very normal view to have.

Her intimidating remark didn't seem to affect Lyka's attitude. In fact, he

seemed to brush it off as the whining of a puppy more than anything else.

"Lowly bounty hunter? Now, now, it's not nice to discriminate based on one's profession. Don't you agree, Mr. Mercenary?"

"I suppose if you're a lowly bounty hunter, that makes me a humble mercenary," Zig chuckled in agreement as Milyna's expression became conflicted.

She appeared taken aback as she picked up on the familiarity between them in their exchange.

"Do you know him, Zig?" she asked.

"A little bit, through work."

Milyna glared at Lyka in disbelief. "I'm flabbergasted. Do you understand how dangerous this man is?"

The disgust in her eyes seemed a little too fierce to be directed at someone who was *just* a bounty hunter. Something about it almost looked familiar.

Oh, I get it. His unusual preference must be what's made him so famous.

That made sense. The deep disdain she was regarding him with was the same as what he saw from the Jinsu-Yah: t was toward Lyka's homicidal impulses, the joy that he took in killing. It looked like his reason for choosing the bloody profession of bounty hunting was well-known even among adventurers.

Lyka seemed to be enjoying himself, laughing at Milyna and her apparent disgust. "Don't waste your breath! This guy's even more crazy than me. Your normal values aren't gonna fly here!"

Zig wondered if he should step in and say something, seeing as the conversation had already been derailed far enough.

"So to what do we owe the pleasure? I'm sure there's a reason for a bounty hunter to go out of his way to make an appearance at the adventuring guild."

At Zig's prompting, Lyka's red eyes grew wide and he clapped his hands

together.

"Oh, that's right! I recognized your voice, so I made the spontaneous decision to try and conceal myself and talk to you, but I'm actually here for work."

After the clap, he stuck one hand back in his robe to pull out a document which he spread open on the table. It looked like a wanted notice, complete with the name of the individual being sought, their crime, and the sum of the offered reward.

"I'm looking for someone at the moment. Tracking down some culprit who mowed down a bunch of members from some adventuring clan the other day. You folks know anything about it?"

So he was in the middle of hunting for a bounty. Zig glanced at the document out of curiosity, but its contents were disturbingly familiar.

The target is a dangerous individual who attacked members of the Wadatsumi Adventuring Clan, killing and maiming several people. Name unknown. Likely a male of average height. Presumed to have reasonable skill as they attacked multiple people alone (even though it was a group of younger adventurers). Wields an uncommon weapon: a double-edged sword. Reward of 600,000 dren, dead or alive.

P.S. Please note that the large man who wields a blue double-edged sword has no relation to this incident and is very dangerous. We will not be held responsible for any damages incurred by mistake.

"Come on now," Zig quipped.

It was obvious from just a glance who that last bit was referring to.

"Gimme a break, Kasukabe, that was goin' too far..." Bates chewed on his fingernails, a grimace on his face.

The attacker of the young Wadatsumi clan members seemed to still be at large.

Leaving the matter unresolved for too long would start to affect the clan's reputation, so Kasukabe had taken it upon himself, thrown pride to the wind, and sent out a request to bounty hunters in hopes of catching whoever was behind the crime.

Based on their reactions, it didn't seem like Bates or Milyna had been made aware of this decision.

"Heh. So not only do you know about it, but you're also involved in the matter. That's a lucky break for me!"

The edges of Lyka's lips curved into a smile, his expression resembling a beast that had found its prey. But it soon faded, and he tilted his head to the side, cupping his chin in one hand when he noticed the twinblade on Zig's back.

"Wait, this big guy in the postscript. Is that you, bro? You were using a naginata back then, but that's your usual weapon? A double-edged sword... That's quite uncommon."

"I guess."

The double-edged sword and twinblade basically referred to the same weapon, the only difference being the naming conventions of the two continents. While it was called a twinblade on Zig's home continent, it was commonly known as a double-edged sword on this one.

He had borrowed a naginata, one of the Jinsu-Yah's weapons, when he was working for them, so Lyka hadn't known about his usual weapon until now.

The young man read the document once more, seeming to piece together the situation by comparing Zig's weapon and height.

"Still, for it to be written this way... Did they attack you by accident?"

Zig didn't respond, but Milyna's face darkened as Lyka's observation brought forth memories of everything that had happened that day.

Realizing by her reaction that he hit the nail on the head, the swordsman smirked and gave a mocking snort.

"And you really had the gall to call me a lowly bounty hunter? You, who mistakenly attacked the wrong man. I bet he took mercy on you, huh? I dunno about the old man, but I don't think it'd be possible for you to run away, let alone beat him."

"You bastard!" Milyna bristled at the blatant insult.

But he spoke the truth. Zig had defeated them even though they had fought two against one, and her partner would have been killed if their companions hadn't come to their aid. She was also aware that the bounty hunter that stood before her was an extraordinary combatant who was beyond her own capabilities.

"Enough, Lyka. That matter's been settled."

"Eh, whatever. I shouldn't be digging into things that the person in question doesn't care about."

The tension in the air was growing thicker by the second, but Lyka backed down at Zig's reprimand. As if to change the subject, Bates rapped the document holding the bounty information with his palm.

"So what made ya decide to go after this bounty?"

"That's my job. I take on requests that pay reasonably well—kill the target and collect my money, that's it. Although...if I had to say a reason, I was a little intrigued by the unusual weapon."

Lyka didn't appear to be lying or trying to hide anything. Just from what he told Bates, he most likely wasn't pursuing this particular bounty for any personal reasons.

"I see... Well, how 'bout ya stop by our clan house after this? Give 'em my name. I'm sure our administrator will supply ya with more details."

"That would be great. I appreciate your cooperation. Well, see you around,

bro."

Lyka rolled up the unfurled document, tucked it away, and walked off in his peculiar sliding gait without offering much of a goodbye. Zig watched him leave with pointed interest as Bates marveled at how quickly he blended in with the guild crowd.

Just as suddenly as he appeared out of nowhere, he vanished in the same way —without making a sound. It was only after he disappeared that the two adventurers finally relaxed, Milyna wiping the sweat from her brow.

"So that's the guy who got to the same level as Isana Gayhone at such a young age."

"Phew! See, this is why the Jinsu-Yah get so much hate," Bates muttered as he did some shoulder circles. "If only they'd put a lil' more effort into how they present themselves. I was so tense that I got a crick in my neck."

He did have a point. It was only natural for people to hold you at arm's length if you gave off such an alien presence. While it wasn't necessary to go so far as to try and curry favor with others, people like Lyka lacked the consideration of reading the room and keeping the atmosphere intact.

Zig had witnessed the same thing time and time again. Migrant groups weren't disliked just because they were different from everyone else. It was common for them to come into conflict with the locals by continuing to do things the way they always had after arriving at their new destination. It was no surprise that resentment would build if newcomers showed up and did as they pleased without any consideration for those who were already there. Even casual conversations like how Lyka spoke with Zig could generate sparks of friction. If such things were made light of and not taken seriously, they would one day accumulate and cause a fatal catastrophe.

The Jinsu-Yah seemed to believe that they wouldn't be accepted, but part of the blame undoubtedly lay with them. Although some—like Isana—seemed to be doing well enough.

"Bates, was it really okay for Kasukabe to put out a call for bounty hunters without getting permission first?" Milyna asked.

"It can't really be helped. I know how ya feel though. It'll take too long for us to find the guy on our own. It's quicker to hire an expert if we're lookin' for someone who's gone into hidin'. If ya worry too much about tryin' to save face and don't take care of the situation, you're gonna end up *losin'* face."

"You're right. Fine..." Milyna shook her head, dissatisfied at Bates's admonishment. She didn't seem content with relying on outsiders to get vengeance for their friends.

Bates chuckled and rested a hand on her head, giving it a rough pat. "Don't be disheartened. That Blade Whistler's on the move, so the bastard's as good as dead! You saw 'em, right? You don't come across a lot of guys with a presence like that at his age."

"Yeah, it was something all right. I don't think I could beat him, even though we're around the same age..."

Milyna's fiery red hair was becoming disheveled as Bates stroked her head, her voice fading as she trailed off.

Aw, crap. I didn't realize she was so sensitive.

Bates internally lamented at failing the promising young adventurer. He himself was a skilled man, so he was somewhat thick-skinned when it came to the mental weakness of being gifted.

Bright, talented, and as a result, mentally fragile, Milyna seemed to droop when faced with a true genius. Leaving her alone in her despair, Zig turned to Bates, wanting to know about a term that had caught his attention.

"So that 'Blade Whistler' you mentioned, is that Lyka's nickname?"

"Yeah, it's kind of like the Princess of White Lightnin', eh? That guy's famous for the speed and sharpness of his swing. Even Isana's said there's no one in the Jinsu-Yah whose blade makes as beautiful a sound as his."

The whistle of a blade was the sound a sword produced when it swung and cut through the air. The sharper and faster the edge of a sword sliced, the better trill it would generate. Although it depended on the weapon, skilled sword users could produce a blade whistle.

If that term had become Lyka's nickname, his skills with a sword must be exceptional. Zig didn't remember much from when they previously fought together because he didn't have the luxury of time to watch.

"Yeah, he's incredible." Milyna's eyes looked somewhat lifeless with her self-deprecating mutter. "Way more impressive than me." Her dejection was worse than Bates initially thought.

"Now, now, you're quite a big deal yourself! Right, Zig?! Milyna's not too shabby with a sword, eh?"

Bates's gaze wandered as he wondered how best to comfort Milyna before turning it on Zig who was sipping his tea like the matter had nothing to do with him.

However, the mercenary only offered a blunt response. "I'm not going to repeat myself."

"Huh? What's that supposed to ...?"

Bates had no idea what Zig meant, but Milyna knew exactly what he was referring to. The words he said to her when she first started running filled her heart. She raised her gaze to the large man, who appeared to only be drinking his tea with no trace of emotion.

He sounded dismissive at first—in fact, he was probably completely uninterested—but in Milyna's current state that indifference was comforting.

"Yeah, that's right."

She gently stopped Bates from rubbing her head and raised it proudly, messy hair and all.

"Bates, I'm okay now."

"Milyna?"

The insecure girl was gone, and her eyes shone with motivation. Startled by the sudden change in her demeanor, Bates shot Milyna a worried look.

"I'm going on a run," she said.

"What?! Right now?"

"I'll be back before it's time to eat! All right, Zig, thanks!"

The mercenary glanced at Milyna from above the rim of his cup, perfectly placed so that she couldn't make out the tiniest hint of his lips curling into a smile.

"Make sure to look ahead when you run," he said.

"Got it!" Milyna responded enthusiastically before exiting the guild, leaving behind a still-confused Bates who could only watch one of his junior members dash off. He turned to Zig, who was wondering what to eat for dinner.

"What in the world did you say to 'er?" Bates asked, suspicious.

"Exactly what you heard," Zig replied rather curtly. "To keep her eyes straight ahead and focused while she runs. That's all."

He got up from his seat, making a silent decision.

That settles it, I'm going to have meat tonight.

The sun had long past set, and it was late at night.

"La-la-lala-la!"

Siasha happily sang to herself as she walked the dark streets alone after finishing up her shopping. Her persistence in sticking around until late had been rewarded by finding something good. She was in an excellent mood, humming a little tune as her hair bounced around her.

Her jet-black hair, still glossy in the dark, otherworldly blue eyes, and pale

face—a perfect mixture of innocence and femininity—made her look ethereal.

Siasha strolled down the dim streets, a picture of vulnerability and radiating a devilish charm that could drive a man crazy. Normally, one look at the intimidating mercenary by her side would have returned them to their senses, but this time, he was nowhere to be found.

By a stroke of luck, this street wasn't a popular one—which was precisely why *he* found her.

The man hungered—his thirst unquenched. His name was Benelli Rasquez.

Benelli was strong. He was born with a talent for the sword, and the bloodbaths he dived into again and again honed his manhood, allowing him to achieve some semblance of status and prestige.

But he was also weak, drowning himself in his own ego and unable to cultivate the mental fortitude that should've grown along with his abilities. This was why he envied those above him and sought to find why he wasn't appreciated by others.

"The reason I get no recognition is because everyone else is incompetent. If only they could see me for what I truly am!"

He didn't like it. And he especially didn't like Alan, the younger adventurer who had achieved the same fourth-class status as him. Despite being younger, Alan was skilled and admired. Even famous adventurers held him in high regard.

Benelli didn't like any of that one bit.

Once upon a time, he had been in the same position—a skilled up-and-coming adventurer with high expectations and envied by those around him.

But eventually, he was cast aside when they saw through his arrogance, the laziness that came from only relying on his latent talent, and his immature mentality. His condescending attitude upset other adventurers, and he was always alone because no one else tried to team up with him. His pride kept him

from lowering his head to ask for help.

So his potential stagnated, and he hit his thirties before he even realized it. He was no longer the young man others saw with such high hopes. Perhaps it was due to his age, but he even found himself getting winded quicker these days.

It was due to his neglecting the basics as he grew up, but his misguided belief that aging was causing it only made him more frustrated.

The higher an adventurer's class went up, the more they could earn, but the difficulty of jobs increased accordingly. He was gradually hitting the limit of what he could do on his own, and his funds were starting to dwindle. Still, his pride wouldn't allow him to be seen by those who would look down upon him for accepting lower-ranking jobs.

These were his circumstances when he received an excellently timed offer from the mafia. Benelli jumped at the idea of landing a huge payday just for spying on a migrant tribe. He was aware that the tribe's children were going missing, but Benelli didn't really give a damn about that.

It's their fault for being weak, he told himself, pulling the wool over his own eyes as he continued to leak information.

Using the money he earned from the job, Benelli bought himself one new weapon. It didn't mean anything; he only bought it to explain his lack of growth for his own peace of mind.

Overriding the clerk's advice, he selected an unusual weapon that very few people used. There were two in stock, and without hesitation, he chose the green one with beautiful thin blades—it seemed more difficult to wield.

That mistake had been a blessing in disguise. Benelli was talented. Unlike the average person, he was able to quickly get the hang of the specialized weapon and even became decent at wielding it. Probably because he was feeling desperate—even if only temporarily—he actually trained with the blade in earnest.

"This is it!" Benelli chuckled, telling himself he was special after all. "As long as I have this...!"

The reason he was stuck at his current adventuring class all this time was because of his weapon! With this new one, reaching third class—no, even second class wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility.

Now I'll show them.

The adventuring guild who failed to recognize him despite his copious achievements and the various clans who never offered him an invitation to join...they would finally see. He would show them who was on top now.

Benelli's frustration dissipated after changing his weapon and earning some dren. The feeling of being able to make big sums of easy money further corrupted him, and he became saddled with debt after counting his chickens before they hatched.

But good things never lasted forever.

The man who had been his liaison suddenly terminated the job. Benelli, who was deep in debt by this point, desperately asked for more work, but they turned him down and he never heard another word from them again.

He had used up all the money he earned working those jobs by that point; all he had left were looming debts.

It was game over.

Benelli tried to drink his anxieties away that day before heading home in an intoxicated state. If he had been able to make it back to his lodgings with no incident, perhaps his future would have been dramatically different.

"Hmm?"

Making his way home, he noticed a few adventurers hanging around. They were all still young but surprisingly poised and carrying decent equipment despite their ages. The sight of them made him remember when he used to be

like that. The dulled thoughts of his inebriated brain twinged with agitation.

He clicked his tongued loudly. "Get out of the way, you stupid brats!" he yelled.

The sight of the young adventurers alone was enough to vex him, not to mention he could tell immediately that they were skilled. Young, talented, and surrounded by companions—all things he found detestable.

Benelli menacingly raised his voice, his heart unable to bear the feelings of frustration and irritation.

Hearing the cursing from some drunk man, one of the young adventurers furrowed his eyebrows in displeasure and glared back.

"What's the deal, old man?" he snapped.

One of the short-tempered adventurer's companions backed up and cleared the way, trying to discourage his friend from getting into a fight.

"Come on, cut it out. We're in the wrong for blocking the path. Sorry about that."

"Damn punks!" Benelli scoffed.

The young adventurer's attentiveness to the situation further rattled Benelli's nerves, making him positively furious. He made sure to purposefully ram his shoulder into their group as he passed, even though they stepped out of the way.

"Why you...!"

"Wait, calm down!"

Another of the short-tempered adventurer's companions stopped him from trying to bite Benelli's head off. A third seemed to realize that Benelli was a fellow adventurer from his ensemble, the young man's eyes resting on his top-grade equipment.

"Look at his weapon; it's quite well-made. He's probably a high-ranking

adventurer."

"Oh? Seriously...?"

The young adventurers were rendered speechless in surprise, making Benelli feel slightly relieved. He was about to regain his self-esteem now that they finally noticed how wonderful he was when he overheard one of them say:

"But isn't Alan much better?"

"What?"

Benelli froze in place at those words. All the blood rushed to his head in an instant, and everything he saw was dyed in crimson. His heart was beating so loudly that the sound echoed in his ears, but he didn't have the mental space to care.

"I mean, look at him. That guy's fairly on in years, isn't he? He's got nowhere else to go but down—no future, right?"

The young adventurers hadn't noticed Benelli pause, their words continuing to deliver one devastating blow after the next because he wasn't looking at them.

"True. I doubt he could make many friends with that attitude; I doubt any clans would accept him either."

Benelli pretended he wasn't watching them. He felt something flare within, his heart reaching its breaking point. The limits of his reason were being broken by the reality that confronted him.

His high capabilities and over-inflated ego coupled with his extremely immature mental fortitude couldn't bear the reopening of old wounds.

"By the way, do you even know who he is?"

That was the moment something snapped inside him.

By the time Benelli returned to his senses, it was already too late.

Even a group of adventurers with high potential was no match for him, a man who had clawed his way to a fourth-class adventuring rank all on his own. It was a tragedy how the fates of the young men were dashed at the hands of a high-ranking adventurer who had lost himself and lashed out in rage.

Several of them were unmistakably dead. One that appeared to still be alive was seriously injured with a severed arm.

"Oh."

Well, now he'd gone and done it.

It's not like it was his first time killing someone; he had taken down some bandits when they tried to attack him. But what was this feeling? This flutter of excitement?

He killed the bandits because he was in a desperate situation, but he didn't feel anything then.

He could have gone after the survivors that tried to escape, but he just didn't care.

He started to laugh as he tightened his grip on his weapon—the double-edged sword. His body was burning with a strange elation. His expression shifted into one of joy.

I never realized how pleasant it would feel to kill those I despise, those weaker than me.

He began to laugh again—louder and longer this time.

It was at that moment a serial killer was born.

Benelli was strong, but he was weak. Therefore, he couldn't control his urges and couldn't resist—no, didn't resist.

"Yes...the perfect prey."

Benelli approved of Siasha with one glance. After all, he was a high-ranking

adventurer—he had bedded his share of good-looking women.

However, he immediately realized that there was something different about this one when he saw her at the guild. It was just hard to define that difference. Elegance? Refinement? No, it wasn't quite that, but no matter how many times he tried to find the words, none of them seemed to make sense.

But one thing was for sure: She was extraordinarily intriguing.

In the few days since he lost his sense of reason, Benelli had killed several other people—mostly women or young male adventurers—fulfilling his dark desires through slaughtering fledgling youths who still had their futures ahead of them.

It felt so good to trample the weak. No matter how many times he did it, he still couldn't forget the sensation of stealing everything away from someone who was begging for their life.

He began to pant.

Just the sight of that woman was making his breathing ragged. His palpitations intensified, and he became aware that his skin was covered in goosebumps.

How will it sound when she squeals?

He could feel his body churning at the thought of mangling that beautiful black hair.

"Settle down," he told himself. "It would be a waste for it to be over all at once. I need to take my time—savor her carefully."

For the time being, he needed to calm his heart and the double-edged sword he grasped, both longing to attack her then and there.

He continued to use the double-edged sword with its thin jade-colored blades since *that* day, but not for his usual work since it was so unique he feared it might lead back to him. However, the more notorious the incidents became, the more likely it would only be a matter of time before the armory he bought it

from released some information. And then suspicion would be cast on him.

Benelli planned to leave town once he made this kill tonight.

"This is almost too good to be true for my final quarry."

He had given up on the idea of targeting her because that large, dangerouslooking man was usually attached to her at the hip, but tonight it was as if she were being offered to him on a silver platter.

This was his lucky day. He began to close the distance between them, not bothering to hide the distorted smile that covered his face.

Not yet. Not quite yet...

He gulped some spit down his dry throat as he waited for the perfect timing with bloodshot eyes.

Just a little longer... Now!

The moment the woman entered striking distance, Benelli physically fortified himself and went for the attack.

The black-haired woman didn't even realize he was there.

He panted loudly, unable to suppress the emotion overwhelming him as he exhaled.

First, he would go for her legs, slicing them up so she couldn't get away before starting to incite fear by carving into her.

The woman finally turned around as he got close, but it was too late. She was apparently a very promising new adventurer, but as expected, magic users—who usually stayed in the rear—were slow to react.

She was all his. Feeling secure in his victory, Benelli moved to cut off the woman's legs with the delicate jade blades, when—

"Huh?!"

That's when he saw it—her blue eyes flickered with a mysterious glow.

His entire body froze as a bubbling sensation ran up his spine, preventing him from acting. Or rather, it was his sword that had been halted. The two blades he tried to use to cut off her legs were blocked by a column of soil that had risen from the ground.

"What's going on?!"

He had been stopped, his sword blocked just by this simple column of soil. Not wanting to concede, he pressed the blade in further, and while it made a slight dent, cutting through it didn't seem to be possible. Just how much mana was condensed into that waist-high column?

"Are you by chance..."

Benelli's head jerked up at the first words the woman spoke, and he looked at her.

His gaze landed on her face. Her beautiful face—as dangerous as it was lovely. She was gazing back at him.

"...trying to kill me?"

Her eyes were like a pair of dazzling blue jewels, glass orbs that offered no emotion he could read. How could he have been so mistaken about the reason why his heart raced when he saw her, the reason she gave him goosebumps?

It had been his instincts warning him.

He let out a terrified yelp. Seeing the witch's eyes up close made Benelli's face contort in terror.

Still, it was perhaps his raw talent that made his reflexive action the correct one. As if propelled by great fear, Benelli distanced himself from her immediately before a stake drove up right under where he had been standing. If he paused a moment longer, it would've skewered him.

It only took one look to realize this was strong magic, but the speed at which she was casting it was unreal. It shouldn't have been humanly possible.

"Oh? You've got surprisingly good intuition."

Siasha cocked her head to the side, looking slightly surprised that he avoided her magic.

What was normally a cute gesture now looked creepy, like how an insect might occasionally tilt its neck. Benelli's hair was standing on end as he spluttered in fear:

"Wh-wh-what the hell...is she...?!"

He had only seen two displays of her magic, but they were more than enough for Benelli to understand the woman standing before him was more dangerous than any monstrosity he had ever faced.

"Even so, you seem half-hearted about killing me. Are you seriously going to try it?" Siasha asked suspiciously since he wasn't trying to attack her, before she realized that thinking about it was pointless and ceased to let it concern her.

"Either way, since you've turned your blade on me, I'll be taking your li—huh?"

When the witch looked back at Benelli to strike him with magic, he had already turned around and fled the scene.

He was sprinting at full speed. Determined to escape like a fleeing rabbit, he quickly put a large amount of distance between them.

"What?! W-wait up! Weren't you the one who started this?!"

Siasha never expected someone to attack and immediately flee the scene. Having been caught by surprise, she tried to launch a follow-up attack, but it was hard for her to aim in the darkness of the night.

She could have prevented him from getting away by reducing the whole area to rubble, but that wasn't an option for someone who had decided to blend in with the human world. Since it would be impossible for her to chase down an adventurer who was a fighter specializing in close combat, Siasha resigned herself to letting Benelli get away.

"Huh? What was that just now...?"

After being attacked by someone who escaped before she had a chance to fight back, all Siasha was left with was a feeling of unfulfillment.

Zig wasn't interested in the bounty that Lyka and the Wadatsumi clan were pursuing. If the misconception about him using an unusual weapon was cleared up, he didn't intend to interfere in the matter any further.

Of course, in the unlikely scenario that the culprit showed up right in front of him, he might consider trying to take him in, but he wasn't planning to actively look for the guy.

"Oh, by the way, some strange man attacked me just now."

That was until he heard those words.

After her shopping trip, Siasha stopped by Zig's room to tell him she had been attacked, almost like she was making small talk about spotting a dog along the way home.

The mercenary, who had taken off his equipment and was in his casual wear, immediately stood and lifted Siasha up, who looked at him mystified. Holding the grown woman up like it was nothing, he began to turn her around, examining her for any injuries.

"I think it was probably the man they mistook you for—the one who killed those adventurers, right?"

Siasha was used to Zig's inspections by now, and she let him twirl her around as he pleased while she told him what happened.

"But, well, his murderous intent seemed incredibly half-hearted. As soon as I stopped one of his attacks, he ran away. What in the world was he trying to do...? Oh, I'm not injured, Zig."

"Seems like it."

The mercenary put Siasha back down, satisfied that she had no external injuries. She seemed to be happy as she started to pinch and prod at his forearm.

"What do you mean that his murderous intent was half-hearted?" he asked.

When he flexed his arm, Siasha made a disappointed moan, poking at the hardened muscle.

"Um, I have no doubt that he meant to kill me, but it was like his purpose was different? Like he wasn't prepared enough? He tried to aim for my legs first. It almost seemed like a game compared to the sharp desire to kill I sensed from opponents when I lived back there."

"Hm..."

On the other continent, she would have encountered those who wanted to kill her because she was a monster—a "witch." It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that the murderous intent directed toward one human by another felt warm in comparison—she mentioned it felt half-hearted or unprepared.

Considering that he aimed for her legs...

"He's a pleasure killer."

Siasha seemed puzzled at Zig's statement as she fished around for the items she bought.

"What's that?"

"They're rare, but they have a unique preference—deriving pleasure from killing people."

Siasha raised her eyebrows dubiously. It wasn't a gesture of displeasure or disgust; she simply didn't seem to understand.

"What's so fun about killing people? It can be a little comical to see them crucified by a stake, though."

"I'm just relieved that's not a preference you have."

A bloodthirsty witch would be unmanageable, he added only in his mind.

"There are different types of pleasure killers," he continued. "Since you said he ran away as soon as you fought back, he's probably the type who enjoys harassing those weaker than him."

He said there were various types, but most of them fell into that category. People like Lyka, who enjoyed when his target put up a fight, were far rarer.

"Hmph. Sounds pretty pathetic if you ask me..."

Despite being the one who had been assaulted, Siasha was already losing interest in her attacker. With her nonchalant reply, she found what she was looking for and held it out to Zig.

The item appeared to be a brilliant vermilion comb. Its unique design seemed similar to the clothing that Isana and Lyka wore.

Zig understood the gist of why she was handing him the comb. It wasn't that their relationship had reached a point to where one could understand what the other was thinking, but it was that she simply didn't know how to ask for help.

The proof was in the way she tilted her head in confusion, not knowing what to say as she offered it to him.

"U-umm, well..."

Even as her bodyguard, Zig was under no obligation to brush her hair, of course. It should be no issue if he refused. The mercenary was perfectly aware of this, but when he saw Siasha stammer as her blue eyes darted back and forth, he reached out for the comb.

"Oh..."

Even though she had been the one to offer, Siasha seemed surprised as Zig's rough fingers took the vermilion comb from her pale hand.



She said nothing, turning to sit on the bed, facing away from him. Zig, who had never properly held a comb in his life, started brushing her black hair. He moved it carefully and slowly through her soft waves as if he were handling a fragile object.

Siasha's black hair caught the light of the magic item she was using. It felt dewy to the touch, like threads of silk.

The movement gradually became smoother with each repetition. When he first began, Siasha's shoulders had been stiff like she was nervous, but now she seemed to be comfortable.

Zig couldn't see it from where he was sitting, but she was perfectly at ease, almost like she'd forgotten someone attacked her not that long ago. That was about as much value a serial killer held for her.

But the same couldn't be said for Zig.

Even if the attempt had failed, the man who threatened the person he was supposed to be protecting was still alive—and he needed to do something about it.

Hmm...

Zig felt a little boredom setting in as he combed through Siasha's glossy hair. How long would he need to keep it up until she was satisfied?

In the end, he continued to comb her hair until she softly started snoring. He then carried her to her room.

Under the cover of darkness, a figure dashed through the quiet nighttime streets.

"Damn it! What the hell?!" he exclaimed through ragged breaths. "What the hell was that?!"

Benelli couldn't help but utter one curse after the next as he recalled what

had just happened.

His plan should've gone off without a hitch! It should've been a simple hunt that destroyed his vulnerable and exquisite prey. But that wasn't the reality of the situation. Benelli had been forced to shamefully flee for his life.

There was probably distance between them now; it didn't seem like she was coming after him. But no matter how far he ran, it felt like he couldn't escape.

"Damn it! Damn it all to hell!!"

Those blue eyes haunted his memory whenever he tried to stop, forcing his tiring legs to start moving again.

Still, he couldn't keep going forever. Benelli stopped in his tracks, his body desperate for oxygen since he hadn't paced himself as he ran. He coughed and spluttered through labored pants.

As he stood there almost choking while trying to catch his breath, he turned around fearfully. All he saw behind him were dark and empty roads; it didn't seem like anyone was giving chase.

His sigh of relief came from the very bottom of his heart. Suddenly, the fatigue he had momentarily forgotten about came rushing back, and he collapsed to his knees.

"Son of a bitch! Why'd this have to happen to me?!"

Now that he was aware the danger had passed, anger replaced his fear. A desire to get his revenge against that woman came bubbling up, but he didn't have the balls to face that gaze of hers once more.

"Looks like it's the end of the line for me here. I'll leave this town tomorrow."

He could move quickly now that he decided his plan of action. He would get all of his things together during the afternoon and depart under the cover of night.

"In the meantime, I need to take a break..."

He needed to recuperate his body that was exhausted from running, and his incredibly fatigued spirit. Benelli started to walk again, albeit unsteadily, as he made his way to a place where he could rest.

The next morning, Zig began to gather information so he could search for the culprit.

Siasha couldn't remember anything about him when he asked her for a description. She remembered he was a man and his general height, but no other defining features beyond that.

According to her, men all looked the same.

Unless it was someone she was particularly curious about, the witch didn't even register human faces, and they were all identical in her eyes. Zig wasn't sure if this was a biological characteristic of all witches or just because Siasha herself was uninterested.

Her attacker was a man who was taller than her, and he wielded a twinblade. Even though she had looked at his face directly, that was all the information Zig got from her.

"I doubt the perpetrator thinks the person he attacked has this little information on him."

The man hadn't concealed his face since he had so much confidence in his skills, but Siasha had seen him point-blank. Although she didn't remember anything, Zig was sure the man believed he had been seen.

As long as he hadn't totally lost his marbles, the guy was probably preparing to flee during the night. In the worst-case scenario, he might already be gone. But if there was a possibility he might still be around, Zig planned to search for him.

In order to do that, he set out to find the people that would likely have the most information.

He entered the western part of the shopping district, the area lined with shops that sold supplies for adventurers, walking through it until he reached the Wadatsumi clan house. He opened the door and let himself in. Since Zig was big enough to call attention to himself, the people who had been chatting inside turned to look at him. They reacted in one of two ways to intruder's presence: suspicious glances or immediately standing in surprise.

"Don't mind me. Is Kasukabe here?"

Now that he had everyone's attention, his request was succinct. He wasn't speaking loudly, but his low voice cut through the room.

"H-hey, you! What do you want?!"

A middle-aged man hurriedly got up from his seat, standing in front of Zig as he reached for his weapon, putting himself in a position to protect the young adventurers who didn't understand what was going on.

"Calm down. I have no intentions of violence, and I already said what I'm here for. There's something I want to talk about with Kasukabe."

To show that he meant no harm, Zig slowly leaned his weapon against the wall, but his action didn't put the man at ease.

The mercenary may not have recognized this man, but he remembered Zig quite well. Even without a weapon, this large fellow had taken down a whole crowd by himself while still having the ability not to kill them.

It was etched in his memory along with the pain of the sword pommel he had taken straight to the head.

Once he regained consciousness, Bates and the others had told him the whole thing had all been a misunderstanding. But even if he knew that was the case, the combat abilities of this big man hadn't changed. There was no way he was going to relax around him just because he set his weapon down.

"Kasukabe, you say? Hold on... Hey!"

"Uh, on it...!"

The man called out to a young man behind him. He ran to the back, following orders even if he didn't understand what was going on. All the while, the man didn't take his eyes off Zig, remaining vigilant and ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

"You sure seem wary of me..." Zig said with a shrug, careful to not further provoke the man as he slowly crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. Meanwhile, another adventurer who also seemed aware of who Zig was evacuated all the clan's younger members to the second floor. It seemed to be true that they valued their youngsters; their movements were neither faltering nor hesitant.

Once they had gotten everyone else out, Zig wished the remaining members wouldn't have felt the need to form a half circle around him as he leaned against the wall. There was nothing fouler than being surrounded by a bunch of middle-aged men.

"Pfft! Hahaha! Foul...huh? Guess I'm spoiled now..."

He couldn't help but chuckle at his own thoughts. Back on the other continent he had been surrounded by other men as a matter of course. Although he hadn't spent that long of a time with the frighteningly beautiful witch, it must've left a deep impression on him.

Zig's sudden loud laughter made the men even more nervous, but he strangely didn't feel like stopping himself.

The back door banged open along with the sound of something being knocked over. Kasukabe pushed his way through the men, beads of sweat trickling down his face. It was notably lacking his usual amicable smile.

"Zig, I'm so sorry to keep you waiting! Come into the back."

The middle-aged adventurers looked like they were about to protest Kasukabe offering unconditional passage, but he silenced them with a hellish stare. His expression then completely changed, and he beckoned to Zig with a welcoming grin.

Rather impressed by his speedy and dramatic transformation, the mercenary stepped away from the wall and followed him. As soon as they stepped into the other room, Zig wasted no time and made his request.

"I want information on the person who attacked the Wadatsumi clan members."

Kasukabe's eyes grew wide. "Are you going after the bounty as well?"

"No. He attacked my client. She wasn't harmed, but I have no reason to let him live. I'm going to kill him."

There was no trace of anger or hatred in his tone; it just sounded like he was going to carry out a mundane task—removing an obstacle that was interfering with his work.

"Although, I suppose I could collect the bounty while I'm at it," Zig said, realizing he could kill two birds with one stone.

Kasukabe only offered him an ambivalent smile in return.

"I heard you're even offering a reward," the mercenary continued, "but is everyone really okay with that? I thought Milyna and the others wanted to settle the score themselves."

"Well, I'm not a fighter myself. If whoever committed this crime is dead, I don't care how we get our revenge."

The clan administrator then further clarified that the ones who wanted to get vengeance were those who had the means to fight. Zig could neither affirm nor deny that statement. He had companions die before, and he also killed the people who killed them. But that was because those people were his enemies, not because he felt the need to avenge their deaths.

It wasn't that he didn't feel a sense of camaraderie. He might never feel sad about their deaths, but he did consider the loss to be a shame. Despite that, as someone who spent his days changing sides depending on who was paying, Zig never cultivated a sense of retribution.

That was why he had been able to kill Ryell.

Zig frowned slightly as he recalled those events.

Would things have been different if I was who I am now? he wondered before shaking off the passing thought.

"So it's information you're after, right? I'll get the documentation we have right now."

"I appreciate it. I'm not saying it'll be a substitute for doing it yourselves, but I can at least bring back his head."

Kasukabe was about to turn down Zig's gruesome proposal with a wry smile, when—

"That won't be necessary."

They were suddenly interrupted with the opening of the door. A man strolled through: Bates, the oldest of the Wadatsumi clan adventurers.

"Bates... I didn't realize you'd returned," said Kasukabe.

"Sorry, Kasukabe, but I need to see the bastard offed with my own eyes,"
Bates said, his eyes full of remorse for the death of his comrades. "It's the least I can do to take some responsibility for lettin' people under my care die."

He had told Milyna it was a necessary evil the other day, but the veteran adventurer himself didn't seem to have given up yet.

He smiled broadly as he turned to Zig. "So that's my reason. I won't say ya can't take a shot at 'im. I know ya have your own reasons for not bein' able to step aside. So, how does lendin' me a hand sound?"

The mercenary didn't answer. Instead, he squared up Bates with a gaze that clearly said, "What about the reward?"

In response, the older man held out his right hand and raised two fingers on his left.

"You get the bastard's information as a deposit, and all the reward money for

successfully completin' the job."

"Done."

He met Bates's outstretched right hand with a slap, sealing the deal. This contract didn't need to be in writing; it was a verbal agreement between two acquaintances—that's why it carried such weight.

"All right, let's get ya that information straight away... Kasukabe."

At Bates's request, the clan administrator went to gather the documents. He seemed to have shifted his demeanor when he realized the veteran adventurer wasn't going to back down. Being flexible and getting work done quickly were his strengths; they came in very handy for the Wadatsumi clan.

"Including the incident with our clan, we believe this murderer has struck four times, five if you count the unsuccessful attempt on Siasha."

Zig sat back in his chair as he listened to the information Kasukabe was reading aloud.

It didn't sound like this perpetrator had much patience, committing crimes at a brisk pace. Not many days had passed since the rumors started to spread, and Zig sighed—half in shock and half in disgust—at hearing this man had made five random attacks in that short a time.

"He uses a green double-edged sword. It's a sharp weapon that leaves deep cuts and slashes. From observing the bodies, it doesn't seem like he kills them immediately and there are signs of torture. The attacks were done near back streets spanning the east to west districts. All his targets have been younger adventurers, but they have nothing else in common beyond that."

As he continued to explain, Kasukabe spread open a map with several markings. The crimes took place in spots that Zig had passed by several times during his runs. Just as the clan administrator said, there didn't appear to be any relationship between the locations or victims—it seemed like this guy was just attacking people indiscriminately.

"Of course, I asked around about double-edged swords users, but no matter who I talked to, the only information I received seemed to be referring to you..." Kasukabe trailed off apologetically.

"Ya do leave quite a strong impression..." Bates nodded as if that was just to be expected.

When comparing an average-looking human to a large and muscular man with a height of 6'5" and a perpetual stoic expression, it was understandable why the latter might stand out more than the former, even if they were using the same type of weapon.

"Regardless, even if ya attract lotsa attention," Bates went on, "double-edged swords are uncommon. It's strange that there ain't any information at all. Which means..."

"It's likely that he usually uses a different weapon?" Zig said, making the older man snap his fingers as if to express, "You got it!"

The mercenary knew exactly what the man was trying to say. "He uses a different weapon as a facade, while also wielding a twinblade...I mean, double-edged sword. There are only so many people who are that dexterous."

"Right," Bates agreed. "We just need to figure out how this guy got 'is hands on that sword... But even if we go to each armory and explain the situation, it'll be dark before we've finished makin' the rounds."

Both men—one an executive member and the other the administrator of the Wadatsumi clan—visibly slumped at the thought of lacking that one piece of pivotal information.

Hm? Zig thought, furrowing his brow. He just realized there was something important he had forgotten to tell them.

"About that... I think I know something."

And just like that, he dropped a surprising statement. Suffice it to say that when Kasukabe and Bates heard his words, their expressions were, well,

"Why didn't he say somethin' earlier ...?!"

They had come to the armory based on Zig's hunch, but Bates couldn't help but moan and groan while standing at the storefront.

He watched Zig and Kasukabe speak with the shop owner's daughter. She had staunchly refused to give out personal information on a customer at first but relented after seeing the wanted notice and hearing Kasukabe's detailed charges against the man.

"If only we'd known this before... Damn it all! But I guess ain't nothin' to be done 'bout it now."

Bates knew his cursing was misguided. The situation had been different then.

By mistakenly attacking Zig, far from finding the culprit, the Wadatsumi clan had put their own survival at risk. The mercenary didn't even have time to tell them that someone else had purchased a double-edged sword, and with Siasha bursting in right in the middle of everything, any opportunity to get the information out there was swept away.

Getting upset at Zig was just barking up the wrong tree. Bates knew he hadn't kept quiet about it on purpose, and even if he had, he wasn't obliged to offer up that information to the people who attacked him. It was just bad timing, that's all.

That's why the veteran adventurer was angrily stomping around outside where Zig couldn't see him. That would be the end of the matter.

"I need to change my mindset, focus on findin' the bastard—and only that," Bates told himself as Zig and Kasukabe returned to where he was waiting after they finished talking to the clerk.

The older man could only hope that the mercenary would overlook the bitterness that lingered in his gaze.

"We got a hit, Bates," Kasukabe said. "It was purchased by a high-ranking adventurer."

I figured as much, Bates thought, his glare intensifying.

A unique or high-quality weapon for adventurers... Neither of those conditions were a big deal on their own, but if the item fell under both, it was a different story entirely.

If a civilian bought a unique, high-quality weapon made for adventuring, they would eventually be tracked down. Even if they weren't completely sure, it was highly likely their culprit was someone in the same profession.

"We need to head to the guild. They shouldn't be reluctant to give consent now that we've got this much information. This is gonna end in bloodshed. Ya should go back, Kasukabe. Siasha was attacked yesterday... If the guy has half a brain, he'll try and skip town tonight."

"It's Benelli Rasquez, a fourth-class adventurer. He's skilled in combat but has some personality disorders and has been cited for problematic behavior on multiple occasions. Based on his abilities alone, he's at the point where he could be considered third class, but he hasn't been able to make much upward progress due to his bad conduct."

At the guild, Zig and Bates pushed their way through to the reception desk to pressure the staff into disclosing information. The other adventurers weren't okay with someone suddenly cutting in front of them, but the older man silenced them all with a glare.

The younger ones looked petrified with terror, while the veterans, alarmed by Bates's unusual behavior, stepped aside to let them pass. After Sian, one of the guild's receptionists, gave them the information they sought, Zig posed a question.

"Even if there's some bad conduct, won't an adventurer's class go up if they

successfully complete their requests?"

"That's applicable only until they reach fourth class. For anyone third class and above, a level of discernment is required. Honestly speaking, they're all things you'd already expect from a normal person, and they usually aren't penalized unless their behavior is quite abhorrent..."

But decent people don't choose to become adventurers, so I suppose expecting common sense from them is too much to ask, she thought.

Sian put away the documents with a dry laugh and turned back to the two men with an anguished expression.

"Still, I never thought he'd go so far off the rails as to start killing people," she said. "There's no doubting it with all the evidence you've gathered; I'm certain he's the one behind those random murders."

The guild didn't divulge information on their adventurers lightly, but it was a different story with all the evidence stacked against him.

They had victim statements from both the Wadatsumi clan and Siasha, plus the history of him purchasing the unique weapon he used to commit the crimes. With clear evidence available, the guild had no grounds to refuse disclosure.

"We're aware that an adventurer named Benelli has been living around the brothels recently," Zig said. "That period perfectly overlaps with the random killings. It's too much to believe that it's just a coincidence."

"Sounds like you've been doing your homework."

"I have connections."

Thanks in part to advice he received from an old friend, Zig's network was surprisingly vast. He had made good connections with people working at brothels—where men tended to leak information. After leaving the armory to head over to the guild, he stopped by one to ask if they knew anything about someone named Benelli. Still, he got the feeling his client wasn't going to be too

pleased when he came home reeking of perfume.

"Understood. I'll give you the name of the place where he's staying and the room number." The cold statement sounded strange coming out of the usually cheerful receptionist's mouth.

It could only mean that the guild had cut all ties with Benelli. They weren't such a benevolent organization that they would shelter someone who repeatedly killed his peers.

"In any case, please try capturing him first. If he doesn't put up resistance, that's fine. If he does resist..."

"Are you kiddin' me?" Bates laughed ferociously as he turned to leave the reception desk. "That bastard better try to put up a fight!"

Sian said nothing more as she watched him walk away.

By the time the two men left the guild, it was already starting to get dark. Zig ran alongside Bates, who started running the moment he got outside. They made their way toward the inn at the edge of the eastern district where Benelli was staying.

"Sounds like they want him captured alive?" Zig asked.

"What a fuckin' joke," Bates responded with a disgusted shake of his head.

The mercenary already knew the veteran had no intention of letting the culprit escape with his life. A clan that allowed someone who murdered their own to live put themselves beyond ostracization.

But even if that wasn't on the line, Bates was so filled with murderous rage toward the attacker that even he couldn't suppress it.

Benelli was staying at a small and lonely inn on the outskirts of the east district. He had lodged at a nicer place before, but his sluggish growth as an adventurer and increased frivolities with women and booze forced him to change to a lower-ranking accommodation. It was in that room that he was

preparing his belongings to leave town.

"All right, this should about do it."

He had spent the entire day sorting out his possessions and exchanged them for portable magic items and gems. He could've fled immediately but found himself unable to leave all the money and equipment he accumulated behind. He was a man who held greed above safety, choosing to focus on the money right in front of him rather than the danger that he could face at any time.

"It's the end of the line for me here," he swore under his breath, cursing the town where he lived for many years as he left the inn. "Not like this place is any good for me anyway."

It went without saying that he was leaving without paying his lodging fees or the massive debts he owed. His mind was already focused on what he needed to do next.

"It'll probably be harder for them to pursue me if I'm near Striggo. That place is so dangerous and overrun with drugs, it'll make a great place to hide. Yeah, there're rumors that there's some weird narcotic getting popular over there, but it'll be a decent place to take cover for the time being."

Benelli walked along, remembering the city overtaken by a drug epidemic due to the mafia's overreach.

He stopped short at the sight of a lone woman.

"Wha?"

Judging from her demeanor and equipment, she was probably a novice adventurer. She had long hair and wore robes typical of a magic user.

Even at first sight, it was obvious it wasn't her. Their statures may have been vaguely similar, but there wasn't any other resemblance. However, the memory of the woman from last night haunted Benelli as he looked at her.

By reflex, his right hand moved to grab his weapon.

This certainly wasn't the time for distractions; even the guild would start

feeling the pressure soon. Reason said as much, but if his grip on his baser instincts wasn't so weak that he couldn't suppress his desires, he never would've been in so much trouble in the first place.

The only thing running through his mind at that moment was venting his frustration by destroying this woman who reminded him so much of that terrible monster.

"I can always leave town immediately," Benelli mumbled to no one in particular as he set down his things and silently drew his weapon. "It shouldn't be a problem for me to stop...and have a little snack."

For this novice adventurer to be living around the dangerous outskirts of town, she probably didn't have much money.

Poor unlucky little thing, he thought as his face twisted into a smile. He, on the other hand, was very lucky.

He licked his dry lips and stomped on the ground before dashing toward her. In the blink of an eye, the green blade swung to close the distance as he moved, intending to slash off his prey's legs. She didn't even sense his approach.

But...it ended the same way as the previous night.

Something red moved out of the corner of his eye, and noticing it, Benelli immediately changed the trajectory of his double-edged sword.

"Fucking hell! Why do I keep getting interrupted?!"

"That weapon..." Milyna, the red-haired swordswoman who had sliced at the man, growled through bared teeth. "The random attacker...it's you...!"

She had come upon him completely by accident.

Boredom had prompted her to go for a run, and when she spotted a man in the distance with a large pack and a strange air about him, she got curious. Seeing him drawing his weapon, she rushed in to try and stop him. It was then she saw what kind of weapon he was wielding.

"You killed my friends!"

"Why do things never go right?!"

There was a discrepancy in their conversation, but now they both had a reason to turn their swords on each other.

"Huh? Ohh ...?"

The female magic user still didn't seem to understand what was happening.

She'd heard a metallic clashing sound and turned around to see two people she didn't know crossing swords. Since she was still a novice and not yet used to these displays of violence, she was slow to react.

"Get out of here!"

"Eeeek!"

Initially stunned by the fight that suddenly broke out before her, the woman finally dashed away in a panic at Milyna's roar. The swordswoman didn't have time to watch her escape as she repelled the man's two blades and tried to create some distance.

The man she faced glared at her, his gaze oozing with murderous intent as he held the weapon in a low stance.

He was strong. She knew that much just from how he carried himself and the one strike he made earlier. She had seen this adventurer before. She didn't know his name, but she had observed him interacting with her older brother, who was also an adventurer. He was certainly above her in rank. Probably fourth class like her brother, maybe even higher.

Still...

Milyna tightened her grip on her longsword.

"I'm not going to back down!"

She physically fortified herself and launched straight into an attack, delivering a wide swing of her longsword down from her shoulder as Benelli moved.

Taking a step back and moving away from her, he met her sword and parried it

to the side with the double-edged sword's upper blade that was ready from a low position. Then he launched forward using the same foot, slashing the lower blade toward Milyna's right side.

His upper blade hampered her attempt to recover, and she didn't have time to pull it back to defend—this was one of the dangers of using a longsword. She immediately let go with her left hand and recited a short incantation, producing a burst of fire magic.

Double-edged swords struck in a sweeping motion, but this also meant they lacked power. That was enough to weaken the attack's momentum.

She used the explosion of the fire to retreat, the tip of the blade only nicking her armor.

"Haah!"

"Ngh!"

It was only a single exchange of blows, but it was enough that their faces showed opposing expressions as they both became aware of the difference in strength.

Realizing that his opponent was inferior to him, Benelli went on the offensive, swinging the upper blade up from its initial lowered position and stabbing at her neck. Milyna deflected it with her blade, her eyes widening with surprise at how weak the blow felt in comparison to its speed.

He feinted another stab, the lower blade closing in on her, but she was able to fend it off by pulling the longsword back. Again, the blow felt light. She managed to block the lower blade, but Benelli stepped back again, using the upper blade to stab at her once more.

The double-edged sword grazed her shoulder as he pulled it back, and the extraordinary sharpness of the thin blade was more than enough to cut her.

"Ahh!" Milyna exclaimed at the rush of heat and pain spreading across her shoulder.

"Tch! Too shallow. Damn instincts."

Benelli annoyedly clicked his tongue, unsatisfied at the inadequate result.

Milyna could feel the cold sweat on her brow. If she had ducked any slower, he could've cut clean through her shoulder muscles. Even if she could use regenerative magic, healing a large muscle that had been cut through took a lot of time. Pushing through the pain was one thing, but having one arm rendered useless by severed tissue was life threatening for a sword user.

They were at completely different levels of experience.

Milyna had intended to fight back, but she realized she had been too naive. It would probably be impossible to run away as well. This wasn't the type of man who would let go of the opportunity an opponent gave by turning their back to flee.

An unbeatable enemy. The fear of death should have been creeping over her.

But strangely, Milyna harbored a different feeling. At that moment, frustration was the only emotion filling her heart. Her opponent was strong, there was no doubt about that.

"But...superficial."

"Huh?" Benelli responded to her words in a hoarse voice.

That's right. It was superficial. Compared to his prowess with the blade, his physical strength was overwhelmingly lacking. Even in their previous exchanges of push and pull, he probably could've overcome her if his blows had been stronger. She was still alive despite their differing experience levels.

The more talented you are, the harder it is for your strength to keep up.

That's right. This man was strong but shallow. That's why it was so frustrating that she couldn't beat him.

"You have all that talent, and yet, you devoted yourself to frivolities. You would've gone so much further if only you'd made a serious effort."

"You know nothing about me, wench!"

Benelli's eyes glazed over at her blatant goading. She figured as much. It wasn't just his body, his heart was also weak—it took so little to get him riled up.

"Bring it, old man! Can you keep up with me and all my youthful energy?"

"You little punk!"

Overcome with anger, Benelli put all his murderous rage toward his blade and swung at her. Milyna parried it with all her might. The more Benelli lost his composure, the more his double-edged sword lost its bite.

"That's all you've got, is it?!" she quipped, though she was barely hanging on by a thread. Still, she managed a smile and scoffed at Benelli in a show of bravado.

"Don't you dare laugh at me!"

To Benelli, being mocked by a talented young adventurer was unbearably humiliating. The rage dulled his blade, extending Milyna's survival in turn. This further frustrated him, sending him into a negative spiral.

Their swords glinted in the darkness of night, accompanied by the echo of metal clashing.

How many times had she staved off her opponent's attack by now? Considering the difference in their combat prowess, Milyna was putting up a good fight. But there was still a clear distinction in their abilities that she couldn't deny.

The swordswoman was only buying time by defending. The cuts she suffered from being unable to fully push back some of his attacks were dyeing her body and clothes in red. Even if she managed to heal her wounds, she couldn't replenish the blood she had lost. Both her mana and stamina were steadily being depleted.

She had reached the limits of her mana pool, and her body, moving on pure willpower, was beginning to ignore her commands.

"Hff... Hff... That's a good look on you, bitch."

Benelli was out of breath, his face twisting into a sadistic smile as he took in the sight of Milyna's wounds. She seethed when her body refused to move but still managed to shoot the man a dauntless glare.

"I don't like that expression of yours, but I wonder if you'll still be able to make it once your legs are gone. Shall we find out?"

He brazenly flaunted the double-edged sword.

"You think I'm gonna let you die peacefully? First, I'll take off one of your legs... Oh, don't worry, I'll patch up the wound so you don't bleed out. After that, I'll chop off your fingers one at a time, slice open your stomach, and stuff them inside of you!"

He grazed the double-edged sword, already stained with her blood, against her leg, making another cut. She breathed in sharply, her expression slightly wavering out of pain and fear.

Seeing her look scared for the first time, Benelli chuckled.

"Yes, that's it. That's what I want to see! I can't get enough of it..."

He then swung the double-edged sword, aiming for Milyna's ankle.

"The weak should fear the strong. All they're good for is trampling down!"

"I completely agree."

He heard a voice, but where had it come from? His shuddering body moved before his mind could process what was going on. Kicking off the ground with all his might, he sprang away.



In less than an instant, something large crashed down exactly where he had been standing. He was able to avoid the brunt of it by hurling himself to the side, but his ear didn't completely make it out of the way. He felt a chunk being sliced off.

A loud boom and a cloud of sand accompanied the impact, the unmaintained ground fracturing with cracks that looked like spiderwebs.

There had been tremendous power behind that attack. If Benelli had moved only a fraction of a second later, his entire body and not just his head would've been smashed like an egg.

"Fucking hell! Now what?!"

The man readied himself in a stance to see what had fallen from the sky. He thought it was perhaps a large boulder created by magic, but standing in the center of the cracks was a human silhouette.

"Just remember this. Power will inevitably be destroyed by an even greater one."

The enormous shadow moved, unsheathing his blue double-edged sword as he prepared to face Benelli.

By the time Zig and Bates arrived at Benelli's inn, he was nowhere to be found. The landlady told them that he left not too long ago, carrying a large pack. Just when they were about to split up and start looking for him, a young adventurer spotted them and asked for their help.

She was running away after a man had suddenly tried to attack her but was stopped by someone else. It seemed like she had gotten away as fast as she could because her voice came out in ragged breaths.

"A red-headed swordswoman...came to my aid... I don't know if she'll be able...to handle him..."

Bates's face went pale at the mention of those specific traits.

Understanding from her words that time was of the essence, Zig asked the girl for their approximate location and ran off ahead of the veteran adventurer. He took the shortest possible route—running over the roofs of the buildings—and didn't even have time to pull out his weapon before trying to crush the perpetrator with a stomp.

"Are you okay, Milyna?!"

Less than thirty seconds after the mercenary arrived on the scene, Bates caught up with him and protectively stepped in front of her.

"Bates, sorry, I..."

"Don't say a word," Bates said. He examined Milyna's wounds, his eyes shooting daggers at Benelli as his voice took on a beastly growl. "You did good. Now... Nnghh...

"We finally meet, ya son of a bitch," Bates said fiercely, gripping the hilt of his axe so tightly he was almost crushing it. "I'm gonna tear ya apart piece by piece with my own two hands!" But then he paused. "Sorry, Zig. I know I just ran my mouth...but I leave 'im in your capable hands."

The tension lifted from Bates's shoulders as he entrusted the fight to Zig, who was already facing off with Benelli.

"Are you sure?" the mercenary asked, not taking his eyes off his opponent.

"This is your chance to take your long-awaited revenge." He was sure Bates had been waiting for the opportunity to avenge his clan mates.

"I hate that man with all my guts. I'd love to rip 'im in half, but..."

Without hesitation, Bates turned his back on his opportunity for vengeance to hand Milyna a medicine imbued with regenerative magic.

"Instead of avengin' my friends who have already passed, it's much more important for me to protect one that's still alive."

The dead weren't coming back; getting revenge wasn't for them—but for the people left behind. Even amid the storm of violent emotions, Bates never made

mistakes when it came to his priorities.

Zig shot Bates a fleeting sideways glance, a thin smile forming as he said four words.

"Leave it to me."

"Sorry to keep you waiting," the large man who had suddenly fallen from the sky said. He crouched down. "Shall we begin?"

Benelli said nothing, only grinding his teeth as he faced his opponent. The large man had apologized for making him wait, but the other man hadn't just been idly standing around as they spoke. As soon as they showed up, he began looking for an opportunity to escape.

But there was a reason why he still hadn't moved from where he stood: the large man standing directly in front of him.

His vigilance was impeccable. It seemed to be his natural state; he wasn't consciously on his toes. There just didn't seem to be any weaknesses that Benelli could find in this man's awareness.

There was a saying: *Always on the battlefield*. It meant to always be combat ready, or more simply, to never let your guard down.

But how this man was holding himself almost seemed like the complete polar opposite. Even in this fearful environment, where a battle to the death could erupt at any time, he was acting like it was just another moment in his everyday life.

Perhaps the battlefield was his everyday life.

There seemed to be plenty of opportunities for him to escape, but the alarm bells in Benelli's head were ringing, telling him he'd be dead as soon as he turned his back on this man.

"You mentioned that the weak should just let themselves be trampled on, am I correct?"

"Heh, what of it?" Benelli said mockingly. "You didn't care for that statement? Let me guess, you're going to tell me that it's the duty of the strong to help the weak, right?"

He had heard more than enough morally upright sermons. He hated them. The strong helping the weak—what a load of bullshit. He couldn't understand why someone as powerful as him had to accommodate those who were vulnerable.

"I already said it—I completely agree with you."

"What do you mean?" Benelli couldn't help but ask for clarification.

Zig chuckled to himself. "In this day and age, the weak are in the wrong. If they don't want to be trampled, they must become stronger. There's no value in righteousness not backed by power."

A twisted smile spread across Benelli's face as he listened to the mercenary speak. It looked like he found a kindred spirit.

If I play my cards right, I just might be able to get out of this, he thought.

"Hah! Well, well, well. I see you're a man who knows what he's talking about. What do you say, want to team up—"

He was about to suggest they join forces when Zig cut him off.

"That's why it's your turn to be trampled down like the weakling you are."

His statement crushed Benelli like a heavy rock.

"What?"

He didn't immediately understand what this man was trying to say.

Weak? Who's weak? He can't be talking about me...can he?

As those words sank into him, Benelli's eyes flashed with anger.

Zig took the opportunity to taunt him by making a beckoning gesture. "Come and get me, you halfwit. There's a price to pay for choosing the path you did

without thinking it through."

"Bring it on!"

The mercenary readied himself as Benelli dashed toward him in a fit of rage. The green and blue twinblades that once lined the shelves of the armory met once more—this time, in combat.

"Die! Die! Dieeeee!"

Flying like an arrow, Benelli ran at Zig, flourishing his double-edged sword. His swift movements and whirling attacks made him appear like a storm in human form. A downward slash to a backward thrust, a sweeping stroke with the hilt tucked at his side—he stabbed at the mercenary who had taken a step back.

Benelli was a whirlwind of green as he violently swung in all directions. Zig parried and dodged the sharp blows, but he didn't try to counter.

"Hahaha! Do you still think I'm weak now?!"

Emboldened that his opponent wasn't attempting to fight back, Benelli furiously increased his flurry of attacks. Watching his skill with the sword, Zig nodded in agreement.

"You're quite impressive considering that you haven't been using this type of weapon for very long."

"Oh, so you realize that now, you imbecile! But it's already too late!"

Wielding a twinblade was an incredibly difficult feat. Not only was it a long weapon, but handling something with blades on both ends demanded an unimaginable amount of mastery. Since the user could only grip it in a small area, it required different techniques than a stick or spear, even if they looked similar.

And Benelli had mastered it—he was the real deal.

"That's why you're weak."

To Benelli's surprise, Zig stepped into his barrage of attacks and blocked.

Although the move was just for defense, it stopped his rotations. The green blade froze. His power was due to the blade tip's swirling attacks, but if another weapon was in the way of the bottom blade, he wouldn't be able to spin.

"Why...you!"

Benelli tried with all his strength to pull his weapon back and recover, but Zig's twinblade didn't budge. He tried to shake him off using a push-and-pull weight shifting technique, but it also didn't work. The mercenary was holding down the other man's double-edged sword with just the sheer strength of his arms.

Even if someone could get far with their skills, some strength and conditioning were still required. Just like a baby couldn't win against an adult, techniques alone weren't enough to bridge the gap in power.

Zig never took the physique he was blessed with for granted and never failed to train and develop his skills. Talent didn't make you grow physically stronger or develop fortitude.

Benelli had indulged in his extraordinary talent and grievously neglected the basics.

"You're weak," Zig said with a tone of indifference, enraging Benelli even more. "Corroded by your own talent."

"Gaaaaaah!"

Benelli roared, amping his physical fortification up to its limits, and thrust Zig's sword away. Along with his talent, the man was also blessed with a large amount of mana that was enough to compensate for his negligence, but it was only a temporary fix. No matter how much you fortified yourself with magic, a weak body wouldn't hold out for very long.

Ignoring his arms that were screaming in unbearable pain from overuse and forceful strengthening, Benelli threw off Zig's blade before launching a counterattack.

A perfect strike.

The man put his talent on full display in this last, desperate moment. Going out of his comfort zone to show how proficient he was, he spun the thin blade in an elegant arc toward the mercenary's right shoulder.

"Nice try."

Benelli's blow was met by Zig Crane—the mercenary who had defeated a witch. He vigorously thrust the lower blade of his weapon upward to meet the other man's strike.

An upward slash versus a downward one. With gravity on its side, the latter should have the advantage, but the blade that was repelled was Benelli's.

All this was due to the weight difference between the weapons, honed technique, and most of all, an overwhelming gap in physical strength. Even an exemplary display of talent couldn't compensate for the strength of his strikes.

Zig moved to counterattack for the first time. Taking a step forward with legs so strong they caused the earth to cave when he struck the ground, he swung his raised twinblade down as if it was being pulled by gravity.

"Crap!"

Sensing the force behind the blow, Benelli retreated in a panicked frenzy.

His judgment was quick, but he was half a step short of avoiding the slash. The difference in stride and arm length due to their physical disparity, as well as Zig repositioning his hand to the bottom of the handle as he swung the twinblade down, was enough to get into his guard.

It tore through the barrier he had thrown up using his magic item, colliding with the double-edged sword Benelli had instinctively raised to defend himself. The shock of the impact made him feel like he was floating, almost like he was hit by a carriage and sent flying.

The low vibration in his stomach didn't seem like it was caused just by sword meeting sword.

"Nnhga... Hff..."

The air escaped from his lungs. He had managed to hang on to his weapon, but his double-edged sword was now sharply bent in the middle. If the handle hadn't been made from the bones of an extremely robust monstrosity, it probably would've been sliced in half.

This was the result of directly taking just one of Zig's forceful blows.

"You fucking mon...ster..."

Benelli was kneeling on the ground, and he looked up at Zig. Even after avoiding all of the enraged man's attacks and delivering that staggering blow, the large man wasn't even out of breath.

"Like I said, power will inevitably be destroyed by an even greater one."

The disgraced adventurer frantically tried to move his numb arms, using his bent double-edged sword as a crutch to rise to his feet.

"That's what it means to choose a life of trampling the weak. Preying on others comes at the cost of becoming the prey yourself. Survival of the fittest—that's the path you chose."

Managing to somehow support himself on his trembling knees, Benelli gave a laugh that sounded like there was something stuck in his throat.

"Haah! Haha! That means...the day will come...when you become the prey too! You really think you're some big shot, huh?!"

This was unforgivable. This man was cut from the same cloth as him! And yet, he was recognized by others, relied on, accepted. What was the difference between the two of them?

"You're also someone who got to where he is by forcefully trampling on the lives of others!" Benelli lamented, his voice echoing as he forced the words out. "What's so different about what you and I are doing?!"

Zig gave an ironic laugh, remembering how he slew his former comrade-inarms. "We're not different. You and me." He had only made it as far as he had by using countless lives as a stepping stone. He knew that far better than anyone else.

Which was why—

"You're the one I'll trample next."

As if those words were a signal, the two men moved at the same time. Both aimed for the other's neck, two flashes of lightning that held no sense of self-preservation and only sought the demise of the other.

Streaks of green and blue, two arcs in line to cut off their enemy's head. They only met for a moment...and only one continued to stand.

A blade sang as it sliced through the air.

In a beat, the dark of night was dyed with a spray of blood. A single line dripped down Zig's cheek before he was drenched in a curtain of red.

Fresh blood ran down his face, dripping to the ground as the now headless body crumpled over with a dull thud. The head flew through the sky before landing in a bloody puddle with a sickly wet smack, joining the corpse.

"I'll be taking that," Zig said, flicking the twinblade to shake off some of the blood before picking up the head that was Benelli's. He was about to close the eyes—still open wide with surprise—but stopped. That was too good for him.

The life of Benelli Rasquez, a fourth-class adventurer gifted with talent, had come to a disappointing end.

"So what are you going to do now?" the mercenary asked, glancing over his shoulder.

The figure who had been hiding in the shadow of a building for some time finally showed himself. The young man wore disheveled robes and had red eyes and pointed ears.

Lyka smiled as the moonlight shone down on him.

"Aww, man, you beat me to it," he said, although he didn't seem particularly

surprised. "I had no idea you were getting in on the action too, bro."

Lyka gave Benelli's headless body a dismissive glance. His gaze was bored and cold, staring at the corpse like it was nothing.

"Still...what a bore." The young man turned toward the head Zig was holding with a sneer. "Killing others as he pleased but never preparing for the possibility that he'd be killed himself until the very end."

"Sorry. Feels like I stole your kill."

"It's generally first come, first served in the world of bounty hunting. Sucks that I lost my prey, but there'd be nothing enjoyable about killing a half-hearted fool." Lyka shrugged. He really didn't seem bothered, or more accurately, he didn't seem interested. Unlike Benelli, Lyka only gave a damn about killing strong opponents. "How about you make it up to me by having a match someday? Yeah...that would be far more entertaining."

Without waiting for a reply, the young swordsman waved a casual goodbye and disappeared back into the darkness.

"It's done?"

Turning in the direction of the voice, Zig saw Bates carrying Milyna on his back. He had been able to perform first aid on her wounds, but she still hadn't recovered all the energy she lost. Her pale face rested on Bates's shoulder as she slept.

Zig wordlessly held up Benelli's head.

"Good. Now they can finally be..." Delight flooded Bates's face at the sight of his enemy's head, but there was a lingering sadness in his eyes. "Still, it's an empty feeling. Revenge, that is."

The happiness was only for a moment before his expression sank once more.

"Just because he's been killed, it won't bring our dead companions back..."

"Right."

Zig didn't have the right words for him. Only superficial expressions like "revenge is justified" or "it brings closure to those left behind" came to mind. But as someone who didn't truly understand the meaning of revenge, the mercenary was hesitant to offer those phrases.

In some ways, war was a cycle of revenge. People whose families and comrades were killed in battle got their revenge by killing the enemy country's citizens. The relatives and companions of those killed would kill in revenge.

That was one of the essences of war.

Mercenaries could be considered a hired vanguard unit of revenge. As someone who had participated in his fair share of it, Zig felt a great irony in the fact that he still didn't understand what it was.

The mercenary stuffed the head into a sack and shouldered his twinblade as he got ready to leave.

"Still, you were able to protect her this time."

His words prompted Bates to glance at Milyna, who was still slumped over his shoulders. He had been able to rescue her *because* he didn't lose his desire for retribution. Because he acted on his desire for vengeance, he had been able to save a life.

"You're right," Bates said proudly, treasuring the warmth he felt on his back.
"I suppose all's well that ends well."

Compared to all the uproar the situation caused, its resolution was rather anticlimactic.

Zig turned the head over to Bates, and his reward money was delivered the day after. For whatever reason, Milyna was the one to bring it to him. Her arrival caused Siasha to put on a menacing demeanor.

But...it was what it was.

"You took on another job?" the witch asked Zig as he combed her hair. It had

gone wild when she intimidated Milyna.

Siasha's threatening presence had made the other woman shrink back pitifully, but the young adventurer still managed to properly express her gratitude for the previous day.

"That wasn't my intention...but I guess it ended up that way."

Money was required to make sure he had suitable equipment for adventuring work. If he couldn't earn coin from participating in wars, it didn't hurt to have as much capital as possible. A cordial relationship had been born from misunderstanding, and it almost seemed like a strange twist of fate that it had led to him being offered work.

He had often heard from senior mercenaries that connections with others would usher in jobs. Now he realized that was nothing to scoff at.

"Hey, Zig..."

Breaking out of his thoughts and realizing he had been slow to respond, Zig finally answered. "Hm? What is it?"

Siasha turned around, her blue eyes locking with his. "Umm...do you ever think about...wanting to go back to the other continent?"

She looked apprehensive. Even if it was only for a moment, seeing the fragility in her expression made him forget that she was a witch. It was easy to get the wrong impression from her usual cheerfulness, but Siasha wasn't that emotionally stable. She just didn't react to things she wasn't interested in.

On the other hand, such a question from her meant that she was interested in Zig's inner workings and thoughts, proof that she was trying to learn more about him. In other words, she was worried.

Since the mercenary never really showed his emotions, she wanted to know what he was thinking and how he was feeling. That's what it all came down to.

"Hmm..." Zig murmured.

The deputy leader who took him under their wing had said never changing

your expression on the battlefield was an advantage, even if you were in a tight spot. But no one ever taught him how to handle a client who was acting distressed in a situation like this.

Even though he didn't show it, Zig felt a little flustered as he wondered what he was supposed to say. Seeing him remain silent, Siasha became even more anxious.

This isn't a good equilibrium, the mercenary thought. In that case...

The witch's shoulders jerked as he moved. Setting the comb aside, Zig placed his right hand on her head, not minding how startled she was as he sloppily stroked her hair.

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"U-umm..."
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Zig interrupted Siasha before she had a chance to speak. "When I first heard this place didn't have wars, I worried about how I was going to make ends meet." He still hadn't come up with the right thing to say, but that probably wasn't a big deal. "But I'm still finding leads for work here and there, and I get to see fancy tricks like magic every day." The mercenary didn't feel displeased with his current life, so he just needed to put that feeling into words. "It's not bad."

With that, he removed his hand from her head and picked up the comb again, gesturing with his chin for her to turn back around.

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"Okay."
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Zig went back to combing her disheveled hair. He had somewhat gotten the hang of it compared to when he first started, but he couldn't—nor did he intend to—check Siasha's expression since she was facing away.

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"Zig... Zig..."
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"What is it?"

"You can pull a little harder."

At her request, Zig pulled the comb through her hair with slightly more force,

though still with care. The awkward atmosphere from earlier was now completely gone.

"By the way, the man that attacked you is dead now."

When the mercenary changed the subject, Siasha almost cocked her head to the side in surprise but stopped herself, remembering that he was still working on her hair.

"What? Oh wait, that did happen, huh?"

She didn't have a very strong reaction, perhaps having already processed the matter in her mind and on her way to forgetting about it.

"Well, something like that."

People who preyed on others were devoured by the strong and promptly discarded. It was a suitable ending for people like Benelli and himself.

"I wonder how long I can keep this up."

"Zig?"

He continued to comb her hair, telling her it was nothing when he heard her react to the thought he didn't mean to voice. One day, he would be gobbled up by someone stronger than him—someone he couldn't beat—and die.

But that was fine. He was prepared for it; he had made his peace with that destiny long ago.

But as he looked at Siasha comfortably squinting like a cat that was being petted, he had a thought.

At least...at the very least, I have to protect her.

"Because it's my job," he added, as if he just remembered.

Afterword

This is the author, chohokiteki kaeru. it's good to see you all again.

First thing's first, I wanted to express my gratitude for your support—it made releasing the second volume of *Witch and Mercenary* possible. After speaking with my editor about releasing it without too much of a delay after the first, it ended up being a tight schedule, but I have no regrets.

It goes without saying that people want to read books they're looking forward to as soon as possible. I remember stopping by my local bookstore often as a student, searching high and low as I checked the lists of books being released in the next month to see if I could find the continuations of series that I liked. It's still hard for me to believe that now I'm the one keeping readers waiting—but it's the truth, isn't it?

This second volume follows Zig and Siasha, who have finally gotten the hang of adventuring work, poking their noses into or getting wrapped up in conflicts around the town. Whereas the first volume featured more encounters with monstrosities, the second one has more human combat—Zig's specialty. Still, being in a different land also means dealing with the new and confusing, so struggling with different views, misunderstandings, and clashing with troublesome forces is inevitable. I hope you look forward to seeing how Zig and Siasha navigate dealing with these challenges in the future.

Those of you who read the web novel version may have thought, "Is this where that foreshadowing is going to be revealed?!" Ha ha ha! Foreseeing that one day a novel version would be released, the foreshadowing I hinted at paid off splendidly. Such is my prowess in composing! Terrifying, isn't it?

...Just kidding, that was a lie. I just reselected a few hints of foreshadowing I'd thrown out there that I felt could be elaborated upon when writing in some

additional content.

Seriously, how could I have ever predicted that such a niche book where my personal preferences were on full display would ever be turned into a novel? When I saw a huge advertisement that was about 7.5 meters long in Akihabara, I remember getting nervous—albeit far too late—as I thought, "Maybe this is a bigger deal than I realized?"

And on top of that, it's been decided that *Witch and Mercenary* will also be getting a manga version with art by Miyagi Makoto! I'd only known his name, but I fell in love at first sight with his lively illustrations and how cutely he drew Siasha. I was under the impression that it would be difficult to depict both Zig's stoicism and Siasha's adorableness, and the latter would probably need compromises, but I should've expected as much from a professional. He surpassed this amateur's half-baked knowledge effortlessly.

No, seriously. Siasha is really cute. I'm waiting with bated breath for it, just like the readers. I'll also try to release the third volume as soon as possible so that I don't keep you waiting too long, so I hope you look forward to that in addition to the upcoming manga.

Lastly, to my editor who always politely points out the inconsistencies in my writing and story; to Kanase Bench, who always complies with my detailed requests; and to everyone who has aided me in various ways, as well as my ever-supportive readers...

...Thank you always for your support. I will continue to work as hard as I can.



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