

17

BLACK SUMMONER

ACADEMY BATTLEFRONT

AUTHOR:
DOUFU MAYOI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY:
DaiXt
KUROGIN (DIGS)

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IT WAS AN
ENDLESS
DOWNPOUR
OF SLASHES,
FORMING
A RED
WALL THAT
COVERED
EVERY INCH
OF THE
STAGE AS
THEY RAINED
DOWN.

BAKKE

“MELTING
TALON
RAIN.”

GRAHAM

“CAVE
KANNON.”

A DIVINE GOLEM
MANIFESTED, FUSED TO
THE STAGE. IT LOOKED
UP AT WHERE BAKKE
WAS-AND STARTED A
BARRAGE OF PUNCHES
WITH ITS MANY ARMS.



“MAGNETIC NOVA!”

RION

RAMI

RION CALLED HER GIGAS KERAVNOS BACK TO HER, AND RAMI DID THE SAME WITH THOR'S NIMBUS. THEN THEY CHANGED THE FORM OF THE LIGHTNING INTO SOMETHING ELSE. THE NEW SHAPE WAS A GIANT BALL.



BLACK SUMMONER

Characters

Kelvin Celsius

Summoner who gained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life while transmigrating from Japan. Constantly seeking battle with powerful foes.

Alias: Grim Reaper

Kelvin's Companions



Efil

Kelvin's slave and a high elf girl.

A perfect maid, her love for her master included.



Sera

A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service.

Daughter of the previous Demon Lord. Ignorant and knowledgeable in equal measure.



Rion Celsius

A Hero summoned by Kelvin who became his half sister.

Has a rather skewed view of what it means to be a little sister.



Clotho

The first monster Kelvin ever took on as a Follower.

Its Storage and ability to create materials make it a key player!



DarkMel

The form DarkMel took when she made a contract with Kelvin while on the verge of death. She's cute, and that's pretty much it.



Melfina

The former Goddess of Reincarnation and perennially hungry angel. Currently enjoying the heck out of her angelic life as Kelvin's wife.



Gerard

The dark knight who serves Kelvin. Dotes on Ruka and Rion as if they were his own grandchildren.



Shutola Trycen

Trycen's princess. Currently freeloading at Kelvin's place. Every day is a blast!



Ange

Former Apostle. Now happily enslaved to Kelvin.



Bell Baal

A former Apostle. Made up with her older sister, Sera, after a fierce fight. Seems like a typical prodigy, but is actually pretty awkward on the inside.

Academic City of Lumiest

The school that Rion, DarkMel, and Bell passed the entrance exams for and now attend. The most famous and elite of schools.



Art Desire

The principal of Lumiest and a Rank S Adventurer with the title "Rimless." A vain dark elf. Seems to have a deep-seated grudge against Shin.

Labyrinthine Country of Pub

A country with multitudes of dungeons within its borders. Home to the headquarters of the Adventurer's Guild. Because of that, the average level of adventurers there is high.



Shin Rainyheart

The director of the Adventurer's Guild and an active Rank S adventurer with the title "Freedom." Former Fifth Seat Apostle. A violent lady who assaulted Kelvin on first sight.



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ILLUSTRATOR: DAIXT, KUROGIN (DIGS)

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Chapter 1: School Life of Dreams

The day of Lumiest Academy's entrance ceremony was a special day, one where the entire city would be whipped into a noisy celebration. Every gate set in each of the cardinal directions would see increased traffic, and security would be even more stringent than when Kelvin and the others had visited before.

Of course it would be; the entrance ceremony meant that leaders of various countries, their children, and their relatives would be gathering in one place. It was an event that rivaled the promotion ceremony of a Rank S adventurer, and to common people, it was a chance for them to lay eyes on future kings and other VIPs. It was a huge event, which was why everyone, from curious rubberneckers to people with ill intent and everything in between, were rushing into the city.

However, inspections at the gates had become stricter to compensate. It was common knowledge that during this time, everyone other than those directly affiliated with the city would have to be able to prove they were who they said they were and have a firm goal for coming, or they would be turned away. So why was it that commoners all traveled to Lumiest during this time despite that?

"Wow, so there will be stalls even outside the city." Rion sounded interested as she looked out from the carriage they had taken from the inn.

"Yep. Naturally, inspections during this period are a lot stricter, so it's really hard to get in. Back in the day, people would just go home, but look, there are a lot of big shots who want to stand out, right? Since they can't dismiss the commoners who came all this way to see them out of hand, at some point those people started to camp out outside the walls. Once that started happening, stalls from various countries were set up, and now it's basically a festival in its own right. Now most of the people who once wanted to see the big shots show up just to have fun," explained their driver, Rudo.

“The festival seems really fun. If mama was here, she’d definitely try to go around all the stalls!” DarkMel exclaimed.

“Ha ha ha! There’s too many of them to be able to see in one day, I tell ya,” Rudo laughed. “After all, it goes all the way around the entire Academic City!”

“Aha ha, that might not be as impossible as you think...” Rion muttered.

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing. Don’t worry about it. Still, doesn’t that mean they won’t be accomplishing their original goal of being able to see the new students? I mean, they might get lucky and see some of us passing through the gates, but almost all the new students, like us, come to Lumiest the day before,” Rion mused.

“Well, you see, that’s not what they’re here for anymore. You know Gaun’s coliseum has that magic item that can show images, right? Recently Gaun’s been lending it out for money, and it’s been placed in the middle of the camp. Thanks to that, people outside can watch the ceremony too, and I hear that every year, the festival only gets bigger,” Rudo explained.

“Wow, it’s sounding more exciting by the minute!” DarkMel exclaimed.

“Images, huh?” said Rion. “The fact that they’re doing it for money sounds a lot like the Beast King. It’s a cunning move.”

“It’s Leonhart-sama we’re talking about, after all,” Rudo reasoned. “I want to learn from his business acumen too.”

During their conversation, Rion and DarkMel’s carriage reached Lumiest’s academy district. They still had some time, but they could already see other carriages parked here and there. There was a lot of variety in the horses and the carriages they pulled.

“Wow, so this is what diversity of culture is like,” DarkMel remarked. “Just looking at the differences in the carriages is fun.”

“Yeah, it makes me want to sketch them all!” Rion agreed.

“Heh heh! That curiosity is a great mindset for people joining the academy. Okay then, this’ll be it for me. I hope you two enjoy your school life to the fullest!” Rudo said.

“We will! Thank you so much, Rudo-san!” Rion answered.

“Thank you very much. Please say hello to Tsubaki-sama for us,” DarkMel added.

With that, Rudo’s mission had been completed successfully. Now, it seemed he would move to the campsite outside the walls to try to find other work. After seeing him off, Rion and DarkMel made their way to where the entrance ceremony would be held.

“Whoa there, beautiful ladies. Are you two lost? Ha ha! I guess I’ve got no other choice. I, Vaccania’s third prince, Charles Vaccania, will show you the way. The way to love, that is!”

A wild, tanned boy suddenly appeared in front of them. Rion was confused by his words, and DarkMel immediately became shy in response to the sudden entrance.

“Uhhh...”

“Oh, I see you’re trying to get to the introductions already. That makes me happy! But wait a second, allow me to guess. Let’s see... It looks like you two’ve been the center of attention for a while now, judging by your carriage. It has a novel shape but excellent functionality and boasts higher performance than any other carriage here...so it must be from a very large and prominent country! And it seems like fate; both of you have black hair just like I do. People with this hair color are rare, after all. Someone as learned as I am could guess where you come from just based on that. Putting together all of my information on you two... Right, you must be part of the Fujiwara clan, the royalty of Toraj!”

“Nope!” Rion replied.

“Heh, too bad. Fate is a fickle mistress. I guess it won’t be so easy to get her blessing.”

“Urgh...” DarkMel shivered. She was hiding behind Rion’s back. It seemed the prince’s nonsensical words had scared her.

“Now that you mention it, you’re right,” Charles went on. “You girls have white skin; it seems I’ve made a careless mistake. Man, Charles, when will you learn?” he jokingly rebuked himself, absolutely refusing to read the room. He

pulled right up to the hidden DarkMel to get a look at her face and come to his own conclusion.

“Sorry, DarkMel is scared, so could you give her some space, please?” Rion tried to be polite.

“Okay, I get what you’re trying to leave unsaid. You mean she’s so in love with me that she’s scared of how deep her feelings are, right?” Charles asked.

“Umm...that’s not quite right...”

It was surprising to them how little effect their words seemed to have. It wasn’t just DarkMel—this also went for Rion, who could normally get along with anyone. It was her first time meeting someone of his type; he was somewhat like Sinjeel, only much more egotistical and relentlessly positive.

“I understand. I don’t want to be scaring people with how utterly charming I am either!” Charles barreled onwards. “That’s right! As a sign of our friendship, how about I teach you about the new students to watch out for!”

“Watch out for?” Rion repeated.

“Huh?” DarkMel only grew more wary as she thought, *Isn’t such a person already in front of us?*

“That’s right, the people that call for caution. Not everyone in school is as friendly as I am, you see. Can you spot that carriage decorated in blue and white over there? The one with a pompous man getting out of it right now. He even made sure to use white horses; how thorough of him! It’s truly unpleasant. His ulterior motives are clear as day!” Charles managed to sound genuinely disgusted.

DarkMel was a little confused, thinking, *Is this some sort of maximum effort bit or something?*

“His name is Edgar Lauzer, and he’s the prince of Leigant, the ice country. He’s your typical ambitious type who thinks power and authority are everything. Originally, Leigant was the most powerful country on the Western Continent after the Rizean Empire, but their forces were split due to a need to monitor the Dragon King within their own territory, so they couldn’t maneuver as they pleased. Recently, though, it seems like the Dragon King has moved. So now,

Leigant can shuffle around their armies as they please, and they're applying pressure to other countries. And now, during this time, they're sending their blackhearted prince Edgar to Lumiest. There's got to be some plot behind it, I'm sure of it!" Charles asserted.

"I see. You're really knowledgeable, Char-kun. Wow!" Rion always tried to see the best in people.

"Ch-Char-kun?! Uh, erm...of course!" Charles stammered, surprised. "I am Charles Vaccania, after all! You can ask me anything!"

He must have been shocked that Rion was honestly happy with the information, as Charles was now flying high. It seemed Rion had already taken hold of his reins.

"Wow, Rion! So this is what people mean by 'a woman's touch'!" DarkMel exclaimed, impressed. The wonderful way Rion had handled the situation greatly relieved her.

"Hey, Char-kun, what country is that carriage from?"

"Heh heh heh! Allow me, the carriage expert, to tell you! That carriage is... It's..."

However, Charles, with his uptrending mood, was quickly rendered speechless. The carriage that passed across his vision had a terribly devilish design, pulled by headless horses wreathed in strange purple flames. It could very accurately be described as a stygian carriage.

The entrance of this unusual carriage saw Charles falling flat on his ass. It seemed not even his extremely polished brand of positivity could hide his surprise at the unexpected sight. As if to laugh at the prince, the two headless horses neighed.

"Oh? Well, if it isn't Rion-sama and DarkMel-sama. It's been too lo— Well, actually, it hasn't, but this is still a coincidence. Keh heh heh." Someone in a formal uniform disembarked from the driver's seat. It seemed he knew Rion and DarkMel.

"Ah! It's you, Victor-san!" Rion exclaimed.

“So, you were the one driving this thing. You’re very good at controlling horses!” DarkMel was impressed.

“Keh heh heh, I haven’t lived this long for nothing. There’s no need to worry. My driving abilities don’t come from a skill, but from years of experience. I haven’t eaten anyone for it,” Victor assured them.

“Aha ha! You’re so funny, Victor-san!” Rion laughed.

“Hee hee, your jokes are really good,” DarkMel agreed.

The girls immediately identified the driver as Victor by his unique laugh, and now they were having a friendly chat.

“Huh?” Charles sputtered, dumbfounded. “Ah, uh...do you two...*know* that man?”

“Yep! We know him well!” Rion answered.

“We’ve been to his house too,” DarkMel added.

“I... I see...”

“DarkMel-sama, that phrasing is somewhat misleading. The castle is not my house, but my workplace,” Victor clarified.

Regardless of this detail, Charles’s reaction would have been the same. The students around them, having noticed Victor, gradually began to cause a commotion.

“Uh, hey, isn’t that a demon?”

“So, the rumors that a student from a demon country would be coming this year were true...”

“Demons can speak? I thought I heard somewhere that they were strong but not very intelligent?”

“Idiot, that’s just lesser demons! That guy—no, that *demon* is way higher in rank, obviously!”

“But even a lesser demon is threatening enough that it needs an entire order of knights to be dispatched, right? If the new student is even higher in rank, how strong will they actually be?!”

“Well, that’s...”

“Whoa there, it seems I really do have too much of an impact on people. I’ve messed up! Keh heh heh,” Victor chuckled.

“You do affect people, Victor-san, but those horses aren’t much better in that department, you know?” Rion said.

“Wow, if you look closer, the purple flames around them are shaped like faces!” DarkMel exclaimed.

The horses neighed questioningly.

“Oho, as expected, you have good eyes to have noticed that,” Victor said, impressed. “Among the mid-ranking demons, they are especially fleet of foot —”

A lovely and somewhat unhappy female voice came from inside the devilish carriage. “Victor, chatting is fine, but how long are you going to make me wait? Since when did you become so great that you could ignore me?”

“Oh no! My apologies,” Victory replied immediately. He opened the door in a huge rush before kneeling. “Please, Bell-sama.”

“Hmph!” Bell huffed. “I left this to you because I thought you’d be better for the job than Sebasdel. I wish you’d live up to my expectations. I’ll still give you passing marks, though.”

“Your words give me the greatest joy.”

The figure to emerge from the carriage was, of course, Bell. Just like Rion and DarkMel, she was wearing Lumiest Academy’s uniform, and was currently the center of attention of all the students. After all, the horns, wings, and tail she’d kept hidden during the entrance exam were now out for everyone to see. She had taken off her Clip of Camouflage, which would normally have disguised her features, so she stood out all the more.

There was a reason for this, however. She had worn the clip to avoid negatively influencing the other exam takers. It had been her way of showing consideration to others on their exam days. But it was no longer necessary, so Bell had decided to enter Lumiest boldly, as royalty of a demon country. The

principal, Art, had already given the decision his stamp of approval. In fact, he had outright said that he wanted her to come to school without disguising herself.

“You look so cute in your uniform, Bell-chan!” Rion gushed.

“It really suits you,” DarkMel agreed.

“Aren’t you two wearing the same thing?” Bell muttered, embarrassed.

“Thanks, Victor. This is far enough.”

“Are you sure?”

“You staying for any longer will make everyone more flustered,” Bell asserted. “Just give a decent excuse to papa. If he gets even a little worried, he’ll try to come here himself. I’m serious about that, by the way.”

“I understand,” Victor answered. “We had quite a tough time even trying to leave the country, after all. I’m being rather serious about that too. Keh heh heh heh heh...” With that, he bowed once and got back into the driver’s seat. “Sorry for causing so much fuss. Well then, everyone, please take good care of Bell-sama. I’m off!”

The flaming, headless horses neighed again and broke into a run as Victor drove the demonic carriage off in a dashing exit. Rion and DarkMel energetically waved their hands in farewell while the rest of the crowd, except for a rather prickly Bell, remained there with their mouths agape in shock.

Among them, a certain someone regained his wits faster than anyone else. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t Bell! It must be fate for us to see each other at this moment. Can’t you feel it?” Charles asked, having recovered from his confusion after being knocked on his ass faster than anyone could imagine.

Bell did not deign to answer. She did, however, finally notice his existence, which immediately made her mood hit rock bottom. “You two must have the worst luck, to meet this guy, of all people... Okay, let’s head out for the ceremony. His idiocy is infectious.”

“Heh heh! Idiocy? That’s quite bold,” Charles said. “It may not be obvious, but I had a pretty good score on the written tests. But I’m sure you knew that, Bell, as smart as you are. I can hear the screaming of your heart, so I won’t be

deceived! You're as coy about your feelings as ever— Huhhh?! She's already gooone?! But...come on, you don't have to be that embarrassed!"

Charles chased after Bell and the others, thus heading for the venue as well. The moment he started to run, though, he tripped and fell flat on his face. Even so, he wasn't disheartened as he continued to chase after the three girls.

There was one new student who had watched this exchange from beginning to end.

"Hmm, so that is Bell Baal, the student who stole the top seat from my personage. True, I can somewhat sense the temperament of a ruler like me, but...no, I suppose the more pressing thing is that the rumors of her being a demon were true," a white-haired boy muttered from his hiding place behind a conveniently placed pillar.

There were two other students who seemed like lackeys on either side of him, each on one knee and waiting. "Yes," one of them, a boy, answered. "We have no idea how, but she didn't have horns or wings during the exam. I was in the same exam hall as her for the first exam, so I'm certain of that."

"I see...so not only do we not know what kind of weapon she uses, but she also has an unknown power that can disguise her appearance. How interesting. I would love for her to offer that power to support the future of Leigant," muttered their leader in response.

"You're being too hasty, Edgar-sama. The entrance ceremony hasn't even happened yet. We know you are looking for a powerful wife, but it's a little concerning that your thoughts are matching that idiot prince from Vaccania," cautioned his other companion, a girl.

"Heh! Are you saying that my illustrious self is thinking on the same level as *Charles*? That is far too disrespectful, Perona. Still, that was a funny enough joke. I will forgive you." The white-haired boy clearly felt he was being magnanimous.

"Thanks!"

Axe, the boy with glasses and precisely parted hair, and Perona, the girl with a very lax and careless manner of speech, were the white-haired boy's

subordinates, though they were all new students. The leader was Edgar Lauzer, first prince of Leigant.

“Ah, but Edgar-sama...” the girl started.

“What is it, Perona?”

“According to my research, you didn’t just lose to that Bell girl in the exams. You lost to the girls next to her as well: Rion and DarkMel. Also, a large man named Graham and Rami, a flashy and easygoing girl who seems to be on my wavelength, both beat you too. And Rami was asleep for the entire first exam. You just barely scraped fifth place in total scores, Edgar-sama.”

The prince didn’t respond.

“Wha— Hey! Perona!” Axe chided. “You’re being far too disrespectful!”

“Whaaat?”

Axe seemed panicked, but Perona seemed as flippant as ever. As for Edgar...

“Heh... Heh heh... Heh ha ha ha ha ha! I see, so there are four girls who have surpassed my talent to become marriage material! This will take some work, then! But that just makes the future of our country even brighter!”

Neither of his attendants had any words. Just like Charles, Edgar was more optimistic than anyone would have expected.



Every year, Lumiest’s entrance ceremony was held in the main auditorium. This year was no exception, and new students were steadily gathering at the venue. Rion and the others had entered and were currently being verified by a receptionist.

“Good morning. Your name and notice of acceptance, please.”

“Yes! I’m Rion Celsius!”

“DarkMel Celsius.”

“Bell Baal.”

“Charles Vaccania!” An extra who came rolling in after them joined the girls.

“Okay, I’ve confirmed all of your names. Right, everyone, here are your student ID’s. From now on, you will be proving your identity with these, so be careful not to lose them.”

The receptionist handed the four their student ID’s, which were somewhat thick cards with nothing on them, not even their names or pictures of their faces. All that was on the card were characters that looked like the school emblem. None of the girls understood what the characters meant.

“Um...what’s this written on the ID?” Rion asked.

“It is emblem writing, developed by the school. You will be taught more about it later, so please go to your seats for now.”

“Okaaay,” both Rion and DarkMel answered in unison.

“This is the seating chart for the event.” The receptionist handed them papers printed with the layout.

“Hmm...we’re all separated from each other,” Rion noted.

“That’s too bad...” DarkMel lamented.

“Whoa, there! Rion-kun and I are seated pretty close. Should I take that to mean the instructors are rooting for us too?” Charles mused.

“Huh?” Rion was dumbfounded.

“Just ignore him, Rion. It’s a waste of time and effort,” Bell told her.

“Huh? Unlike everyone else, Bell-san’s seat seems to be a lot closer to the teachers...” DarkMel noted.

“It’s just your imagination,” the demon replied with a note of finality. “Come on, let’s go.”

The auditorium was huge and already filled with scores of new students. Many were making light conversation with those seated next to them. Students who were already enrolled didn’t participate in the ceremony, but those who were interested could obtain permission from the school to watch. Rion and DarkMel glanced up at the second floor, where they could see people who looked like upperclassmen here and there. One student whose uniform was entirely gold stood out significantly, but they decided to say nothing and

pretend they didn't see him.

"Bye!" Rion said energetically.

"See you," DarkMel replied.

"Adieu!" Charles butted in.

Bell sighed.

Since their seats were all over the place, the group of three plus their hanger-on separated for the moment to go to their designated places.

"My seat's there, I think?" Rion wondered out loud.

There was another new girl in the seat next to hers. She had chestnut-colored hair and seemed calm and gentle. However, it was immediately obvious that she was feeling really nervous from the way she was turning every which way, her eyes constantly darting to and fro.

"Hey! My seat's right next to yours," Rion said in greeting.

"Huh? Ah, ha ha...right! Please, go ahead!"

"Thanks! Man, the entrance ceremony is nerve-racking, isn't it? I'm Rion. Nice to meet you!"

"Oh! Uh, yeah...right, my name is Dorothy. Um...pleased to meet you too!"

"Dorothy? Dorothy... Dorothy... Dorothy... Okay then, you'll be Thee-chan!"

"Huh?! Thee-chan?!"

"That's right, Thee-chan. You can call me whatever you want too!"

With that, Rion got the girl to calm her maxed-out nerves, and the two quickly became friends. It took less than a minute from their meeting for conversation to bloom.

Heh heh, I am a man who can read the room, after all. Getting in the way of two lovely girls and their budding friendship isn't stylish or something I would ever do! Charles thought to himself. *For now, I'll just burn this sight into my memory and love them visually! Heh heh heh heh...*

He was having this internal monologue from two rows behind Rion, his eyes

shining. The male student next to him was totally creeped out, but the prince didn't pay him any mind.

Meanwhile, DarkMel, who was a ways away, had safely reached her seat as well. However, that was when a problem occurred.

Uhhh...hrrrnggghhh! I... I can't see what's going on in front of me... she thought.

A male student with glasses was sitting in front of her. His hair was in a precise 7:3 part, and he looked extremely intellectual. However, there was something about him that stood out even more than that: his incredible height.

He's so big. I wonder if he's as big as Gerard-san, Sera-san, or papa? DarkMel thought to herself.

His sitting back was basically a wall to DarkMel, who was appropriately small for her age. There was no way for the girl to see past him, even if she were to stand up on her tiptoes and stretch as high as she could.

"Oh, if it isn't DarkMel-san. Is something the matter?"

"Huh? Ah, Instructor Milky!" DarkMel exclaimed.

Someone had come up behind DarkMel in her time of distress. When the figure called out to her, causing the girl to turn around, she found a woman wearing a teacher's uniform. The woman's name was Milky Crespella, the one who had been assigned to DarkMel for her interview.

"Um...I'm too short, and I can't see the front..."

"You can't? Ah, you're seated behind Graham Nakatomiuzi-kun. He's huge, so you're not tall enough to see over him, huh? Sorry, it seems the one in charge of seating had a fatal flaw in their head. What a hopeless person, to make someone as cute as you make that face. In fact, he's trash. Absolute trash. But don't worry, I will make sure to chastise the person responsible and put him in his place later. I'll make sure to cut him down to size."

"I'm not *that* troubled by it!"

Milky's smile was lovely but also somehow scary, and it put a lot of pressure on DarkMel.

“Excuse me. Am I to assume that I am being an obstruction? My apologies for being so needlessly large.” The large male student, Graham, turned around, seeming to have realized that DarkMel and Milky were talking about him.

The impact of his movement was incredible, but more than that, the way he spoke went above and beyond being polite, so DarkMel was doubly surprised and doubly pressured.

“O... Obstru— Whaaa?!”

“Oh no, I seem to have surprised you further. This style of speech comes from ancient Toraj, so it is understandable that you do not recognize it. Or...doth not understand it?” Graham repeated.

Milky let out a confused noise. “Um...are you perhaps not used to speaking so casually?”

“Splendid! That is exactly correct,” Graham replied.

“Instructor Milky...” DarkMel muttered nervously.

“Please calm down, DarkMel-san,” Milky replied. “He may have an overwhelming build and strange style of speech, but on the inside he’s very earnest and brilliant. If you can believe it, Graham-kun is here on recommendation from Toraj’s ruler, Tsubaki-sama.”

“Really?! That’s amazing!” DarkMel gushed. “But...huh? You don’t really seem like someone from Toraj, Graham-san...”

DarkMel took another look at the boy. His hair was blue, his skin was white, and by any metric, he looked nothing like those from Toraj, who could trace their stock back to the Japanese.

“Yes, well, there are a lot of complicated reasons for that,” Milky started to explain. “As you’ve noted, Graham-kun was not born or raised in Toraj. As a result of some extenuating circumstances, he is currently learning ancient Torajian dialect. If you listen carefully, it’s not impossible to figure out what he’s saying, so please don’t mind his way of speech, and treat him normally.”

“I am truly grateful for your concise explanation, miss instructor. In short, that’s how things are. Well met,” said Graham.

“I...see?” DarkMel was still somewhat confused. “Um...pleased to meet you too.”

Thus, she made a strange new acquaintance with Milky’s introduction. At least she was able to switch seats with Graham, so she could now see what was going on.

“It’s about time for the ceremony to start, so your teacher here needs to get back to her seat. See you two!” Milky called as she left.

“Thank you very much, Instructor Milky!” DarkMel said.

“It wasn’t much—I mean, I am indebted to you?” Graham tried to puzzle out.

A while after Milky left, the announcement that the ceremony was about to begin rang through the venue.

“The entrance ceremony will begin shortly. New students, please take your designated seats quickly and wait. I repeat, the entrance...”

Once they heard the announcement, the new students followed the instructions and filed into their seats. A glance up at the ceiling revealed an owl-type monster flying around with a magic item that looked like a camera hanging from its neck. It seemed to be filming footage to stream to the outside, and in spite of its large size, the flapping of its wings was almost inaudible.

“Hmm...I wonder if it has the Covert Action skill,” Rion mused.

“Why are you looking up like that, Rion-sa— Muh... Muhmuhmuh-monsuhmmm?!” After Dorothy followed Rion’s gaze up, she seemed about to scream, so Rion had to hurriedly cover her mouth, answering in a whisper.

“You shouldn’t shout here, Thee-chan! You’ll cause trouble for everyone else. Look closely—that owl is the same one that delivered your admittance letter.”

“Mfwhuh? Y... Yfwhwaaiee! Huh? You... You’re right!”

“I am, so there’s no need to worry!”

Dorothy calmed back down, and soon the entire venue settled into a state where everyone was simply waiting for the ceremony to start.

Once it did, the announcement was broadcast again, this time announcing the

start of the proceedings. This was followed by a congratulatory address and explanation of the program. According to the schedule, it would start with greetings from the principal.

Umm... "greetings" means the principal will come out and talk to us or something, right? Rion thought. I wonder if it'll be super long like in manga?! Some theories say those speeches have a special effect that causes sleep or otherwise makes the listener's consciousness hazy, thus rendering them unable to fight!

Was this tendency for her mind to immediately turn to battle a side effect of being around her big brother, Kelvin? Rion was completely dyed in his battle-loving colors, as she got excited over the strangest things.

Art, Lumiest's principal, warmly watched over Rion and her shining eyes as he stepped up to the podium. "First, allow me to give you my heartfelt congratulations. Well done on being admitted to Lumiest, new students. I am sure that all of you, having overcome the most difficult of tests founded on strict standards, will be able to shape the world. That's right...just like me and my beauty on the level of art!"

His greeting, which he was being extremely serious about, was followed by a sudden strange pose. The venue was instantly filled with a burst of laughter, and the serious mood that had been present abruptly softened.

Dorothy giggled. "The principal is really funny, isn't he?"

"Uh, yeah...he is, isn't he? I think he's being serious, though..." Rion replied.

Art's eccentricities continued for a while more, after which the new students were wrapped in a congenial mood. Meanwhile, Rion, who had known about the principal's personality beforehand, had fun too even though the speech was different from what she was expecting.

"Thank you, Principal Art. Next, the representative of your class will speak."

"It... It's finally happening," Dorothy muttered.

Rion was confused. "Hm? What do you mean, 'finally'?"

"This speech happens every year and is given by the most excellent new

student who scored highest on the exams. In other words, the one who passed with the highest marks. Not only that, but they have a really high chance of becoming the future student council president and continuing to hold the top spot until graduation. This student will become an exemplar of the academy, the object of adoration all across the school, and a symbol of the institution itself! There's no way someone like me, a commoner who basically got in by a stroke of luck or mistake, could afford to *not* pay attention to them."

Dorothy gave that explanation with a self-deprecating smile. From Rion's point of view, it was actually more amazing to get in without any connections or financial help, but it seemed the girl had a habit of putting herself down.

"Well then, Bell Baal-san, please take the floor."

"Ah, here comes the top student now." Dorothy perked up.

"Lemme s— Huh? Bell-chan?" Rion said, surprised.

The person who approached the podium after the announcer was none other than Bell.

Now that I think about it, Bell was the only one of us who seemed super separated... Rion realized. *Oh yeah, of course Bell-chan would be up there if it's given to the student who scored at the top.*

"Wow, she's so pretty and elegant," Dorothy gushed. "Just the way she stands and walks makes it seem like she comes from a different world. Huh? But...those horns and wings..."

Dorothy was totally captivated, but by the time Bell got to the center of the stage, she had realized Bell wasn't human, now able to see the unique features that no beastfolk, elf, or other demihuman had. The other new students were the same, and a commotion spread throughout the venue.

"Quiet! Please, be quiet!"

The announcer's voice rang out, attempting to quell the fuss. However, Bell put up her hand to stop the announcer.

"This is fine," she stated.

"Huh?"

Bell walked up to the podium. “As you’ve heard, I am Bell Baal. You might have noticed that I am from the demon country located on the Northern Continent. Nevertheless, I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to this academy’s teachers, who evaluated my grades fairly and impartially and gave me this prestigious opportunity. That being said, I am sure there are some of you who believe that demons are to be rejected or feared. That is a truly saddening opinion to me. As the princess of the sovereign nation of Grelbarelka, I desire to be a mediator between humans and demons...”

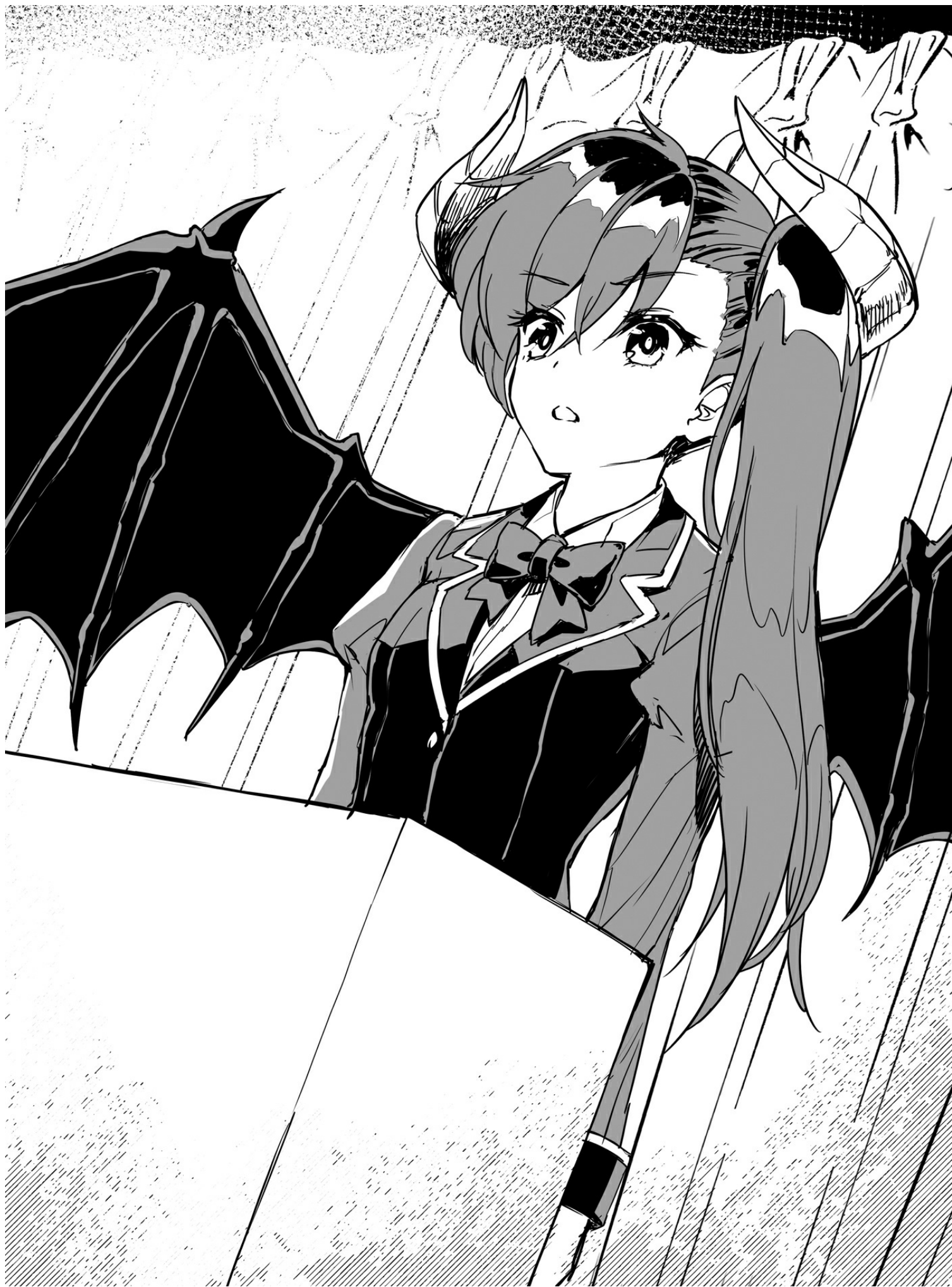
Bell spun her words smoothly even though she did not have a script to read from. Not only that, but she was doing more than talking; the eloquent, heartfelt speech that she was making seemed to be aimed directly at the hearts of every individual student. Her phrasing and breathing, and the way she used pauses, all served to convey her emotions. Everything was perfect. With Bell’s words, which seemed to draw everyone’s attention to her, the beginnings of the great tumult that had been swirling around disappeared completely. Rion and DarkMel, who were already close to Bell, were even more surprised and lost for words. Since they couldn’t speak, they instead opted to exchange messages telepathically.

::Hey, Rion-san...doesn’t Bell-san seem different from usual? It... It sounds rude, but for a moment I wondered who was really up there,:: said DarkMel.

::Uh, yeah. I’m surprised too. But I think I might have heard of something like this from gramps,:: Rion replied.

::What did you hear?::

::Before I was summoned to this world, I heard that they had an audience with Tsubaki-sama in Toraj. Back then, Sera-nee was just as amazing and pretty, and from what I hear, it was what made Kel-nii fall in love or something.::



::J-Jeez, papa... But that *does* make sense. Bell-san had the same gifted education, so she should be able to act the same as Sera-san did.::

::I see! But wow, seeing Bell-chan like this is a breath of fresh air! I wonder if she would consider acting like this normally?::

Rion imagined Bell acting like this and smiling all the time. At present, such a thing was incredibly rare.

::Don't wanna. Sounds dead tiring,:: Bell replied through the Network.

::Bell-san?!:: DarkMel messaged, surprised.

::You... You even have the leeway to use telepathy while giving a speech?:: Rion commented, as Bell's public address was continuing even now.

"I have heard that out of all those who have graduated from Lumiest, there is one so excellent that they skipped multiple years to finish at the top of the class in an incredible single year of schooling. It may be beyond my standing to talk about it with my lack of ability, but I would like to swear to leave a similarly magnificent record now, as we start our lives here. Thank you for listening."

The instant Bell bowed to signal the end of her address, the entire venue erupted into thunderous applause. Almost no one present would continue to view Bell through prejudiced eyes just for being a demon. The applause was enough to make anyone certain of that.

But...Bell-chan sounded serious when she said that last part... Rion mused worriedly.

Her friends knew all too well what truly lay in her heart.



After the ceremony was over, a task awaited the new students: moving into the dorms they had been so frivolously assigned to. Luggage had to be moved from the carriages into their rooms, which provided opportunities for students to meet the classmates with whom they'd be spending their school lives. Time was also needed to put their rooms in order, and out of consideration for the exhaustion they must be feeling after such work and the prospect of new living arrangements, this was all that was scheduled for today.

Afterwards, the students would be free to deepen their bonds with their dorm mates, tour the school's facilities, or do anything else they might desire. But it was likely that nearly everyone would start with the same thing: checking out the dorm rooms.

Rion had been assigned to Volcann, the dorm led by Arche Desire, who had also been the one to interview her for the third exam. A total of twenty-five new students, including Rion, had been assigned to this dorm, which had fire on its crest. The only faces Rion recognized were Dorothy and Charles. In front of the students stood Arche, the sunlight glinting off her glasses as she energetically went through roll call.

"One, two, three, four... Okay, everyone, listen up! Congrats to all of you on being admitted to this dorm! I am filled with emotion over the fact that I am able to welcome you all on this momentous day! Health really is the most important thing!" Arche pushed up her glasses as she said that last line, but her pose and words didn't really match, so neither did they land. "I believe all of you already know, but rooms here will have two or three people assigned to each of them. In other words, you will be cohabitating! Don't waste this chance to get along with the people you will be living with!"

"Instructor Arche, do students have any say in the room assignments? If we do, I would of course love to live with girls—" Charles started but was swiftly interrupted.

"Of course, the living arrangements *will* be separated by gender. Furthermore, the school has already decided on room assignments, and I will be announcing them now!"

"So that's how I am to be thwarted. But the tale of my epic romance is just beginning. There's no need to rush. That's the lesson here, isn't it?!" Charles exclaimed.

"Hmm...in a sense, you're actually pretty amazing to cause me, Arche, so much trouble. I gotta give it up to you!"

"Heh, no need to compliment me *that* much."

No one could muster a response to that. Charles had immediately bought the ire of all the girls in the dorm.

“Okay, let’s get back to the room placements. First, Rami-san and—”

“Ah! It’s already time for Rami-chan?! Here, heeereee!” The student named Rami, who had been called on first, immediately interrupted Arche with just as much enthusiasm as the teacher usually mustered, her loud voice accompanied by the raising of both her hands. The girl had flashy blonde hair and was wearing her uniform loosely and casually. In general, she stood out a lot. Also, the looseness of her dress exposed that much more of her skin, which drew the eyes of the boys, including, of course, Charles.

Rion had her own thoughts on this. *Hmmm? Don’t I recognize that Rami girl from somewhere? Not during the exams... Before that...* Rion tilted her head left and right as she pondered the feeling of déjà vu.

But before Rion could figure it out, her name was announced.

“Rion-san will be in a room with Dorothy-san. Get along well, you two!”

“Ah, yes!” Rion responded hurriedly.

“Oh, thank goodness!” Dorothy said in response. “I’m glad I’m paired with someone I know. Rion-san, I hope we have a good time together.”

Dorothy seemed especially happy to be paired with Rion, indicated by the smile that bloomed on her face. She stuck out her right hand, initiating a handshake to start their new relationship.

Rion was about to take the girl’s hand and respond to her excitement, but... “I’m glad to have been paired with you too, Th—”

“RIIIIII-CHAAAAAANNN! IT’S BEEN TOO LOOONGGG!”

“Awagh?!” Rion yelped.

“Wha— Rion-san?!” Dorothy shouted, concerned.

Just as the two girls were about to shake, someone came flying in from the side to tackle Rion. Since it was a lightning-quick surprise attack made at incredible speed, she wasn’t able to avoid it. Even so, she managed to react and change her posture to try and catch the tackle.

Swtssscchhh!

Rion and her attacker slid back what seemed like a few meters before Rion fell on her butt. The female student who attacked her had buried her face in Rion's chest while also sitting on top of her. Except for Arche, who was all smiles, everyone else's expressions were blank with shock and surprise. Electricity crackled along the ground they had passed through, making audible noise as it did so.

"Oh, maybe I really did put in a little too much oomph? Hey, hey! You good, Ri-chan?" the girl, Rami, asked, her face popping up from Rion's chest.

It seemed she was worried about her victim's safety, at least, but for some reason both her hands were creeping towards Rion's cheeks. Then, she started *squishing*.

"Owwiiiiieee... Gah, jeez! You can't just suddenly do that to people, Rai-chan!" Rion protested.

"Wow, this is hella moving! So you recognized me even though I look like this. I knew it, our hearts are always connected! But you didn't seem like you knew who I was before, so I was really worried, you know?" Rami shot back.

"I just noticed now," Rion replied. "Also, I told you already to stop doing as you please to other people's cheeks."

"But I'm just so *happy*! Come on, squishy squishy!" Rami said in a singsong voice.

"Rai-chaaan!"

The girl Rion referred to as "Rai-chan" (Rami) seemed to improve in mood even more at that, as she continued playing with Rion's cheeks with a broad smile on her face. It seemed she had no intention of letting the girl go.

"Also, my current name is Rami Ryuuoh, so make sure you get it right!" she corrected her brightly.

"If you want me to do that, then I'm begging you, listen to me!" Though Rion tried to shake Rami off, the girl didn't budge an inch. And since Rion's current posture was bad, she couldn't slip out of the hell of having her cheeks pinched and squeezed either.

“Hmm? You two know each other?” Arche asked. “Oh yeah, aren’t both of you from the Eastern Continent?”

Arche was the only one who seemed to be having fun, as everyone else was too busy staring at these events, dumbfounded. However, even she felt like things couldn’t continue this way, so she stepped in to save her poor student.

“Huh? Uh...yeah, that’s right. We’re friends,” Rion replied. “But she looks really different from when we last saw each other, so I was just a little confused...”

“We’re more than just friends. It’s more like...best friends? Something like that?” Rami corrected her. “We haven’t seen each other in so long, so I just got so excited! Soz!”

“Ha ha! So such coincidences really do happen. Still, you should save your excitement over your reunion for after you’ve moved in. All right now, go on. Go dye those bland dorm rooms your own special colors!”

“Hey, wait—” Rami’s protest was interrupted as she was picked up by the nape of her neck by Arche and tossed into the dorm. It seemed that if students acted like students, then sometimes teachers would act like teachers.

“Rion-san, you and Dorothy-san should go together to see your assigned room first. It’ll help with moving in if you have a magic item with storage capabilities. If so, please help Dorothy-san as well. After all, I’m fairly sure she will be moving her luggage into the room by hand.”

“Uh, okay, I understand...” Having been released from her cheek-pinching hell, Rion went with Dorothy to their room.

“Are you okay, Rion-san?” Dorothy asked.

“It still stings a little, that’s all. She messed with my cheeks a lot back there, but it looks like they’ll retain their shape, at least.”

“Um, thank goodness it didn’t turn into anything more serious. Still, do you really know that Rami girl? You seemed pretty surprised.”

“Yeah, we’re friends. As I said before, she looks really different now.”

“Really? Is she *that* different? Hmm...like she used to be a lot quieter and had

a calm air about her or something?” Dorothy started imagining what Rami had been like in the past. However, her imagination ran counter to the change Rion was actually referring to.

Rami Ryuuoh... Rai Ryuuoh... Ryuuoh is a way to say Dragon King, so Lightning Dragon King... Come on, Rai-chan, that name's way too on the nose...



“Wow! So this is our room!” Rion exclaimed in wonderment.

“Yeah, oh woooooowww!” Dorothy agreed.

They had been given a nice corner room with a good view on the second floor of dorm Volcann, and they wasted no time in opening the door and checking it out. The room was already furnished—expensively, at that. Maybe that should have been obvious for a school that catered to nobles and royalty. Though it seemed some people brought their own furniture regardless, the beds and whatnot were soft and warm enough that there was no need to do so. Also, the moment Dorothy laid eyes on the room, her mouth dropped wide open and refused to close.

“I...knew from the reading materials that furniture would be provided, but I never expected they would prepare such amazingly expensive stuff! Whoa, wow...the bed's so soft...” she muttered to herself.

“Wheee!” Rion jumped onto her own bed. “It's bad manners, but you can't help but jump into it butt-first, huh?”

“Oh no, don't treat your bed like a trampoline! I could never treat something this expensive so roughly! But I really...really want to try it... It's so hard to resist!”

In the end, the pair enjoyed the feel of their beds until they were satisfied.

“Now then, we should get to work moving in,” Rion said.

“Uh, yeah, you're right. Let's work hard...um?”

Rion had jumped off her bed and reached into her shadow. Dorothy watched, wondering what was going on, until a small dog—or rather, wolf—jumped out of the shadow. It was Rion's partner, Alex.

“Woof! (I’m out!)”

“Aha ha, looks like Alex likes this room too,” Rion told her.

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?!” Dorothy screamed.

Alex ran excitedly around the room, his tail wagging the whole time. Dorothy, meanwhile, was unable to keep up with the situation and opted to scream for the moment.

With that, after running through pretty much all the conventional things to enjoy in a new room, Rion introduced Dorothy to Alex. When she explained that the wolf was there as her pet, Dorothy seemed to understand and massaged her heart to calm herself down.

“I was so surprised, it all happened so suddenly. But I see, so Volcann and Selva allow pets. I was so preoccupied with my own stuff that I missed that. Whoops,” Dorothy said.

“Sorry, that really was out of nowhere, wasn’t it?” Rion apologized. “Wait, Thee-chan...are you bad with animals?”

“Oh no, if I was, I would never have asked to be in this dorm in the first place. In fact, I love them!”

With that, they went straight into playful petting time with Alex. Rion and Dorothy only managed to restart their moving-in efforts a good while later.

As for how the other dorms were doing...

“Kyaah! So cute! That pose is cute too!”

“Sit here, DarkMel-chan! Ah, stay like that and try hugging Clotho-chan tight. I’m sure it’ll work great as an accent!”

“Uh...erm...” DarkMel couldn’t quite speak up.

“Don’t move, DarkMel-chan, you were in such a great pose!”

“Y-Yesh!” DarkMel bit her tongue as she responded in surprise.

Dorm Selva, where DarkMel was assigned, was for some reason holding a huge sketching meet under the dorm’s crest with its tree motif, with DarkMel

as the main subject. The girls of Selva were surrounding her while she held Clotho as a prop, sketching as if their lives depended on it, eyes glinting and pens moving with frenetic speed.

“I’m done! What do you think? Isn’t my art the most angelic?!”

“Heh heh, you’re totally wrong! My art is totally more angelic!”

“Ahhh, I’m so jealous, DarkMel-chan! You’re cute no matter what pose you take, and you make the best model!”

“Hey DarkMel-chan, whose art do you like best? Mine, right?”

“Uh...errr...” DarkMel couldn’t form an answer.

“Auuughhh! DarkMel-chan’s cute even when she’s floundering!”

It seemed that DarkMel, the youngest one there, had totally become the dorm’s mascot. Girls who should have been her classmates were all head over heels for her, likely because her pure and innocent personality tickled their maternal instincts.

“Clotho-chan’s unexpectedly cute too, isn’t it? This is the first time I’ve ever felt this way about a slime!”

“I get what you mean! They could totally rule the school’s cute factor as a set combo!”

“Yeah, I just want to wrap them both up in a big hug!”

The pair had synergized, and now Clotho was popular too. However, because Clotho had a lot of experience dealing with children from its life in Parth, it was keeping up with the girls better, as it seemed to be used to it.

“Oh? You girls are still drawing Lady DarkMel? It’s been a goodly amount of time; you should all go back to your task of moving into the dorm.” Graham, the giant with the odd way of speaking, had appeared as the girls were sketching. It seemed he had finished his task earlier than the others.

“Ah, Graham-kun!”

“Has it really been that long? Whoa, crap! The only things I’ve moved have been my sketchbook and pen!”

“I just have to take my luggage out of Storage, so I’ll still have an easy time even if I start now, I think? Ah, I got it! I’ll just help DarkMel-chan in my free time! This is great!”

“What, why? You’re in a different room. I’ll be the one to help her, since it’s my responsibility as DarkMel-chan’s roommate!”

“What the heck, that’s so unfair!” the rest of the girls exclaimed. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem their competition over DarkMel would finish anytime soon.

“Uh, erm...Clotho can also use Storage, so I don’t need to do all that much either...” DarkMel said meekly.

“I see, it looks to me like Selva will be getting much more lively. Still, all of you, our honorable dorm head will be coming soon. Heeeyyy, listen to me, pleeease!” Graham begged them.

DarkMel had been spinning around with Clotho in her arms in a panic. Seeing that, Graham shook his head in an amused but exasperated fashion. Right afterwards, the dorm head Milky really did show up, a vein on her head popping out in anger. The words she spouted then were far too poisonous to write down, so they’ll be omitted.

Lastly, dorm Cielo, where Bell had been assigned, was filled with a tense atmosphere for some reason. The crest with the sky motif over the entrance of the dorm was where Bell faced off against a flashy female student with long ringlets and her hangers-on.

“Don’t you think you’re getting a little too big for your britches, Bell-san?” the girl started.

“Big for my britches? I don’t know what you mean by that. I’m not wearing any britches, and who do you think you are, suggesting I’ve gotten fat?”

“I’m talking about your attitude! Just because your grades were a little good, you were made head of the class, and now look at you! I have no idea what you meant by that bridge between people and demons business, but you should learn some modesty!”

“Yeah! Hear, hear!” shouted the girl’s flunkies.

Haahh...I thought this would happen at some point, but not this quickly...

Since she’d spoken in a way she really wasn’t used to for the ceremony, Bell was fairly mentally fatigued. She just wanted to fix up her room already and take a nap, but just as she’d been about to do that, she’d been stopped by this girl and was now just fed up. Just ignoring the annoyance would normally be an option, but unfortunately, ringlet girl was to be her roommate. Considering future developments, treating her crassly now would only cause further trouble.

The Color Corrosion I stealthily spread through the venue during my speech should have lessened their antagonistic feelings towards me, but... Ah, I see. It didn’t affect prideful idiots like her since I had to make it weak enough to be mistaken as part of the airflow. Tch, this is such a pain in the ass... Bell thought.

She wrapped up her pondering within a few seconds, deciding to resolve the issue by educating the girls. And, in order to do that, she concluded that she would need to make an obvious taunt.

“Why don’t you try looking in the mirror for once instead of worrying about me? And that goes for all you third-rate losers. I swear, all your yapping is so noisy, I can’t stand it. I know all of you are nonachievers who can’t accomplish anything unless you do so in a swarm, but that also makes you smell, so could you have the common decency to not get near me? Your smell will get on me.”

“Whuh-HUUUHHH?! What did you just say?! I was trying to settle this peacefully, but that’s off the table now. I will *not* forgive you for this! I demand satisfaction, Bell-san!” The ringlet girl took off one of her white gloves and threw it at Bell’s feet.

In that moment, Bell’s expression looked a little like Kelvin’s famous smile.



A commotion had taken over dorm Cielo. A new student who had taken a run at Bell had gone as far as to challenge her, the top student, to a duel. That news took the form of rumors that reached the ears of students in the middle of moving in, upperclassmen who were relaxing in their rooms, and even the

dorm's head in the blink of an eye. Although the dorm was large enough to rival a castle in size, the speed at which a rumor spread never ceased to amaze, no matter the time period.

"Hey, did you hear? Bell, the one who gave the speech at the ceremony, is going to duel that major noble Katerina and her followers!"

"What?! What are they doing?! It's only the first day! It *does* sound interesting, though. So, where is this happening?"

"I mean, I only just heard about it, so I don't know either."

"Come on! Wait, you said Katerina was an important noble, right? From where?"

"No clue. That was also part of the stuff I just heard!"

"You shouldn't be proud of that! Not like I've heard of her in my country either, though."

"Want to see the duel between Bell-san and Katerina-san, you two? I heard it's happening in the dorm's inner courtyard."

"Whoa, seriously?! Thanks! Hey, let's go!"

"W-Wait a second! Come on, using Green Magic to buff speed is cheating! Just run normally!"

"Hey! You shouldn't be running in the hallways in the first place!" the dorm head shouted.

"Grk! Dorm Head Boyle?!" both boys cried in unison.

Just like that, rumors abounded, and people started gathering in the inner courtyard of dorm Cielo. The rumor also managed to reach the ears of a certain someone.

"Oho, a duel, huh? And that Bell Baal is at the center of it..." It was a handsome boy with white hair, Edgar Lauzer of Leigant. He had heard the fuss people were making in the halls while he was taking a break in his room.

"You interested in that Bell girl, Edgar-sama? Should we go watch the duel too?" his attendant, Perona, asked.

“No, let’s not,” he replied. “If she really is stronger than me, she’ll be able to clean up some random student with one hand. Even if we went after the rumors have spread this far, the duel would already be over. Isn’t that right, Axe?”

“As expected, Edgar-sama, what a wise decision!” Axe replied.

“Yep, totally!” Perona agreed noncommittally.

While Axe, who was rooming with Edgar, replied, he never stopped industriously working to move both of them into the room. Meanwhile, Perona, who was a girl but still Edgar’s subordinate, lounged on Axe’s bed, reading for pleasure. Every once in a while, Axe gave her a questioning look as if to ask how her own moving efforts were going, but she paid him no mind.

“Hrm, where should we hang up this painting, Edgar-sama?” Axe asked. “Every time I see this, I am impressed. What a wonderful piece.”

“Indeed. It is the work of a famous artist among royals who know the worth of things, such as myself, though the artist’s whereabouts are currently unknown. If I remember correctly, his name should be something like Rein Hart. That one is my favorite. Hang it up near my bed,” Edgar commanded.

“I see, that makes sense! Understood!” Axe seemed impressed.

“Huh. Yeah, I just don’t get art,” Perona said dismissively. “Hm? Is it just me or are there really loud footsteps coming from somewhere?”

“Footsteps?” Axe asked.

“Sounds like it’s coming from outside.” Edgar furrowed his brow and looked outside.

Thwudududududududud!

He saw something throwing up clouds of dust along with an appropriately loud sound. Someone or something was running around at great speed outside.

“Hearing the rumors, I have arrived! Is it true that Bell’s having a duel?! Since she is one of my potential future fiancées, I must mediate! That said, where is the inner courtyard? Since the dorms are different, the layout is also different, and I’m truly lost! Ah, there’s another cutie! Wanna have some tea with

meeee?!”

The source of the noise was confirmed to be Charles Vaccania. Edgar left the window to sit down on his bed.

“Wasn’t Charles Vaccania supposed to be in a different dorm?” he asked.

“Charles, sir? If I remember correctly, he was assigned to Instructor Arche’s dorm, Volcann,” Axe replied.

“I see. Hm...so even idiots shouldn’t be underestimated if they’ve mastered idiocy. There is something to be learned from his initiative, if nothing else,” Edgar said.

Axe and Perona shot each other looks before tilting their heads quizzically in unison.



The outer edges of the inner courtyard, which was where all the rumors said the duel would be happening, was already filled with a crowd of both new and old students. Some of them had even neglected their task of moving in to come watch.

The place was lined with well-maintained grass and trees. There were also vibrant flower beds, and overall it had a resplendent yet tranquil atmosphere, since it was meant for students to relax in. However, now the place was the opposite of its usual state. The unending tide of students’ voices joined together into a roar as the gazes of the boys and girls all gathered in the center of the yard.

“What kind of disturbance is this?!”

“Grk! It’s Dorm Head Boyle!”

Dorm Cielo’s leader, Boyle Potaufeu, appeared in the inner courtyard as it swirled with the hustle and bustle of students. Of course, making a fuss in the dorms and holding an event without the school’s express permission was against the rules. It was a matter of course for Boyle, who was responsible for the dorm, to come running with rumors of a duel between students flying about.

“What is *that* sound supposed to mean? Huh?! My word, youngsters these days have just the worst attitudes. Oh wait, now’s not the time for that. Come on, let me through! I’m big-boned, so you all need to make way!” Boyle shouted.

“The dorm head is coming through! Open up a path!” An upperclassman, having noticed Boyle’s presence, wasted no time in raising their voice.

“Good. As expected of upperclassmen. You are all supposed to be good examples, and you’re doing well. You know what must be done,” Boyle said, impressed.

“If you underclassmen don’t want to get run over, open a path as wide as you can! If the dorm head rolls over you, you’ll be crushed! He’s *really* heavy! You could end up with broken bones!”

“You *know* that’s rude too, right?!” Boyle shouted.

And so, after some fuss, Boyle managed to get into the inner courtyard. Finally, he was able to see into the area that had been blocked by the crowd.

“Whew, I’m finally through.” Boyle let out a sigh of exertion. “Oh right, I need to keep moving. Bell-kun! Bell-kun! Stop this duel nonse— Hmmm?!”

Boyle had taken a moment to gather himself and wipe off his sweat, but just as he was about to set forth again, the person he was calling for, Bell, came up to him. She had on a very nice smile, just like the one she had used during her address.

“My, if it isn’t Dorm Head Boyle,” she said in greeting. “Is something wrong? You’re sweating so much. Ah, no need to worry; I’ve already finished moving in. Right now, I’m just refreshing myself with this wonderfully green scenery. All these eyes are somewhat concerning, but I will eventually stand at the top of my country. I should get used to it while I can.”

“Oh...okay?” was all Boyle could get out.

The smile on Bell’s face wasn’t the only thing that was perfect; the words she used painted her as the picture of an excellent student. If someone who didn’t know the rumors were to hear her, they would likely be totally convinced.

However, Boyle managed to stand firm through pure strength of spirit. “Agh, wait! That’s not what I need to ask about! Come on, get a grip, me! Keep at it, Boyle! I don’t care about your excuses, Bell-kun! How do you explain those students whom you’ve knocked to the ground?!”

“Oh...dear me...”

Boyle was pointing at a group of students who were lying on the ground, folded into a neat pile. Among them, Katerina, the other individual involved in the controversy, could be seen, muttering incoherently.

Bell was currently sitting atop the pile, using them as a bench.

“Oh? What do you mean?” she asked innocently.

“I’m asking if you’ve gone through with that duel or whatever and actually resorted to violence! And...hm? Hmmmm?! One...two...three... Um, Bell-kun? Aren’t there quite a few more people in that pile than you were rumored to be fighting?”

The pile that he was pointing at, which Bell was using as a bench, consisted of easily more than ten people, including Katerina, her hangers-on, and several other Cielo students. The current student council president, Melissa, whom Boyle had his eye on as a promising talent, as well as her secretary, were also in there. Katerina aside, the fact that an upperclassman with top-class skills like Melissa had ended up in this state left Boyle reeling and unable to hide it.

“Even Melissa, someone who has a shot at graduating at the top of her class?! I... I ask you once again, Bell-kun, what is the meaning of this appalling scene?” Boyle asked.

“Appalling? None of them have even a scratch on them; they’re just napping. What do you mean, ‘appalling’?” Bell replied.

“Bell-kun!”

“Your face is too close, Dorm Head Boyle.”

“That doesn’t matter! You *must* explain this situation to me, as fast as possible!”

“I *said* your face is too close!”

“Ah, right. Okay...”

Bell’s smile had melted into an intimidatingly serious expression, which got Boyle to take three steps back. He was being exceedingly meek.

“Ahem,” Bell cleared her throat. “Well then, allow me to explain. Katerina-san here was the one who started this series of events. She came to take a jab at me. It seems she didn’t like the address I gave at the ceremony. Personally, I prefer to avoid fights as much as possible, so I was going to give her some space, but...it seems my attitude offended her delicate sensibilities, so in the end, she challenged me to a duel. Here, the white glove she threw at me.”

With that, Bell held out one of Katerina’s white gloves. It was spotless. Meanwhile, in a twist of irony, its owner was serving as the base of the human bench, and was covered in dirt.

“So...you accepted the duel and defeated her?” Boyle asked, trying to predict what had happened.

“Accept a duel? I would never,” Bell replied. “I took my time to talk with her *a lot*, and as you can see, she seems to have learned where she stands. Right now, I’m just enjoying the greenery here with Katerina-san and her friends and getting along. Also, as you can see, this activity was so pleasant and comfortable that they fell asleep. Isn’t that right, Katerina-san?”

“Oh dear...yes...” Katerina replied absently.

“See? She agrees with me,” Bell said.

“Isn’t she just saying random things in a daze?!” Boyle reacted.

“I’m sure that’s just your imagination,” Bell replied placatingly.

Boyle had, of course, been forced to play the straight man to this farce. However, it seemed Bell had every intention of forcing her excuse to stand, and she flashed her blinding smile once again.

“But...then what about the other students? Unless I’ve got holes for eyes, that’s Melissa-kun, the student council president, right?” he asserted.

“Hmm, it seems you don’t have holes for eyes, Dorm Head Boyle,” Bell said.

“And now you’re spitting poisonous words with a smile on your face?!” Boyle

cried.

“Hee hee! It’s just a devilish joke. Don’t mind it,” she countered. It seemed real devilish jokes were accompanied by a kick. “As for President Melissa,” Bell continued, “well, I’m having a bit of trouble figuring out how to handle her as well.”

“Meaning?” Boyle asked.

“The student council president called out to me as I was enjoying this place with Katerina-san,” Bell explained. “I was truly moved by that, but I was also nervous. I couldn’t hold a conversation with her properly because of it.”

“I...see.” Boyle understood that she had decided to ignore Melissa.

“Still, the student council president continued to enthusiastically talk to me. If I remember correctly, it was something about joining the student council and working to manage this academy with her. Or maybe it was about how I should become an apprentice to learn from the current student council as a future candidate for student council president? Well, it was something like that.”

“I... I see. I believe seeing Melissa-kun come to recruit you personally would be a moving sight. So how did such an impressive tale end up like this?”

“If I remember correctly, Dorm Head Boyle, students can only join the student council during their second year at the earliest, right?”

“Indeed. That is the rule the academy has decided on. That’s why Melissa-kun recommended you start as an apprentice to the student council.”

“If that’s the case, then as I suspected, such a thing would be useless for me. I plan to skip grades and graduate at the top of the class, after all. If I were to graduate along with President Melissa, then there would be no meaning in becoming an apprentice, no?”

“Ye— Whaaaaaat?!”

Bell then went on to say that she had explained the same thing to Melissa and gently turned her down. According to her, whether aware or not of the fact that Bell planned to graduate at the top of the class, Melissa replied that while she would probably be the one to graduate in the top spot, she still felt it would be

an honor to graduate along with Bell and left it at that.

“But then, President Melissa suddenly wanted to compare our strengths, so she also gave me her white glove. The secretary burst in to help her—it was awful.” Bell produced another white glove, different from the one Katerina wore. It had Melissa’s family crest on the back of the hand. Apparently, Bell had received two requests for duels in quick succession.

Boyle brought his hand up to his forehead as he tried to imagine what had happened next. Melissa was attractive and accomplished in both her studies and martial fields. While she was the student council president, she was also a student strong enough to represent dorm Cielo as a whole. She hailed from a well-known family as well, all of which garnered her a lot of fans within the dorm. The other students, including the secretary, had likely challenged Bell after Melissa was defeated. At least, that was how Boyle imagined it. And his imagination was spot on.

“So then you’re going to say that you spent some *productive* time talking to them, convincing all the rest of the students who are now fallen under you? And then, I’m assuming, you’ll say you immediately started teatime while also enjoying the greenery?” Boyle predicted aloud.

“Just what I’d expect from you, Dorm Head Boyle. You really do understand what I’m trying to say before I say it. It really helps.”

“It’s not helping at aaallllll! Just... Hey, wait! What’re you doooiiinggg?!” Boyle’s scream came from deep in his soul.

“I’m taking a nap. What does it look like?”

“As if I’d believe that! Beating over ten students in duels on the first day?! Even before the rules, there’s no precedent for—”

“So it’s not a problem, right?” Bell interrupted him. “Just shut up for a while, you pig.”

“What?!”

Bell had suddenly whispered threateningly in his ear, causing Boyle to instinctively jump. Her voice was quiet enough that she couldn’t be heard by the people around them, meaning it was meant only for Boyle.

“They weren’t duels, just students getting along and messing around. It’d be better for you to make that the official story, don’t you agree?”

“Buh, but...what about the students you’ve taken out, Bell-kun? No one would accept such an absurd excuse.”

“They will,” she asserted confidently. “Or rather, they’ll have no choice but to. All of them picked a fight with a new student and were easily beaten without being able to do anything. Those prideful upperclassmen wouldn’t want such a disgraceful report being spread, would they now? So I think it would absolutely be better to make this claim that we were simply bonding ‘the truth.’ Luckily, the only witnesses were students from this dorm. All you have to do is report what happened today exactly as I told you, spread that around, and make sure the people from this dorm don’t go telling the truth. I remember the faces of all the people I ‘played around’ with, so if something happens, I’ll be able to deal with it.”

“Uh, ah...errr...just what are you trying to accomplish by doing that, Bell-kun?!”

“If I want to take the top spot as fast as possible, I’ll need to get my hands on my opponents’ weaknesses. Isn’t that the go-to play?”

That day—the first day of Bell’s school life—she instantly climbed the ranks to join the top caste of the school.



Some time had passed since the disturbance at dorm Cielo. The sun had risen to its peak, meaning it was noon.

“Let’s go to the cafeteria, Ri-chan!” Rami Ryuuoh threw the door to Rion and Dorothy’s room open and charged in.

“Wagh?!” Dorothy yelped.

“What— Rai-chan?!” Rion exclaimed in surprise.

It had happened the instant the pair had finally finished moving in and had a moment to catch their breath in their now clean room. While Dorothy’s reaction was a matter of course, Rion was also surprised by the sudden

intrusion.

“Oh, is this girl your roommate, Ri-chan?” Rami gushed. “Aww, she seems simple and hella nice! It’d be worth polishing her up! Ri-chan and I’ll make you shine during our school life together!”

“Uh? Huh? Wha?” Dorothy muttered, dazed and confused.

“Jeez, Rai-chan! Everything you do is way too sudden,” Rion protested. “I’ll translate for you, Thee-chan: she wants to get along with the both of us, so she’s inviting you to be her friend.”

“R-Really?!” Dorothy seemed half in disbelief.

“We’re gonna be BFFs!” Rami declared.

“She’s saying she’d be happy if we could all become best friends in the future,” Rion translated.

“Uh, whaaa?” Dorothy let out. Though they all spoke the same language, she couldn’t seem to understand Rami at all. She was just being led around by Rami’s strange way of speaking.

At any rate, Rami’s introduction went off successfully thanks to Rion translating, after which the girls had gone with the flow and were now in the cafeteria.

“This is it!” Rami had led them to a huge building. Though everything in this academy seemed huge, put plainly, it was a really impressive mess hall. Everything the girls had seen since coming to Lumiest was on this type of gigantic scale, so they were slowly growing numb to such sights.



“Wow, this place is so big! And isn’t it more like a high-class restaurant than a cafeteria?” Dorothy remarked.

“Um, there seem to be more cooks and waitstaff than diners here...” Rion muttered.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff!” Rami exclaimed. “Doesn’t it just show how much people have paid for this place and how much they expect from our futures? Not that I really know about any of that stuff. Ah, I wanna have meat! Meeeattt!”

“Huh? You eat meat, Rai-chan?!” The sight of Rami ordering meat was the biggest surprise of the day for Rion.

“Hm? Of course I do. In fact, it’s what I eat most days. I’m a drag—erm...a growing girl? Yeah! Eating meat should be the default. Ah, but I’m a carnivore in other ways too!” Rami declared.

“Uh, huh? Is eating meat...normal?” Rion wondered aloud. “Now that you mention it, Boga was eating meat back at the volcano too...”

“Hmm? You’re acting pretty weird, Ri-chan,” Rami noted.

Rion had totally accepted that dragons ate mainly vegetables and sugar as common sense. However, she didn’t need to spend time pondering to realize such a thing had never been true. The resident vegetable lover, Dahak, and sweet-toothed Mdofarak were simply exceptions.

With this shocking revelation, the trio successfully put in their orders with the waiter. As Rami had stated, she went for a pile of meat. Meanwhile, Rion ordered a small set meal, and Dorothy asked for a soup and salad.

“What?! Is that seriously enough for the two of you?!” Rami exclaimed in shock. “You know you can order as much as you want since your tuition pays for this stuff, right? Or are you on a diet?”

“Neither,” Rion replied. “I just don’t eat much. In fact, this is a little more than normal.”

“It’s more than enough for me too,” Dorothy agreed. “There were times in the village where we would have to skip meals during cold snaps, so I’m just

grateful to be able to eat my fill.”

“Huh...” Rami considered that information. “I heard about how little Ri-chan ate, but you’ve got it pretty hard too, huh, Thee-chan? Respect.”

“Um...those rumors, where did you hear them?” Rion asked, but after taking a moment to think about it, she corrected herself. “Actually, never mind. By the way, where do you come from, Thee-chan? I’m from Parth on the Eastern Continent.”

“I...guess I’d be from Gaun? Sorta? Yeah, totally Gaun!” Rami spoke as if she was convincing herself, repeating the word several times. She should have been here on Gaun’s recommendation, but it seemed the receiver of that recommendation had basically no awareness of that fact.

“I’m from Leigant’s, um...well, it’s a remote village. It’s a poor, destitute village that doesn’t even have a name, so it’s really embarrassing for me to tell you,” Dorothy said.

“Leigant? You mean the same country as Ed-kun?” Rion asked to confirm.

“Ed-kun?” For a moment, Dorothy didn’t recognize the name thanks to Rion’s casual nickname. “Uh, ahhh, you mean Prince Edgar! Oh, no, no, that might work as a nickname, but you can’t do that to him; it’s discourteous!”

Dorothy then went on to say that while she knew of him, she was sure he didn’t even know that she existed, declaring that she was so far off his radar as to be practically nonexistent.

“That’s probably not true,” Rion said. “I think it’s pretty amazing that you managed to get admitted to Lumiest in your situation. It shows a lot of talent. After all, I only managed to get in after having a whole lot of help from Kel-nii and everyone else around me.”

“Yep! I agree with Ri-chan,” Rami added. “Honestly, Thee-chan, you took care of the tuition and a recommendation all on your own, didn’t you? Seriously, respect.”

“Oh no! Nonononono! That’s not it at all!” Dorothy replied vehemently. “I just happened to concentrate all the luck in my life into one event when I managed to catch the eye of a particular person who stopped by the village. After that, I

was recommended to the academy and given all I needed to be admitted. That's why I'm going to graduate and come into my own, give my thanks to that person, and then return to my home and do some good!"

"I see!" Rami seemed impressed. "Still, isn't that impressive in its own right? That means there was someone who would go that far for you, Thee-chan. Don't you think that's amazing?"

"I do!" Rion agreed. "Also, I think it says a lot about Thee-chan that someone saw enough talent in her to go that far!"

"I... I'm telling you, I'm not that great!" Dorothy insisted. "Seriously, I'm just like dregs in a gutter!"

The trio continued arguing back and forth about whether or not Dorothy was amazing. No onlookers would be able to see an end to that circular discussion.

"Wow, you're way more stubborn than you look. Okay, let's settle it this way." With that, Rami took out the card she'd been given that morning from between her bountiful breasts.

"Is that your student ID?" Rion asked.

"Yep," Rami confirmed. "You have one too, don't you? I'm used to using these kinds of items. I did a lot of testing during the ceremony and discovered a pretty interesting function."

"Oh come on, Rai-chan, in the middle of the ceremony?" Rion said reproachfully.

"Heh heh." Rami didn't seem perturbed. "For me, not falling asleep means a lot already. Part of it was because the principal's speech was surprisingly funny, though."

For the tough kid who had slept through the written exam, not sleeping during the school's entrance ceremony was a miracle in itself. At least, that was what Rami was trying to imply.

"Wait, we're getting off track. Look at this: my student ID. If you put in some magic like this..." Rami let a small amount of magic flow into the card, causing a change to ripple across it.

Name: Rami Ryuuoh

Entrance Exam Rankings (out of a total of 100 accepted students)

- Written Test: 100th
- Physical Aptitude: 1st
- Expressiveness: 22nd
- Interview: 89th
- Overall: 47th

Rami's grades were now showing on her ID card. The gap between her written and physical exams was truly egregious. It was incredible.

"Wha... This is..." Rion sputtered, shocked.

"My exam grades or something? Yeah, they haven't told us anything about how to use this card yet, but it looks like we can check our own standings. We can compare our grades with this. We've all passed already, anyway, so there's no problem with letting each other see, right? Right?" Rami asked expectantly.

With a push from her, Rion and Dorothy tried the same with their own ID's.

Name: Rion Celsius

Entrance Exam Rankings (out of a total of 100 accepted students)

- Written Test: 37th
- Physical Aptitude: 3rd
- Expressiveness: 1st
- Interview: 1st
- Overall: 3rd

"Whooooaaa! Ri-chan, you're, like, hella super good!" Rami exclaimed.

"I... I was surprised by Rami-san's physical test scores, but you're amazing too, Rion-san!" Dorothy agreed. "I mean, aren't you nearly at the top?! Er...should I call you Rion-sama instead from now on?"

Rion quickly but gently declined Dorothy's offer. Then, it was Dorothy's turn.

"Um, like...this?" she said as she tried to do the same with her own ID.

"Yep, yep!" Rami confirmed. "Now then, I wonder what'll show up?"

"I'm so excited!" Rion added.

- Name: Dorothy
- Entrance Exam Rankings (out of a total of 100 accepted students)
- Written Test: 50th
 - Physical Aptitude: 50th
 - Expressiveness: 50th
 - Interview: 50th
 - Overall: 50th

Both Rami and Rion let out surprised noises at the same time as they saw what it said on Dorothy's ID.

"Ah, thought so," Dorothy said. "I really am lower than the two of you. I don't have anything I'm especially good at, so my grades are always like this. Uh...huh? What's wrong, you two?"

Her ranking was almost miraculous, and it was hard to believe it was just a coincidence. Rion and Rami were both lost for words.

Isn't she the most amazing out of all of us, in a sense? they both thought.



More and more students could be seen in this high-class restaurant called the cafeteria, probably because it was just about lunchtime. However, Rion and her group were more focused on Dorothy's grades, unable to tear their eyes away from the card.

"So...coincidences like this really do happen. Isn't this...rarer than winning the lottery?" Rion wondered aloud.

"I don't know any difficult facts like that, but even I know that this is really hard to pull off," Rami said. "Did you do this on purpose so as not to stand out,

Thee-chan?”

“I... I couldn’t do anything as impressive as that...” Dorothy replied.

“Hmm...even if she did do it on purpose, something this obvious would only make her stand out even more. There’s not really any merit in doing it, so I don’t think Thee-chan actually manipulated anything,” Rion reasoned.

“Ahhh, now that you mention it, yeah,” Rami agreed. “My bad, Thee-chan! I can’t believe I made wild accusations like that!”

“I...should be the one to apologize...for getting weird scores like this—” Dorothy began before being interrupted.

“Scores?! *Huff, huff...* Wha... What was that about scores?! *Huff, huff...* honeys?”

“Ah, Char-kun,” Rion acknowledged unhappily.

It was Charles who had suddenly barged in on their conversation and was panting hard for some reason. His breathing was ragged, meaning he must have been running at full sprint until just now.

“He’s a dude from our dorm, right? I’m Rami! Heya!” Rami greeted him.

“My name is Dorothy. Um...it’s...nice to meet you,” Dorothy said.

“Niceta— *Huff!*” Charles couldn’t quite get a full sentence out between breaths.

“Um...why do you look so tired, Char-kun?” Rion asked.

“I... I went to the next dorm over to give my greetings...” Charles gasped. “But then I got lost, and I ran all over the place to *huff, huff, huff...* Okay, I think I’m okay now. So, err...you three were showing each other your exam scores? Oh, kittens, you should let me into your circle too!”

“Oh! You sure sound confident,” Rami said excitedly. “Okay, let’s see it; take out your ID!”

“My pleasure!” With Rami urging him on, Charles let his magic flow into his ID card. Everyone’s gazes gathered to his scores, and...

Name: Charles Vaccania

Entrance Exam Rankings (out of a total of 100 accepted students)

- Written Test: 44th
- Physical Aptitude: 72nd
- Expressiveness: 76th
- Interview: 100th
- Overall: 88th

His ranking was...difficult to comment on. However, Charles still seemed proud somehow.

“So?” he asked. “What do you think of my scores? My academic ability looks pretty good, doesn’t it?”

“Uh...yeah,” Dorothy said. “You did better than me.”

“Heh, thought so.”

“Oh no, no, what’s more important is this: what’s up with your interview score?” Rami asked. “It’s the same score I got on the written exam, and all I did was write down my name and sleep!”

“Rai-chan?!” Rion exclaimed, shocked. Rami’s statement was also problematic in its own way.

“I’m not really sure,” Charles replied. “I showed off my charms, and I feel like I did a good job wooing the proctor, who was female, by the way.”

None of the three girls had anything to say in reply. The moment he spoke, they understood why he had gotten the score he did. However, in a certain sense, he was truly a big shot.

“Huh? Is that Rion-san I see?”

While the girls’ feelings about Charles looped all the way back around to being vaguely impressed, a familiar voice called out to them.

“Ah, DarkMel! You’re finished moving?”

When Rion turned in the direction of the voice, she found DarkMel in her uniform. The young girl was also accompanied by a huge man who gave off a

similarly large impression.

“Hello, all. I am honored to meet you. Mine name is...”

To move things along, the boy was Graham, from the same dorm as DarkMel. As the group listened to him, they heard how he had saved DarkMel, who had become the mascot of dorm Selva, from the gaggle of girls who were fighting over her. Because he had done so only a few seconds before Milky, the dorm head, had appeared, it was safe to say they had gotten down to the wire in that case. After that incident, it was time for lunch, so he had shown her to the cafeteria.

“I see...so this girl is the one from the rumors...” Rami muttered. “Hmm, well, she doesn’t feel evil anymore, so I guess it’s fine?”

“Huh?” said Dorothy.

“Oh, nothing. Don’t worry about it,” Rami assured her. “More importantly, now that you two’re here, you’ve gotta show us your ID’s!”

“Huh?” This time, it was DarkMel’s turn.

“Hmm?” Graham was similarly confused.

“Aha ha, you’re too hasty, Rai-chan!” Rion laughed.

This second set of questions was followed by what was now custom: the showing of their ID’s. The pair then did as they were told and put their magic into the cards.

“Heh, let’s see...” Charles said confidently. “I will be the judge of how good your scores are. I, who ranked number forty-four on the written exam!”

Of course, Charles had yet to see Rion’s and the others’ scores.

Name: DarkMel Celsius

Entrance Exam Rankings (out of a total of 100 accepted students)

- Written Test: 43rd
- Physical Aptitude: 5th
- Expressiveness: 28th
- Interview: 4th

- Overall: 8th

There was quite a pause before Charles let out a “Huh?” although it was understandable why he’d let out such a noise.

Name: Graham Nakatomiuzi

Entrance Exam Rankings (out of a total of 100 accepted students)

- Written Test: 2nd
- Physical Aptitude: 4th
- Expressiveness: 5th
- Interview: 7th
- Overall: 2nd

And now, Charles was speechless. Or, it might have been more accurate to say he was struck dumb. Finally, he had shut his mouth.

“Wow, DarkMel’s also in the top ten!” Rion exclaimed.

“You too, Rion-san?” DarkMel confirmed excitedly. “Thank goodness! That means we achieved our goal. We match!”

Charles aside, it seemed that Rion and DarkMel had been aiming to get into the top ten together. The two held hands as they jumped for joy.

“Ooohhh?!” Rami exclaimed, impressed. “Well, aren’t you amazing, Grammy?! Like, all around...just amazing!”

“Grammy... What a bizarre nickname. Still, it feels like I may spew fire from my face with how much you are complimenting my person,” Graham replied bashfully.

“These... These scores aren’t just in the realm of amazing!” Dorothy asserted. “Uh, but...you scored this well and you’re still only second? Ah, that’s right, that pretty girl was the one who gave the address... But if your grades look like this, what do hers look like?”

“You rang?” the girl in question said.

“Hwaaagh?!” Dorothy yelped.

Today seemed to be a day for surprised yelps. Unsurprisingly, when Dorothy turned towards the voice, there stood Bell. Coming in after her were a number of other students, likely from dorm Cielo.

“Please don’t just disappear all of a sudden, Bell-sama! We lost you for a moment!”

Just like Charles had been, the students were drenched in sweat and breathing hard.

“I didn’t disappear; I just jogged for a while,” Bell told them. “Actually, can’t you do your recruiting somewhere else? I have no intention of joining any clubs.”

“Buh... But!”

“Um...Bell-chan?” Rion prompted meekly.

“Ah, Rion, DarkMel.” Bell turned to them. “What a coincidence, to see you two in a place like this. Are you about to eat? Would you mind if I joined you?”

“Hey, you just told us to add ‘sama’ to the end of your name! Why’re you—”

“You can’t run down the hallways, Bell-san!” DarkMel interrupted. “It’s against the rules! Sera-san wouldn’t do it either! Apparently, it hurts her conscience!”

That elicited a gasp from Bell. “Sister Sera does?! Tch, fine. I’ll be careful.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s important, sure, but what’s more important is what those people behind you—” Rion started but was interrupted.

“Hey, come on, bring out your student ID!” Rami demanded. “You’re the new challenger, Bell-cchi!”

“Huh?” Bell said incredulously.

“Yeah...she’s saying it’d be nice if you’d show us your exam scores, Bell-chan,” Rion interpreted.

Bell chose not to go against the flow, and the questions were pushed back for later.

Name: Bell Baal

Entrance Exam Rankings (out of a total of 100 accepted students)

- Written Test: 1st
- Physical Aptitude: 2nd
- Expressiveness: 2nd
- Interview: 2nd
- Overall: 1st

“Ugrrrrkkkhhh...” Charles made a noise.

“Char-kun?!” Rion shouted in surprise. The boy had ascended to the heavens, it seemed.



After that, the group was finished showing each other their scores, and they went straight to eating together (without Charles, who was knocked out and had to go to the infirmary, or the people who were trying to recruit Bell). Though they were in different dorms, they were all new students, and Rion had suggested they should take this chance to deepen their bonds.

“Huh,” Rion made an appreciative noise. “So you’re from the Rifiel Orphanage in Deramis. Kel-nii, my older brother, told me before that he went there with Colette.”

“Is that so?” Graham replied. “What a coincidence—though I suppose I should not be surprised. Rumors of the Grim Reaper Kelvin-dono and the Oracle of Deramis being together abounded even at the orphanage. Going for their honeymoon would only be natural, if one thinks about it.”

“Hon... Honeymoon?!” Rion reacted with surprise at the word.

“Indeed. There is no way the orphanage’s sisters and the children *wouldn’t* talk if the Oracle, who had up until now had nothing to do with men, came with a fierce-looking guy in tow. I left the orphanage a year ago, but whenever I go back to visit, I am inevitably filled up to my ears with gossip. Presently, no one at the orphanage *doesn’t* know about the relationship between the Grim

Reaper and the Oracle.”

“Really... It’s spread that far...” Rion muttered.

It *was* possible that an orphanage where Colette was so familiar would be as shocked as Graham claimed if she were to bring a man with her. Rather, since the rumors weren’t entirely wrong, there was no need to correct them.

Meanwhile, Bell spat out the word “Filthy!” under her breath.

“Heh ha ha! To be fair, some of the children were in love with the Oracle, so that probably contributed to the speed at which the rumors spread,” Graham reasoned. “Unfortunately, they would be up against a Rank S adventurer. There is no doubt they have now totally given up and are looking elsewhere. Personally, I would have liked them to have continued to strive for the top instead of giving up, but this is also a trait of youth!”

Graham wrapped it up nicely, but a couple people in the group couldn’t help but feel that they had been right to give up on her, as they thought of Colette’s expression during one of her episodes.

“Oh come on, stop!” Rami said teasingly. “I bet you were one of the people who was infatuated with the Oracle, weren’t you, Grammy? Hey, hey, tell us the truth! Get it off your shoulders!”

“Alas, that is untrue,” Graham replied. “I am devoted to Sister Atra.”

“Atra? Huh, I’ve no idea who that is, but you aren’t flustered at all, Grammy. You’re totally determined, aren’t you?” Rami asked excitedly.

“Yes indeed,” he said, elongating the tail of his reply in concert with Rami’s speech pattern. Surprisingly, he was pretty good at playing along.

“Huh? Then...does that mean you know Ellen-san too, Graham-kun?” Rion asked.

“Of course. Sister Ellen is the entire orphanage’s mother, meaning she is essentially my mother. As you might know, Rion-dono, due to particular circumstances, mother was missing for a while. But thanks to the efforts of my elder sisters Lunoir and Ashley—in adventurer terms, they would be the Ice Princess Sylvia and Blaze Princess Ema—she was found. My word, I had been

traveling the world looking for her as well, but those two were far ahead of me. Of course, that doesn't change the fact that the matter is settled. I am quite pleased."

Apparently, just like Sylvia and Ema had left Trycen to find Ellen, Graham had been searching for her as well, though on his own. Judging from his scores, his physical prowess was close to Rion's; he was that strong. It seemed the orphanage tended to produce highly skilled people, like Edward, who was involved in the political sphere of the Rizean Empire.

"Ah, um...DarkMel-san..." Dorothy whispered. "There has been a lot of talk about leaders of great countries and famous adventurers..." She trailed off, her question implied.

"Huh?" DarkMel whispered back. "Uh...are you talking about papa? Well, papa is papa, and we're all friends with Colette-san and Sylvia-san and the others. Why do you ask?"

"Papaaaaaaa?!" Dorothy was rather skilled at whispering, as even that outburst was done at low volume. Was this just part of the repertoire of someone who managed to score completely average on everything?

"Mother is rather wild and uninhibited, you see," Graham had continued in the meantime. "Back when I was a little whelp, I was scolded often along with my elder sisters."

"Aha ha, sounds really fun," Rion replied.

"Indeed it was. Very much so, in fact. When I returned home after hearing the news that she had been found, I felt like I had returned to my childhood, though it was rather unlike me. Still, that wasn't what was truly shocking. If you can believe it, there was someone even more incredible than mother awaiting me when I returned, someone with such power in them that I couldn't believe they were of this world. I asked for a match as a way for us to entertain ourselves, but even with my elder sisters working with me, we stood no chance. I must say, I thought I had gotten rather strong after my travels, but it seemed I was but a frog in a well."

"Ah..."

A few members of the group had instantly had a specific black-haired Hero who was the strongest in history come to mind. She came as a set with Ellen, so it made sense that she was there at the orphanage. Even Rion and Bell found it next to impossible to win against that Hero. In fact, it was close to a miracle that they'd won during that fateful battle. Even if Graham teamed up with Sylvia and Ema to fight her, it would probably be difficult, to say the least, to win against her if her unique skills weren't sealed off.

"At any rate," Graham continued, "after that shock to my system, I decided to polish myself some more, from the ground up. That was a major factor in my decision to come to this school. Luckily, my big brother Edward tutored me, so I had no problems with the exam. And as for the money and recommendation that I was missing, I used some connections to secure them from Tsubaki-dono of Toraj."

"Wow, so generous!"

"She truly is. She even prepared a place of employment for me, saying that it would all be good as long as I worked for Toraj after graduating. From what I hear, my elder sisters are also currently under Toraj's umbrella. Heh heh, to think I would once again have the opportunity to work side by side with my elder sisters... It would be impossible to find more favorable terms!"

"Ah, yeah..."

In short, that sounded exactly like the human resources monster that was Tsubaki; it was quite a forceful bit of recruitment.

"By the way..." Graham changed the subject. "I understand that you obtained a recommendation from the Beast King Leonhart-dono of Gaun, Rami-dono. I would ask: what is *your* purpose in coming to this academy? When it comes to Leonhart-dono, I hear he is cunning for a member of the beastfolk. Are there, as one suspects, extenuating circumstances?"

"Huh? Me?" Rami responded. "Nope. If I had to give a reason, I was just bored, I guess? I just happened to hear that Ri-chan was going to go to Lumiest from my friend, Salacchi. So I was all like, what the heck? School life sounds perfect for me! Anyhoo, I went over to Leo-chan's place and asked him to get me in. He said okay, and now I'm here!" Her reasons were as empty as could be.

“Wow, the Beast King sounds nice too.” DarkMel sounded impressed.

“Yep, yep!” Rami agreed. “He’s super understanding!”

The mood between DarkMel and Rami was cozy.

Uh...that Beast King?! Rion thought, shocked. Is something like that even...possible? It doesn't sound like he asked Rai-chan for something in return... Suspicious... There's definitely something up with that!

Rion, having fought Leonhart one-on-one, was convinced that there was something behind the ruler’s apparent goodwill. But in truth, the Beast King had just made the decision after mucking around with his abacus and concluding that strong relations between Gaun and Lumiest would bring in more money than Rami’s tuition would cost, through festivals, stalls run by the country, and general publicity. Those stalls run by Gaun were, in fact, in operation right now at the party outside Lumiest’s walls.

“May I have a moment, Rion, Graham, and Rami?” Bell called out to the three in the middle of their lively conversation.

“Hm?” Graham let out an inquisitive noise.

“What’s up, Bell-chan?” Rion asked.

“Why was I last, like an afterthought?” Rami chimed in.

“You just were,” Bell answered. “Come to the school’s inner courtyard tonight. At midnight.”

“The inner courtyard?” the trio repeated in unison.

“Yes. You’ll know when you’re there, since there’s a large monument in the middle. Make sure you slip out of your dorms unnoticed. Of course, none of you have the right to refuse.”

Seeing Bell’s smile, the trio collectively tilted their heads in puzzlement.



Today, Lumiest remained lively even after the sun had set. There was not even the slightest sign that the festival outside the walls would end, and the students inside the academy’s dorms were also celebrating their admittance.

Dorm Volcann, the one Rion was assigned to, was no exception, and until just now, they had been in the middle of a welcome party thrown by the upperclassmen. Since dorm Volcann housed a lot of demihumans, practically none of the students there cared about race or age. That helped both older and newer students build fast bonds and saw them living it up in great spirits late into the night.

“I... I didn’t think I’d have to greet that many people... I feel nauseous... But I’m glad I made so many friends...” Dorothy finally made it back to her room and immediately fell into her bed. She was all smiles, though. For someone who was rather shy and unconfident, it seemed she was quite satisfied by her welcome to Volcann.

“Our seniors seem really nice, like they’ll take good care of us, huh?” Rion said. “Also, it was fun watching you in such a panic, Thee-chan!”

“Ugh, please, you didn’t have to point that out, Rion-san...”

“Aha ha, fair enough. Okay then...hup!” In the midst of their conversation, Rion walked over to the window, opened it, and started to climb out. “I’ll be leaving for a bit, so I’m counting on you to take care of things for me here!”

“Huh? Waitwaitwaitwait— Ri-Rion-san?!” Seeing Rion about to exit through the open window, Dorothy hurriedly tried to stop her. Her exhaustion had piled up, though, and instead of getting up, she fell out of bed and could only desperately stretch out her hand to attempt to grab her friend.

“It’s fine! Look, Alex is in my bed mimicking my shape, so as long as nobody flips over the covers, I won’t be found out.”

Rion gave a thumbs-up and puffed out her chest as she assured her friend that everything would be fine. She was right; Alex was indeed in her bed using his ability to mimic Rion’s silhouette. Because he was a shadow, the entire body was black, but with the lights off he did look like a slumbering Rion.

“Whiiine! (It’s me!)”

“Whaaat? Alex?! What... What kind of magic? Wait, no! We... This is... It’s the second floor!”

“Oh, don’t worry about that; this height is nothing. Basically like jumping off

the stairs.”

“Ah, right. With Rion-san’s physical abilities... Wait, that’s not the problem here! Um...you’re not allowed outside at night unless you notify the dorm head. Going out without permission is a violation of the school rules. So, um...please stop becoming a delinquent—”

“Huh? But I got permission? Look, I have a signature from Instructor Arche and everything.” With that, Rion showed Dorothy a slip of paper. She was right; what was in Rion’s hand was a formal notice that was signed by the dorm head, Arche.

“Oh, so you do have a pass... Um, then why are you acting like that? It’s confusing. And why make Alex a standin?”

“Hm? Isn’t it just etiquette to make sure you go out in secret if you’re going to go out at night?”

“Huh?”

Was there such a rule? Dorothy had to ask herself that and pondered the answer seriously. However, Rion had been totally serious. That begged the question of where, or more specifically, in what manga, she had learned such a thing from.

“You ready, Ri-chan?”

“Ah, Rai-chan!”

“Whoa?!”

As they were talking, Rami suddenly poked her head through the window. As a reminder, they were on the second floor, which wasn’t a height where people could normally poke their heads through windows. Dorothy was deeply surprised, and it seemed she was still affected by what had happened earlier that day.

“I was just about to leave,” Rion replied. “Okay then, Thee-chan, I’m off! I’ll probably be right back, though.”

“Sup, Thee-chan. I’ll be borrowing Ri-chan for a bit!”

“Um...have a good trip...” Dorothy had yet to calm her heavily beating heart,

but she tried her best to smile as she saw the two off.

Rion and Rami jumped out of the window like it was nothing and landed easily on the ground. Within a few seconds, they had completely disappeared.

“So...this is Lumiest!” Dorothy muttered to herself, impressed. “I came to a really amazing place!”

Though Dorothy was impressed, she would find herself disappointed if she were to judge everyone else by the two girls’ standards.



While the main school building’s inner courtyard was lively during the day, at night it was totally quiet and empty. The pillar-shaped monument, which towered high at the center of the area, took on a different, mystical air compared to how it was during the day.

Three figures waited by the monument’s side, seemingly mindful of the time, as if they were waiting for one more.

“You’re finally here,” one of the figures complained.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” Rion answered.

“Soz!” Rami echoed.

They had arrived at a light run while waving their hands.

“You’re late. Five minutes late,” the same figure said unhappily.

“Uh, sorry,” Rion apologized. “The welcome party went a little long, and it was so fun that I just...”

“Oh, don’t sweat it. Five minutes doesn’t count as late. In fact, aren’t we a bit fast? Come on, you should praise us for coming this early!” While Rion sincerely apologized, Rami asserted that they weren’t actually late.

The pair’s opposing reactions already had Bell at a loss. “Rion aside, it seems you’re constantly playing it loose with time.”

“Oooh, are you actually going to praise us?” Rami asked.

“No...”

“Now, now,” Graham interjected. “We are all here, are we not? Everything is fine. Bell-dono, now is the time to show your broad-mindedness as a ruler.”

Bell sighed. “Seriously, all of you get full of yourselves so quickly.”

“By the way, Bell-chan, I’ve been wondering when to ask this, but...who is that?”

Rion’s gaze was directed at the female student who had been waiting with Bell and Graham. The girl had shining golden hair that stood out even in the dead of night, and just by standing there, she gave off a very elegant presence. Since she stood out so much, there was no way for any of them to have forgotten her if they’d met before. While it was hard to describe why, she just *seemed* like royalty.

“*Ahem.*” The girl cleared her throat. “It is nice to meet all of you. I am the president of Lumiest’s student council, Melissa Crowlord. While I feel this is a bit late, allow me to extend my congratulations on your admittance to Lumiest.”

“The... The student council president?!” Rion exclaimed. “Uh, no, the pleasure is all mine!”

“Huh, so you’re a pretty big shot. Sup!” Rami seemed unaffected.

“It seems the words ‘many and varied’ don’t even begin to cover the breadth of this year’s new students,” Melissa remarked, the next one to be at a loss.

“Pft!” Bell couldn’t help but react with a snort from her position behind the blonde girl.

“Umm...so, the student council president was acquainted with Bell-chan and Graham-kun, then?” Rion asked.

“No, that’s not the case—” Melissa started but was interrupted by Bell.

“Yes, we are. I only met her today, but Melissa told me she would love to be friends, so now we’re just like you and her,” she said, indicating Rami.

“Wow, really?” Rion replied.

“Best friends already? You sure work fast, Miss Student Council President!” Rami said, impressed. “I guess I shouldn’t judge a book by its cover!”

“R-Right. Yes, exactly...” Melissa agreed hesitantly, a cramped smile on her face. Surely she felt no qualms or dissatisfaction at all, as Bell’s bosom buddy.

“That should be enough for introductions,” Graham interjected. “We should get to the point of this gathering, Bell-dono.”

“Ah, that’s right!” Rion gasped at the reminder. “Why did you call us out here at this time, Bell-chan?”

“I didn’t want anyone unrelated to hear what I’m about to say to you,” Bell explained. “Rion, do you know what this is?” She pointed at the symbol of the courtyard: Lumiest’s Divine Pillar, which had been confirmed as such when Rion and Kelvin had visited before.

“Huh? It’s a Divine Pillar...isn’t it?” Rion replied. “Um, I think it’s a bit dangerous and you shouldn’t get too close, Bell-chan...”

“Hmph! A demigod will pop out from inside if a demon touches it. I believe that’s the story? But there’s no need to worry. This pillar’s empty,” Bell explained.

“Empty? What do you mean, Bell-chan?” Rion replied with a puzzled look and tilted head.

Rami didn’t seem to understand either, as she had a blank look accompanied by a giant question mark seeming to pop up over her head.

“I meant exactly what I said,” Bell replied. “I just explained it to Graham and Melissa, but the demigod that was supposed to be sealed inside this one is gone. As proof... Look, even if I touch it, nothing happens.”

With that, Bell walked over to the pillar and gave it a light kick. It was true; even when a demon like her touched it, there was no change.

“You’re right,” Rion said. “Back in Parth and Gaun, when Sera-nee and gramps touched the pillars, they went all bright right away... But how did you figure out that it was empty?”

“All the Divine Pillars feel the same,” Bell explained. “I knew what they felt like since Tristan used them, so it wasn’t hard for me to figure out. Anyway, one of the things Kelvin asked me to do was related to this Divine Pillar, so I came to

check it out during the day just in case. When I did, I found it like this.” Bell gave the monument a few more kicks.

Knowing that it was a commemorative monument for Lumiest, Rion went up to stop her. “I... I see,” she said. “That makes sense. Kel-nii was interested in Lumiest’s Divine Pillar, after all.”

One of the conditions Kelvin had set for Rion and the others to attend Lumiest was related to the Divine Pillar, though it was more like several personal requests.

The Divine Pillars had been made and spread throughout the world by the former goddess Elearis; they were demigods and a measure against Demon Lords. However, thanks to the clandestine actions of Black Melfina, they had been filled with malice, which caused problems with their sense of morals and motivations. That was also why they tended to go on a rampage just by being touched by people like Sera. Because of that, Deramis, the country that had jurisdiction over the Divine Pillars, had designated them targets to be either isolated or destroyed.

Bell continued, “Out of a total of ten pillars, six have already been destroyed. On the Eastern Continent, there were the Divine Wolf Galonzolf in Parth, the Divine Beast Diamante in Gaun, and the Divine Beetle Lenge-Range in Trycen. On the Western Continent, the Divine Dragon Zahahka, Deus Ex Machina, and the Divine Snake Anra. Of those remaining, the Divine Spirit Deatotal in Deramis and the Divine Whale Zeval in Toraj lie deep in a dungeon, and it seems Kelvin is planning to take care of them when the time is right. As for the Divine Bird Wyldgroh, which I have heard is somewhere in Leigant, the location of its pillar is currently under investigation. That leaves this tenth one here in Lumiest—”

This time, Melissa was the one interrupting, speaking as if picking up where Bell left off. “Which we were notified about by Deramis. However, since this is a commemorative monument given to us by the gods, I have heard that many influential people both in and outside the school have voiced their objections to doing anything about it.”

She paused for a moment before continuing.

“The general student consensus is that it’s just a regular monument with

some nice matchmaking rumors attached to it. I never would have imagined it had such a dangerous thing lurking inside if Bell hadn't told me. The people who objected to the appeal from Deramis likely didn't know anything either. Other than that, right...this city is an inviolable symbol in which countless countries have spread their roots. If I had to liken this holy territory to a place on the Eastern Continent, it would be Parth. There might have been feelings of not wanting to accept it out of defiance since the message was from a major country."

"That's why I'm aiming to graduate at the top of the class," Bell said. "Once I do, most reforms I propose will be adopted, isn't that right?"

"Yes, well..." Melissa agreed noncommittally. "As someone who is also aiming to graduate at the top of the class, my feelings on this are...complicated."

As Bell said, for generations, those who had graduated at the top of their class at Lumiest gained the right to propose school reforms, such as allocating budgets and necessary facilities. This was a symbol of the trust placed by the school in their top graduates and a thing that served to make Lumiest better.

Of course, Colette and Shutola, who had graduated in the past, used that right to enact changes such as placing a Rinne chapel on school grounds and adding a class to teach sewing dolls and stuffed animals. Those might have seemed like proposals made due to personal greed, but since the right was also meant to be a sort of reward for the graduate, ideas like those examples tended to pass quite easily. As long as the proposals weren't too offensive, they tended to be adopted quickly.

Bell was aiming to take advantage of this system. If the school wouldn't cave to outside pressure, then she would use the system to convince them from the inside. If they were listening to an honorable top graduate instead of bending to the will of a large and influential country, even the more hardheaded of detractors would likely get on board.

"Anyway, the plan is totally useless now, so there's no need for me to do that anymore," Bell explained. "The contents of this Divine Pillar—the entire reason it needed to be removed—is missing, after all. Bringing this empty pillar back to Kelvin would only serve to let me look at his dumb face. Ah, but that would

make sister Sera sad, so I guess that's no good either..."

"Hey, that isn't the first thing you should be worrying about, is it?" Rami asked. "If that thing's empty, where did whatever was inside go? Is it still in the academy, or is it already outside somewhere? Either way, having a Divine Pillar loose would be real dangerous, wouldn't it? Like, you'd also have to think about finding whoever let it out too."

Rami had seemed totally uninterested up until now, but all of a sudden, she was speaking up while playing with her hair. Since no one had expected her to contribute, her totally reasonable and serious question made Bell's eyes widen for a moment.

"Are you...surprisingly smart?" Bell couldn't help but ask.

"Not really!" Rami replied. "I just wanna enjoy a lovely school life with Ri-chan! So wouldn't it be better to take care of this annoying stuff super quick?"

"Heh, that train of thought is easy to understand. I like your type better than the stupid ones, though," said Bell.

In order to ensure the safety of the academy and its inhabitants, the course of action for those present had been set. They would have to find out where the Divine Pillar had gone, as well as who had released it.

"By the way, Bell-chan, are Graham-kun and the student council president going to be helping us?" Rion asked.

"Yes," Bell replied. "Melissa is the central piece of the student council, so she has some sway with the academy. I'll have her request that the principal, Art, and the instructors with the more pleasant personalities help us. I'm still pretty sure that even with them helping, we won't be able to do anything drastic like evacuating all the students for safety or something, though."

"I'd agree with you on that," said Melissa. "As I've just said, the academy is skeptical about this Divine Pillar's existence. Even if they do exercise vigilance, they wouldn't do anything that would smear their reputation. I personally won't hold back on anything you might need, but don't expect much, please."

"Understood," said Bell. "There's no need to worry, though. I never was expecting much, my best friend."

Melissa said nothing in reply.

“Please be a little softer with your words, Bell-dono.” Graham attempted to mediate. “The way you speak may cause a revolt someday.”

“Ah, allow me to explain,” Rion jumped in. “The fact that Bell-chan feels comfortable enough to talk that way with you is good proof that you’re great friends!”

“I see!” Rami said in a singsong voice.

“Is that so?” Graham said.

“B-Bell-san, I would never have guessed...” Melissa reacted with surprise.

Thanks to Rion’s support, everyone had turned their gazes to Bell.

“Graham seems fairly strong, and most importantly, Elea—” Bell stopped herself and cleared her throat. “*Ahem*, well, I was suspicious of his past and that he claimed to be from Ellen’s orphanage. I have to ask, you were given orders by Ellen and Serge to do something concerning this Divine Pillar, weren’t you? Come on, hurry up and tell me what you’re hiding. Quickly.”

Ah, she totally ignored it, Rion noticed, but kept to herself.

She changed the subject, Graham thought.

Aw, Bell-cchi! Seems like teasing her will be fun! Rami thought.

Bell-san, you really do... Melissa shouted in her mind. There might have been one of the group whose gaze upon Bell was a bit more heated than the others, or there might not have been.



A few days had passed since Rion and the others had formally entered Lumiest. My daily worries were never-ending. Were they doing well? Were they feeling confused by the change in environment? Were they getting along and making friends their own age? Were they properly turning away all the men who tried to approach them?

I continued to put my all into mentoring Suzu and the others in magic and martial arts in an attempt to get those questions out of my mind. Part of this

included immersing myself and the others in the recently discovered Rank S dungeon where I'd met Sinjeel and his party. However, the cloud of worry in my heart never went away, and now here we were.

Gah! They're all growing up so deliciously right in front of my eyes; why can't I enjoy it?! I've lost my little sister, I've lost my daughter...I'm at my limit!

But just as my mind was roiling with conflict, I received a telepathic message. It was from the people I wanted to hear the voices of most at the moment. Yes, Rion and DarkMel! *I see; they were thinking the same thing!*

::...so that's how things went, and now we know that the Divine Pillar is empty. But Bell-chan and the student council president made some moves, and now the academy is going to be helping us in secret! It also looks like Graham-kun, who came from the orphanage, asked Sister Ellen to start her own casual investigation, and we learned a lot about Divine Pillars.: That was the content of Rion's first message.

::The meetup took place at midnight, so I was asleep at the time. I'm so ashamed...:: came DarkMel's unfortunate follow-up.

::Aha ha! Apparently, given the time, Bell-chan knew not to invite DarkMel. She takes really good care of us, in the end.: Rion noted.

::I... I'm not that much of a child! I'll try hard to stay awake next time! I'm definitely going to be there at the next meeting!::

::That's the spirit! So, Kel-nii? Have you been listening?::

Uh...yeah... I replied telepathically, before thinking to myself, How could this be?! They didn't message me because they were lonely or anything! They just wanted to report the status of the Divine Pillar that I asked about! But I'm still satisfied since I got to hear their voices!

That was as far as I took my fatherly urges, though. The pillar was empty, and that meant there was someone who had caused it to be so. It was a grave discovery for Rion, the others, and their school lives. Some sort of countermeasure was needed, and I could only compliment Bell for taking the initiative and making a move.

It's been a few days since the pillar was found to be empty. Has anything

changed? I asked through the Network.

::Nope. Nothing from my end, I think? The school's having classes as usual, and none of my classmates or my seniors have found anyone suspicious. What about you, DarkMel?:: Rion answered.

DarkMel then sent her own message. ::I feel the same. Even though it's empty, the Divine Pillar still exists as a monument, so there hasn't been any sort of commotion from what I've seen. Bell-san also said that aside from the empty pillar, she hasn't felt anything of note at the academy, so....::

I sent back a summary and gave them my conclusions through the Network. *So, for the moment, there's nothing really to be done, huh? I guess that means we should be looking outside the academy... Ah, right, who was inside Lumiest's Divine Pillar? I mean, the others all have their own motifs, right? Like wolf and dragon and stuff. If we know what whatever was inside looks like, we'll be able to find it much easier. And you mentioned a Graham-kun who was recommended by Toraj? He's been taught by the former-Goddess-Elearis-turned-Sister-Ellen, so he's told you that much, at least, right?*

::Ummm...well....:: both of them replied evasively and in unison.

What's wrong, you two? I urged them to explain.

DarkMel was the one to elaborate. ::It seems that not even Ellen-san, who made the Divine Pillars, knows what form Lumiest's took when it activated, papa.::

Huh? Really? I answered, surprised.

::Yeah, seems like it. This is just stuff I heard from Graham-kun, but when the Divine Pillars were made all over the world, it was essentially like planting seeds. They would continue to grow over the years after that, taking on forms suited to the area,:: Rion explained.

I see, I replied. *So that's why Gaun's was a beast, and I hear that Toraj's is a whale, though I haven't seen it.*

::Yep!:: came DarkMel's short affirmation.

::Also, it looks like all the Divine Pillars other than the one in Lumiest have

been activated at least once before for the demigods inside to fight, but...:: Rion trailed off.

I tried to urge her on. *But?*

::Lumiest's pillar is the only one that has never been activated. So not even Ellen-san, who used to be the Goddess, knows what kind of shape the thing inside evolved into. I'm sure mama is the same.:: DarkMel messaged.

Ah, I see, I replied, then thought privately to myself, *So, Sister Ellen created the Divine Pillar back when she was Elearis, but there haven't been any Demon Lord incidents anywhere near Lumiest up until now? That's why all the different countries value it as a peaceful land, and those of the upper crust like to gather at the academy...* I returned to the Network and asked, *Do you have anything to add to that information, Mel?*

::Mgmgmgmg!::

Okay, so everything that's been said is generally correct. It seems Graham-kun or whatever his name is is right, I mused to myself.

::Uh, um...did I really just hear loud chewing sounds?:: DarkMel inquired.

Oh, we're eating lunch right now, I explained. *You know Mel; her mouth is stuffed with food right now. Basically, those are the sounds of her chewing leaking through the Network. There's no helping it, so I just translated the noises in my head.*

::So, you've finally awakened even more powers, Kel-nii...:: Rion replied.

::Wow, what an amazing ability!:: DarkMel sounded impressed even through telepathy.

Still, having to search with absolutely no hints would be too hard. I felt like we'd become quite strong after defeating six of the pillars, so would it just be faster to try and look for any strong monsters around Lumiest? *I could take Suzu and the others on a field exercise around the Western Continent, which would be two birds with one stone combining both searching and a death march...* *Right, let's do that,* I thought to myself.

Okay, I understand the situation, I finally announced "aloud." *Leave the*

investigation in Lumiest's vicinity to me. I'll give the heads-up to the former Apostle guild director and the other people I know.

::Thanks, Kel-nii!::

::I knew you'd come through, papa. You're so reliable.::

It's nothing, I'm just doing what anyone in my position would do. By the way, you two, how is living at the acade—

I was interrupted in the middle of my message.

::Oh, it's time for my next class! Okay, Kel-nii, I'll talk to you later! Bye-byyyyee!:: Rion hurriedly sent her farewells.

::I need to excuse myself too, papa. Please tell mama to chew her food properly before swallowing. Bye, then...:: DarkMel followed suit.

Just as I was about to get into what I really wanted to talk about, our conversation was cut short in a show of the worst timing. *Damn! I wanted to know about their lives at school as well as the Divine Pillar!*

Three voices broke through my frustrated thoughts.

"Your expressions were changing at the drop of a hat for a while before settling on disappointment, it seems. Are you okay, Master Kelvin?"

"Really, now? So Master Kelvin can make faces like that."

"Mmm, I managed to see something rare!"

"Are you not feeling well, Master Kelvin?! Should... Should I go get a doctor or something?!" Suzu was in a panic.

We were currently in the main hall of my current base of operations, the Golden Sparrow. After working Suzu and the others until they collapsed, I was treating them to a meal here to get them lots of nutrition, but for some reason everyone had started calling me "Master." It was likely, or rather, almost definitely, thanks to Suzu's influence. Honestly, I'd have liked them to stop, but I had a feeling it was already too late.

"Kelvin-kun! Kelvin-kun!"

"Hm? What's up, Ange?"

Ange had popped up from beside Melfina, who was currently stuffing her face full of food.

“From what I see, it’s not just Pub’s three greatest adventurers that are here, but their parties as well. Am I seeing things?” Ange asked. “Isn’t this party way larger than planned?”

There was a moment’s pause after that, only it was filled with the noise and chatter of the table.

“Uh, oh no, I mean, I just thought that if I was going to train them anyway, I might as well do so for their parties as well, so that things would be more balanced...”

Ange just stared...audibly stared.

“I... I’m doing my job properly and making them stronger! What?!”

She sighed. “What’re you doing, increasing their numbers like you’re picking up abandoned puppies?”

Paul’s party was another six people, Oddradd’s party another two, and Sinjeel’s party made two more newcomers.



“Uhhh...next is the country to the west of Lumiest, right?” I asked. “According to the investigation brief prepared by Director Shin, there are Rank A extermination targets popping up. We’re gonna get there before the sun sets and clean this up on the way, you guys. Get ready!”

“Haaahhh...haaahhh!”

“Keep... Keeping this running style up isn’t like me...or should I s— *Hack! Hack!*”

“Trying to talk while you run will just put you out of breath faster, Sinjeel-san. Keep your breathing to a steady rhythm and try not to make any unnecessary movements as you run.”

“Ruh... Roger, Lady Suzu!”

“Urghwhoooarr! My muscles are so heaaavyyy!”

Having received Rion's report telling me that the Divine Pillar was missing, I had taken Paul, Sinjeel, Oddradd, and Suzu with me to look around Lumiest's general vicinity. While we were, of course, searching for the missing Divine Pillar, this also served as training for them, so we were moving on foot. We dashed, dashed, and then dashed some more with them at full speed as I matched my pace to theirs. The aim was to build up stamina that wouldn't fail them even after an entire day of battling! Also, tough legs and hips that would become the foundation of everything!

Now run, run! The more you run, the stronger and tougher and more delicious all of you will get!

"Hm? Are we running a little late? Hey, speed up, all of you! Run like mad towards the sun!"

I almost thought I could hear Paul, Sinjeel, and Oddradd cry out in their hearts, *"I'm... I'm gonna die! I'm absolutely gonna die!"* but I had no such ability, so it was probably just a figment of my imagination. More than anything, they were currently basking in the joy of becoming stronger. They likely didn't have the time to whine, ha ha ha!

"Whew, that was hard!" Suzu said.

Meanwhile, the other three seemed like they would puke.

"Uh...um...are your companions okay? If you need someplace to rest, I can lend you a space..." One of the soldiers at the checkpoint we had reached seemed concerned after seeing Paul, Oddradd, and Sinjeel's states as we showed the people manning the checkpoint our ID's.

"Oh no, don't mind them. This is part of their training. Also, we're pressed for time so we're going straight to the nest of the monsters we're supposed to exterminate. At full speed."

"Wow, as...as expected of a Rank S adventurer. The speed of your response is great and truly helps. Um...is something funny?" the soldier asked.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. You're just smiling really wide," the soldier clarified.

“Oh, whoops, my apologies. It’s just a bad habit of mine.”

“I...see. Well then, please be careful on your way.”

That won’t do. I guess I was so excited for the next leg of this trip that I was smiling unconsciously. That guy seemed a little taken aback, but I’m sure I was just imagining that, especially since everyone says my smile is harmless. As a Rank S adventurer, I can’t allow myself to be shaken by these small things.

Still, now that I think about it, the privileges that come with being Rank S are pretty amazing. Most of the countries under the influence of the Adventurer’s Guild let you right through just by flashing your guild card. I never really appreciated how great it was, since the Eastern Continent requires an application beforehand or the use of teleportation gates, and I always just came and went in Abyssland, or the Northern Continent, as I pleased.

“Okay, we’re safely through the checkpoint. Now then, all of you! This will be the tenth super fun picnic today; let’s get going already!”

“I would like to say something, Master Kelvin!” Suzu snapped off a crisp salute. Her action was neither ninja-esque nor kung-fu-like.

“Uh, okay?” *What is with those movements, it’s like Sera’s controlling her or something. Wait...that Sera, did she say something weird to Suzu? Suzu tends to believe things blindly. I’ll need to work to undo that later.*

“You don’t really need my permission to speak; I told you that already. Anyway, what’s up?”

“Right! Paul-san, Sinjeel-san, and Oddradd-san have collapsed!” she reported.

“Huh?”

The other three responded with silence.



I looked over to where Suzu was pointing and saw that she was right. The rest of our party had indeed fallen over next to each other.

“Ah, that really was their limit, huh? No, I guess I should praise them, since we managed to hit nine places on their first go. I’ll take Paul and Oddradd, so can you carry Sinjeel to the next town since he’s the lightest?”

“Oh... Oh no, I can’t trouble you like that, Master Kelvin! I’ll carry them all myself! I’m still doing fine!” Suzu asserted, trying to show how motivated she was by puffing out her chest.

I could see that she was a little unsteady on her feet, though. It was obvious that she was pushing herself.

“Once one of you reaches their limit, the others get to take a break as well. That’s how we’ve done things so far, isn’t it? Also, if you were to collapse as well, Suzu, I’d have to carry four people. Don’t forget that.”

“S-Sir! Yes, sir! Sorry for being selfish!” Once again, she snapped off a sharp salute.

Yeah, I’m happy she understands quickly and accepts it honestly, but...I get the feeling that habit is going to rub off on Sinjeel and the others, just like with the “master” thing. I’ll have to stop it before it gets to that point.



Having reached the nearest town, Suzu and I went straight to an inn. We dumped all the unconscious guys into one big room, while Suzu retired to her own. While we were checking in, the employee had seemed concerned about Paul and the others who were unconscious, but I laughed and said that they would recover with some good food in their bellies.

“Nonono, I can’t do this! I don’t mind being in the big room with the others; you should have the private room, Master!” Suzu insisted.

“Yeah, yeah, here’s the key to your room. Once these guys wake up, I’ll come knock on your door, so feel free to do whatever you want until then. See ya!”

“Wha— Master?!”

I forced the key to the private room into her hands and immediately dragged

the other three into our room. *If only Suzu could look at herself a little more objectively...*

After throwing Paul and the others onto a bed, I sent a telepathic message to Efil reporting on why I wouldn't be back that day: *Given the situation, I'll be staying over tonight. I'll take care of the extermination we came to do first thing tomorrow, so we'll be back once that's done.*

::I understand. I'll go and buy some ingredients now so I can prepare a nutritious meal tomorrow.:: she messaged back.

No, I told you not to push yourself, didn't I? I've had to repeat myself a lot; I wish you'd at least take it easy at times like this, I replied, hoping to get her to prioritize herself.

::But... But...::

I spent time having my usual conversation with Efil before "disconnecting" and taking a breath. Today had been pretty satisfying for me, but only on a personal level. All the extermination quests that Director Shin had given us were for monsters that weren't quite Rank S, and we had absolutely no developments on the Divine Pillar front. No matter how many circuits we did around Lumiest's surroundings, there were no rumors or eyewitnesses to be found. Either it had hidden itself and gone unnoticed, or it was moving with the one who had freed it from the monument.

Hrmmm...the mysteries are intensifying. It'd be great if they'd just come to us, like with DarkMel, but...well, I guess things won't work out that conveniently. Yeah, no way they will.

"Urgh... Where... Where am I? Urp! I feel like shit," Paul muttered.

"Heh heh! I can see a huge river... Someone's waving at me from the other side... Madam?!" Sinjeel rambled deliriously.

"The muscles all over my body are screaming. I'll have even more tomorrow!" Oddradd muttered excitedly.

"Oh, you guys came to?" I replied.

Paul and the others muttered very flavorful remarks as they rose, prompting

me to use healing magic to make sure they could properly handle food. *Good, let's go get Suzu.*

"I was feeling like such shit, but now it's like I just had a great sleep, and I'm so refreshed... It's a bit late, but damn, Master Kelvin's magic is just unbelievable," Paul commented appreciatively.

"Don't forget that you can't become a Rank S adventurer without reaching those unbelievable heights. In my case, I rely mainly on magic, but there are other Rank S adventurers who have abilities that are just as or even more annoying," I advised him.

"Urgkk..."

"The road is so long," said Sinjeel.

"Mwa ha ha!" Oddradd laughed. "Don't worry, if you just keep increasing your muscles like today, you'll eventually build a body worthy of Rank S!"

If you built yourself up to Goldiana levels of muscle, you'd easily be stronger than Sera. Well, I guess it's better to be positive rather than negative.

"Okay, you guys, we picked up some info on the upcoming match after coming here, so I'm going to share it while we eat. First, we have to meet up with Suzu."



Having joined Suzu and gone down to the inn's bar, we occupied a table in a relatively unpopulated corner. I kept in mind that I had to order a well-balanced meal, since Paul and the others were in the middle of training.

"I'll take your order!" the waitress said energetically.

"For now, give me three of everything on the menu," I answered.

"Huh?" she responded.

"Waitwaitwaaaaiit!" The moment I tried to place my order, my three trainees (other than Suzu) all tried to stop me. *What? What is it?*

Paul started, "Err, Master, I know we've got four grown men here, but there's still no way we'd be able to eat that much food. I've rented out bars with my

party before, and even then, the food we ordered all fit on one table, you hear me? Seriously, there's no way we'd be able to finish all that..."

Oddradd backed him up. "That's right! Also, I want food that's good for building muscles! Taking in too many calories is forbidden!"

"You should eat some more vegetables..." Sinjeel suggested. "Wait, that's not it. I need to say this just in case, Master, but Lady Mel isn't here right now, you know? You shouldn't order like you usually do."

"Ah, riiiiight! Yeah, you're right. Sorry, I just did that out of habit." I had been automatically ordering this way every time I went out, since whenever Mel was around, food disappeared in an instant. But Sinjeel was right; I had made a mistake.

"If you have expectations of us, Master Kelvin, allow me, Suzu, to fulfill them! I will show you I can digest as much food as Mel-sama. I will be her stand-in!" Suzu offered enthusiastically.

"Nononono, don't do that!"

All four of us reacted simultaneously, stopping her. Trying to imitate Mel was as reckless as charging into a horde of Rank S monsters alone. I'd immediately raise the white flag if I ever attempted what she had offered to do, and even the dessert monster Mdo couldn't hold a candle to the former goddess in an eating contest, even if sweets were involved.

Suzu deflated. "Urgh...my apologies for being so inadequate..."

"It's nice that you're more motivated than most, but what you just offered to do would be impossible even if you turned all of your internal organs into stomachs, so you don't need to try to imitate her. Actually, you *shouldn't*."

"Um...your order?" the waitress prompted us.

"Uh, could you...wait for a moment?" I asked.

In the end, I hastily ordered a normal portion of food. I knew my senses had been numbed by that point, but when I heard how much the bill would be, I was shocked by how low it was. Like, *What?! Is that seriously it?! Wow, such good prices!* I almost said aloud. *I'm so glad I've been earning money like a Rank*

S adventurer...

“And now he’s suddenly tearing up,” Paul muttered.

“Is he conversing through telepathy again?” Sinjeel wondered.

“Ah, no, this is just due to some personal stuff. Don’t mind me,” I told them.

“More importantly, I want to hear the news about the match you mentioned earlier!” shouted Oddradd.

“Yeah, I know. Just wait a second.”

I took out the documents I’d prepared from my Clotho clone. *One, two, three... Good, I have enough for everyone.*

I needed the papers to pass out to the others. Having to take the analog approach since they weren’t connected to the Network was pretty tough in a lot of ways.

Ah, that’s right. I should cast Silent Whisper since Oddradd’s voice is so loud. That should ensure the information doesn’t leak.

“Here, pass this around,” I said.

“Thank you very much!” Suzu responded. “If I remember correctly, the match will be against students from Lumiest, right?”

“Yeah, five students who are specialized for combat. The format might be a bit weird some years, but basically it’s going to be five sets of one-on-one fights.”

“We’re pretty active around the Western Continent ourselves, so we know that much, at least,” Paul replied. “But you know an awful lot about Lumiest’s circumstances this year. Are you having your little sister act as a spy and leak information to you, since she’s a student right now?”

“You fool! If I did that, Rion would feel guilty about her life at school! She and I only talk about the Divine Pillar and how she’s doing. This information comes from Director Shin, and it’s all stuff that the Adventurer’s Guild researched. Normally, I’d like to attempt stuff like this blind, but the director won’t shut up about raising our chances of winning as much as possible. So, I have no choice but to give you this information!”

“Right, it’s true that prior research runs counter to how you usually act, Master Kelvin. I understand; I’m also disappointed,” Suzu said, mirroring my sentiments. “Frustrated by my own lack of strength!”

“What the hell is so frustrating about this?” Paul muttered.

It seemed Suzu was the only one who sympathized with me. It was too bad, truly too bad. I could only hope that I had more comrades among the people who had been left behind in Pub and were surely being put through the wringer by Sera, Gerard, and the others. Also, I hoped they would reach the minimum level necessary to come on these kinds of trips too.

“Let’s look through this real quick and finish up before the food comes. Here, I’ll introduce the most notable students.”

“Wow, you look so unenthused...” Paul muttered.

“Don’t worry, I’ll say what I have to. First, let’s start with the third-years that will be graduating this year. Judging from the past average, almost all the students that will be participating will be from this year, but...there are only two worthy of attention here.”

“Only two?!” Oddradd shouted. “That’s not a lot! Are they eating their meat?!”

“Eating meat has nothing to do with anything, Oddradd...” Sinjeel muttered.

“Which means, ummm... It sounds bad to say, but...the quality of students in that year is especially low?” Suzu ventured.

“No. Actually, it’s pretty high compared to the average. The current student council president and top candidate to graduate at the head of the class, Melissa, compares favorably in all areas to those who were chosen to represent Lumiest in the past. She’s great at her studies, is popular among the students, and even comes from a good family. She has no weak points. You could say that she’s a high-spec all-rounder. After her comes, uhh...the Golden...Prince? The male student who calls himself that is almost as skilled as Melissa, but...honestly, I’d like to leave these two out. I’m sure we won’t have to worry about them.”

“I agree,” said Sinjeel.

“Figured,” Paul added.

“Ooomitteeeddd!” Oddradd shouted.

“They’re up against Rion-sama and DarkMel-sama, after all...” Suzu reasoned.

Sinjeel and the others immediately understood what I was getting at, probably because they’d either witnessed Rion’s strength or felt it directly. Yes, although the two kids in question were excellent, in the end, that was only on an academic level. They were little better than the average student.

“At Melissa’s and the Golden Prince’s level, they could easily be taken care of by any proper Rank A adventurer, like all the years before. However, as you all know, this year, fighters of Rank S or at least the top echelons of Rank A are being gathered by Director Shin. That means people like me—and people with peculiarities like all of you. The reason for that is on the next page.”

We skipped right through the page with the upperclassmen on them to the main event, the one with the first-years, and I continued.

“The new students admitted to Lumiest this year include, as you all know, Rion, DarkMel, and Sera’s little sister, Bell, from the Northern Continent. In terms of pure combat ability, Bell reigns, followed by Rion, and then DarkMel below them by a significant margin. As you all are currently, you can consider yourselves a match for DarkMel. You understand, right, Paul-kun? You put up a good fight against her before.”

“Hah!” Paul responded. “I wonder. But I know I’ve gotten stronger recently. Who knows, the next time we fight, I might just beat her senseless!”

“Huh? There’s no way you could defeat DarkMel so easily! Also, if you dare hurt her, you’ll have me to deal with.”

“Come on, don’t fly off the handle right away like that...”

You’re the one at fault for underestimating how fast DarkMel grows. And for threatening to hurt her.

On a more serious note, I was speaking the truth when I said that if one out of these four had to participate in the match, they’d be a good opponent for DarkMel. But there were other new students this year who were more

dangerous than expected—enough that it was actually doubtful DarkMel would be chosen.

“Uh, erm...Master Kelvin?” Suzu started. “The paper here is saying some weird and...honestly, hard-to-believe things... Like one of the new students being the little brother of the Ice Princess and is just as strong as her, or that the Lightning Dragon King has snuck into the school as a new student...”

“Hm? Yeah, and it’s all true. Furthermore, Arche, the adopted daughter of Lumiest’s principal and Rank S adventurer, ‘Rimless’ Art, might be participating as one of the teachers. Ha ha! Looking at it now, it really seems like a magnificent lineup. I can’t help but smile.”

All three of the others seemed lost for words.

“Since M-Master Kelvin had to be recruited for this, I figured it wouldn’t be easy, but...I never expected that there would be such incredible competitors! I... I’m so moved! To think I’d be able to stand side by side with Master Kelvin and compete against such high-level opponents! That alone is enough to make me prepared to risk death! The rest of you are the same, right?!” Suzu exclaimed excitedly. However, none of the other guys responded. “Uh...huh? Hello, everyone?”

I already more or less expected Suzu’s reaction, but I wonder how everyone else feels? Are they being swallowed up by the mood and frozen, or—

“Hah! That’s awesome! So if I win, I’ll basically be Rank S already!” Paul exclaimed.

“You’re right about that,” agreed Sinjeel. “You could say that this is a trial before the Rank S promotion, for we are indeed being tested.”

“Yeah!” Oddradd chimed in. “I wanna have it out with this Graham kid! He’s got a pretty good build! Let me do it, Master!”

The more deadly situations one got through, the more confidence and strength one would gain, which also connected to a sense of joy from overcoming adversity. It seemed these people could at least understand my feelings as a battle junkie a tiny bit. Finally, I was starting to feel like training them was worth it.

“Heh, that’s a good mindset! As long as you keep your desires in mind and don’t give up, I’ll guide you where you want to go! Do you guys wanna defeat someone way stronger than you?!”

“Yeeaaaahhh!” all of them shouted in response. All our hearts had become one.

“Thank you for waiting. Here’s your order— Agh, what’s with all the noise?!”



A month after Rion and the other new students were formally admitted to Lumiest, it was about time for them to get used to their new lives at school. Rion and Rami had selected one of the magic classes, which had been separated by attribute. They were in the Red Magic class that included lightning magic, and were currently sitting through a lecture.

Doooooong, dooooooong.

“It’s time! That’s it for today. There’ll be a quiz next time, so make sure to review what we learned in class.” The professor announced the end of the class as soon as the bell rang to notify them of the time.

Some of the students wore clearly unhappy expressions after hearing their hated word “quiz,” while others had already flown out of the classroom to get something to eat at the cafeteria. Their reactions were varied. As for Rion, who had been sitting at the front of the class during the lecture...

“Oh, I see, so you can use the spell that way! Yeah, today was fun!” she said to herself. She was truly enjoying learning.

“Uerrrghhh...” Rami groaned. “Aren’t you a bit *too* resistant to this, Ri-chan? I feel dizzy, nauseous, and headachy whenever I see blocks of words in the triple digits like that. Also, I already know everything they’re teaching, so it’s so boring...”

“Aha ha, yeah. After all, there’s no one who knows more about lightning magic than you, Rai-chan. But didn’t you learn something about fire magic? I’ve made a lot of discoveries myself.”

“Ah...well, I never had any intention of learning about that stuff. I’m good

with just lightning.”



“Uh, sure, that might be true, but don’t you think it’s a waste since we’re finally in school and all?”

“I’d rather you praised me for not sleeping through it.”

Rami should have become a student because she wanted to enjoy school life, but she was already saying “no, thank you” to studying and lectures.

The pair suddenly heard voices coming from the rear of the classroom. It seemed other students had stayed to make conversation as well.

“Hey, did you know? Apparently there’s been a weird group going around the countries surrounding Lumiest recently.”

“I heard about that too! You’re talking about that weirdo battle brigade that wanders around looking for fights, right? Apparently, they’ve gone after strong monsters, vicious criminals, and even famous martial arts schools. Like, it doesn’t matter as long as their opponent puts up a fight. I also heard they yell nonsensical stuff as they go, like ‘search and destroy,’ ‘never give up,’ and ‘enjoy it.’”

“Whoa, they sound barbaric and dangerous, like they’ll chew up anything. Y’know, I heard that they take the monsters they kill back to their lair and eat them, even the bones! They sound like cavemen, don’t they? My country’s pretty far from Lumiest, but I hope they’re okay...”

“I’m worried too! My knight is the strongest or second strongest in the nation, so they’d definitely target him!”

“What?! Is that a love life I smell? Tell me more! Is it like a love that pierces through social strata?!”

“Nope! It’s a secret between me and *him*!”

The mood of the conversation did an instant one-eighty, and the girls were squealing as they left the classroom.

“They were having a really interesting discussion, weren’t they? Sherry and Michelle, I mean,” Rion said a little while after the girls had left.

“Huh? They weren’t from a different dorm?” Rami sounded surprised. “Man, Ri-chan, you’re really good at remembering names and faces.”

“I am! I did my best to memorize all of the new students’ names and faces. I wonder if I can go for a hundred new friends?”

“Whoa! I’d expect nothing less of my best friend. Your goals are scary big. Oh, but what was it about their conversation? Like, yeah, I’m totally interested in a forbidden love between a noble lady and a knight!”

“*That’s* what you’re interested in?! N-No, I was talking about the first half of their conversation!” Rion hurriedly corrected her.

Seeing her reaction, Rami seemed quite happy. “Ha ha! I know, I know. Uh...that was about the crazy battle brigade...or something?”

“That’s right. I just thought those people might have something to do with the Divine Pillar incident. Look, nothing’s happened at all inside the academy since then, right? So you’d think the mastermind and Divine Pillar are already outside somewhere. Then, there’s this perfectly timed rumor... I don’t think it’s a coincidence! It could be the birth of a new evil organization going around doing crimes! I’m sure of it! What do you think, Rai-chan?!”

“Uh...Ri-chan? Are you seriously saying that? Or is this some kind of newfangled joke?”

“Huh? Oh come on, I’m totally serious.”

Rami paused, and the silence stretched on. Although they had been dramatized a bit, the rumors were obviously about Rion’s older brother and his friends. At least, that was what Rami thought, but she hesitated to correct Rion when faced with her pure and innocent eyes.

“Oh, so this is where you two were!” a voice called out, cutting into their conversation. “Could I borrow you for a minute?”

When the two looked towards the entrance of the classroom, they saw the dorm head of Volcann: Arche.

“Instructor Arche? Yeah, sure,” Rion replied.

“I’m fine with it as long as it isn’t about studying!” agreed Rami.

“Great, so neither of you have a problem with it. There’s something I want to ask you two to do for me...”



“So...that’s how you two became candidates for the exhibition match?!” Dorothy’s voice reverberated through the great mess hall, which was only sparsely populated by students at present. Even so, her voice was loud enough to attract the attention of several people.

“Your voice was a little loud there, Thee-chan,” Rion warned her.

“Oh, sorry. I just...”

“But yeah, it really was a surprise,” Rion agreed. “The match is a long way off, but they’re already picking out representatives.”

“Oh, no, that wasn’t what surprised me...” Dorothy corrected her. “It’s not that strange for them to start this early, since they’ll have to reduce the number of candidates to the final five. What was actually surprising was that they chose new students to be part of it. That’s amazing! Not only that, but two of them from the same dorm!”

“Ah, about that, there are actually a lot of first-years among this year’s candidates, according to Instructor Arche,” Rion told her.

“Huh?! R-Really?! Wow! This really, truly is something that’s going to go down in history! It’s that amazing!” Dorothy howled for the second time that day. Once again, stares gathered on the trio.

“Um, Thee-chan, you’re way too excited...” Rion muttered in shock.

“Ah! Uh, sorry! My joy at being able to witness a historic event for the school I admire so much and the successive surprises are making me all weird... Uh, so how many other candidates are there among the first-years other than Rion-san and Rami-san?”

“Hmm, I wasn’t interested, so I let all that stuff go in one ear and out the other,” Rami answered nonchalantly.

“Jeez, Rai-chan...” Rion pouted. “Uhhh...she said that there were five other people. I don’t know who or from what dorms, though.”

“Five?!”

“Seriously, five?!” Dorothy’s shocked exclamation harmonized with a yell

from Charles, who had suddenly appeared, reverberating once again through the great mess hall.

“Wha— Char-kun?” Rion cried. “You appeared so suddenly! What’s up?”

“Beautiful men are creatures that appear in the gardens of maidens—that’s all!” he answered.

“Oh no, his reason’s so out there, I hella don’t get it,” Rami replied.

“That stuff doesn’t matter right now,” Charles answered. “I heard what you said. There are five candidates other than you for the upcoming exhibition match, right? Heh, I just thought it was weird. The fact that I wasn’t notified of my candidacy, that is! The answer to that problem surely must be that I’m about to be approached—”

“Sorry, could you move?”

“Wheeerphhh?!”

Just as Charles was psyching himself up, someone came in from the side and blew him back. He went rolling across the floor and kept on rolling, but no one cared to watch him go. Why? Because the perpetrator had come to stand in front of Rion and the others.

Rami sighed. “Is it just me or has there been an uptick today in the number of people who just appear out of nowhere? I’m so done!”

“I wish you wouldn’t react like that. You may call me Edgar Lauzer, first prince of Leigant. Do you recognize the name?”

“Ah, yes. I do,” answered Rion.

“Good. Let’s get to the point, then. Rion Celsius, Rami Ryuuoh: become my wives.”

The great mess hall, which had up until a short while ago been the center of a commotion, was now totally silent. Everyone in the space, not just Rion and her friends, were working their minds at full speed trying to understand what had just been said. That was how out of the blue Edgar’s words were.

“Uh...maybe I misheard?” Rami said questioningly. “Hey, you there, playboy. Try saying that one more time.”

“Heh! You’re not afraid to make me repeat myself, I see. As I thought, you’re an interesting woman, Rami Ryuuh. Fine, then allow me to give you my declaration once more. Rion Celsius, Rami Ryuuh: become my wives!”

The mess hall erupted into chaos. The heated majority were normal students who just happened to be there, but there was nothing to be done about that. The truth that the first prince of Leigant, a powerhouse on the Western Continent, had proposed to two classmates simultaneously was more than enough to drive these pubescent students into an excited frenzy. It was the highest class of the type of love talk the girls in the classroom had been so excited about, so that was hardly surprising.

“Gyaaahhh! He... He said, ‘wives’!”

“Whaaaaaa?! What the heck did he just say?! We’re in the middle of the cafeteria, you know?!”

“And aren’t those two girls Rion and Rami?! Fuckin’ hell, how much confidence can one guy have?!”

“I’ve heard of people proposing just before graduating, but this approach blows past a lot of stuff; it’s really unusual. Not only that, but they’re all hot... Ahhh, I feel the need to create! Hey, paper! Does anyone have any spare paper?! And a pen too!”

“Wagh?! What’s up with you all of a sudden?!”

Well, some of the people reacted strangely, but the major reactions have all been noted here.

However, the pair being proposed to were not among them. They stayed silent, as it seemed that Rion had yet to fully process the meaning of Edgar’s words and Rami was clearly displeased.

::Can you hear me, Rion? It’s me, Mel.::

In the midst of this, a sudden telepathic message came to Rion. For some reason, Melfina sounded like she was in a hurry.

::Huh? Mel-nee? Did something happen?:: Rion asked.

::Yes, a lot happened. Getting right to the point, we’re in a pretty big

emergency.::

::Whaaat?! What... What happened?!::

::Uhhh...how should I put this? Actually, let me ask you this: did something strange just happen to you? That's most likely the cause of the trouble.::

::Cause of the...trouble? Uh, I don't see how what's going on here would be related, but...just now, one of my classmates named Edgar...proposed to me? I think.::

::Ahhh, I get it. Yeah, that's totally unacceptable.::

::Huh?::

Melfina sounded like she was satisfied with the answer, which only made Rion more confused, giving her no recourse but to tilt her head, puzzled.

::Basically, my honey...Kelvin and Gerard were about to go raid your school. That's all.::

::*Basically?! That's way too vague! Mel-nee?!::* In spite of Rion's reaction, she did have an idea of what Melfina meant, even without being able to ask for more details.

::WHOOOAAARRRGHHH! I'm going! I need to go! My grandpa sensors have picked up a fool trying to seduce my grandchiiiiiiLLDDD!:: Gerard's shout came through the Network.

Kelvin's response followed. ::Well said, Gerard. As expected of my comrade, the proud shield who protects our friends. To tell you the truth, my big brother sensor is also going crazy right now. If it's just a figment of my imagination or my fears running rampant, then fine, no harm done. But...we *have* to go make sure, don't we?! That's why, Gerard, I'll summon you near Rion as the vanguard! Assess the situation and report back! I'll buff myself with a super-overclocked Sonic Acceleration and follow! Now is the time to surpass Hexa and get to Septaaaaa!::

::You got it! Leave it to me—:: Gerard began, but he was interrupted by the line being cut with a *kersnap*, like a CRT television switching off.

::Sorry, it seems some extraneous noise got into the Network.:: Melfina

commented.

::That clearly wasn't noise! That sounded like Kel-nii and gramps!:: Even Rion was able to figure out what was going on after hearing all of that.

::Well, it's exactly as you imagine, then. Right now, Sera, Ange, Dahak, and Boga are somehow managing to hold those two back, but they're really going on a rampage. My word, just a little bit more leeway and Gerard would have been summoned right where you were. That was too close...nom nom....::

::Did you just eat something, Mel-nee? You did, didn't you?::

There was a pause for a moment instead of a real answer. Then, ::But we'll stop them no matter what, so don't worry. Nothing can be allowed to get in the way of your school life, Rion! And so, adieu!::

::Wha?! Mel-nee?!::

::Oh, and say hello to DarkMel for me, please! Tell her that her mama is trying her hardest too! Well then!::

::She...hung up.::

Everything's happening so suddenly today, thought Rion from the bottom of her heart. But the worst scenario (for Edgar) had been avoided (that being Kelvin and Gerard's onslaught). That point, at least, was worth feeling relieved about.

But...can I really relax? Rion thought. In the end, she couldn't; not totally.

"Wow, you really said that, out of nowhere to two girls our age? Did something go wrong with your head?" Rami asked, making a preemptive verbal attack against Edgar. Her choice of words was somewhat off, but the contents were quite reasonable.

"Excuse me, I'm aware that you may be confused by such a sudden proposal, but you should watch how you phrase things," Axe interjected. "Since you were so disrespectful, I am forced to warn you as his retainer. I understand painfully well how you feel, but given your social position, that is how things stand!"

"Real sorry 'bout that. Our boss has the habit of proposing marriage along with his greetings when he sees a good woman. It'd make me happy if you just

let it slide instead of taking it to heart. Ah, want a pamphlet on Leigant? You should take one, just in case you become interested in the place later on,” Perona suggested.

“Uh...thanks...” Rami muttered.

As if to oppose Rami, the glasses boy and strangely talkative girl behind Edgar spoke (and also handed out some pamphlets). However, rather than opposing him, what they said was very close to making excuses.

“You didn’t need to do that, you two. I did not make my proposals frivolously. I was totally serious and meant every word,” Edgar protested.

“I really wish you wouldn’t be serious so often,” replied Perona. “You just got dumped by Bell Baal this morning, didn’t you? You’re so uselessly handsome, I’d really recommend starting with some of the easier girls first.”

“Your use of ‘uselessly’ was rude, Perona,” Axe chided. “While it’s true that our hope of him settling down with an established household may be distant with this method, we mustn’t compromise when it comes to the future of Leigant. All we have to do is support Edgar in all his ventures. I admit that going after Bell Baal was a bit *too* optimistic, though!”

“Hey you two, what kind of nonsense do you think you’re spouting?” Edgar asked unhappily. “The matter of my proposal to Bell Baal is still on hold, don’t you remember? Only a fool would hurry to a conclusion without hearing her reply.”

“Oh, no, no, what she did was heave a massive sigh and proceed to ignore you. That was just a silent way of saying no,” Perona said. “You’ve got no chance.”

“I *told* you, Perona, you’re being too disrespectful!” Axe shouted. “Also, the truth can sometimes hurt! When will you figure that out?!”

“I don’t think you’re much better, Axe...” Perona muttered.

The trio from Leigant continued with their lively conversation. But there was one point that the students around them wanted to set straight no matter what.

“Uh...umm?” one student murmured.

“Hm?” Edgar grunted in response. “What is it, my school friend? I will make a special exception and allow you to speak.”

“Rion-san and the others... They’ve already left.”

That shut the trio up as they looked over to where Rion and her friends had been sitting just a little while ago. The student was right—they were gone.

“Heh! So those two also need time to think,” Edgar said. “But engagements are big events in people’s lives. It’s only natural to need time. Fair enough! I will wait.”

“Oh no,” Perona responded. “Our boss is mentally invincible.”



It seemed the fuss had subsided for the moment now that Rion and her friends had left the mess hall. The other students realized that nothing more was going to happen, so they all returned to their own places and matters. Even so, the event was going to be the subject of gossip, so the best that could be hoped for was for the incident to only spread moderately as a rumor.

“Uh, um...Charles-san? Are you...okay?” Dorothy asked.

“Heh! Heh heh. I am Vaccania’s proud tanned prince, Charles Vaccania! An impact and some spinning of this magnitude is nothiiiieooowww!!! Maybe it might be?! Grk, this pain! I might have reopened the old wound on my left leg!”

“Oh no!”

It seemed the fuss wasn’t quite over just yet. Charles, who had been sent rolling by Edgar, was still on the floor at the edge of the room. Dorothy had come over to him, worried about his health, and now she was frantically attempting first aid.

“I... I don’t know any White Magic. Uh, let’s hurry to the infirmary! Can you stand? Should I lend you my shoulder?”

“Please! Also, it really hurts, so please take it slow!” With that, Charles borrowed Dorothy’s shoulder and got up...very slowly. From the outside, his ulterior motives were clear as day. To borrow his own words, there was surely a

plot afoot.

Ahh, Dorothy-kun's kindness seeps straight into my heart! he thought. If only Rion-kun were also here, I'm sure she'd worry about me as well. It's too bad she took Rami-kun and left! Yeah, I get it, though... You don't have to worry about me; I know how you feel, Rion-kun! But...now that I think about it, it's been a really long time since I was last treated nicely like this, hasn't it? Dorothy-kun's as kind as the angelic Rion-kun, I see. She looks rather plain at first glance, but now that I've had a peek at her face, I see that she's surprisingly pretty! Huh, what's this beating in my chest? Wow, it's amazing, but I dunno, am I wounded or something?!

Charles's mind was spinning at incredible speeds, nearing the realization of a new love. However, in another bout of incredible timing, someone else interrupted.

"Heya, you said you were Dorothy, right? Your noble willingness to help the weak has struck a chord in me. How about it? Want to be my wife?"

Yes, it was the other prince with invincible mental strength: Edgar Lauzer.

"Whoa, there he goes again. His heartstrings must be loose as all heck, our boss," Perona commented.

"Er, but this time he proposed to someone quite reasonable, I think?" Axe tried to support his prince.

"Axe...that was really rude to the girl," Perona chided. "Rude *and* disrespectful. You fail as a person. You're a rude, disrespectful failure of a person!"

"Don't you think you're being a little harsh?!"

Though the two subordinates were somewhat split in their opinions, they decided not to step in since their prince stood much more of a chance with the girl he had chosen this time compared to Bell, Rion, or Rami. Instead, they simply watched over their leader as he made another attempt.

"Wait! WAIT! What are you planning, showing up out of nowhere like that?" Charles interrupted. "Actually, you were the one who sent me rolling just now, weren't you? Now that I think about it, I've yet to hear an apology, huh? It

makes me wonder if Leigant's first prince really is that violent!"

"Hm? Ah, I remember you now; you're Charles Vaccania. My apologies, I only intended to gently push you aside, but you were lighter and more frail than expected, Charles. In the first place, you're a difficult man to notice. Regardless, you weren't hurt, were you? You look like you're dragging your foot, but if you really were hurt, you wouldn't do that. Just stop that terrible acting of yours," Edgar demanded.

"Wh— Whaaat?! It's not an act! I really did open up an old wound!" Charles protested.

"I told you, stop with that terrible act. I have experience on the front lines of battle. I know more about the structure of the human body and how people walk when injured than most."

"I... My body is just more sensitive than most people's!"

"Uh...ummm..."

A small, extremely soft voice reached Charles's and Edgar's ears as they argued. It was Dorothy's, and despite how quiet she was, neither of them missed it.

"What's wrong, honey?" Charles replied.

"*Honey?!!*" Dorothy exclaimed.

"Is something wrong, my wife?" Edgar asked.

"Huh?! Wife?!" Once again, Dorothy shouted her response. Both Charles and Edgar had turned around simultaneously, spouting similar lines. They were totally in sync, although it was unintentional.



“Oh, it’s not much. It’s just, I’m nowhere near that big a deal, uhh, errr... For now, I’ll just take Charles-kun to the infirmary,” she stammered.

“Oh, how could I forget? It seems I’ve been rather hasty,” Charles responded smugly. “Well, that’s how it is, Edgar-kun. I’m going to the infirmary, so—”

“Wait right there. I have been made to wait quite a lot today myself. At this point, I would like to hear my wife’s voice directly. Dorothy, would you give me a reply before you leave?” Edgar asked, somewhat imperiously.

“Ignoring me *again*?!” Charles yelled. “Dorothy-kun, there’s no need for you to listen to anything a guy like this says. Now, let’s go to the paradise called the infirmary together!”

“Uh, ummm...err...” Dorothy was stuck, but Charles pulled her along towards the infirmary.

Now Charles was walking normally, but Dorothy didn’t seem to notice. Instead, just before she left the cafeteria, she turned back towards Edgar.

“Uh, um...I’m not important enough a girl to fall in love with royalty at first sight. Erm...I’m a commoner, and as such, I need to understand my station in life, you could say... So, err...that’s why I don’t think I’m worthy of standing by your side, Edgar-sama... Yeah...”

With that, she turned and left the cafeteria. Having been left behind, Edgar did nothing but stare at the door she had disappeared through, saying nothing.

“Uh, um...Edgar-sama? You shouldn’t let that get to you,” Axe said. “She understands the difference in standing between the two of you and withdrew from candidacy as your wife on her own. That’s why there’s nothing for you to fret over, Edgar-sama—”

“You lost four times in a row today. A historic streak!” Perona interjected flippantly.

“Perona! You really need to think about the time and place when you say things!” Axe yelled.

“So, she would prioritize helping and supporting people, even to the point of rejecting my proposal. Heh! What an interesting woman. I’m becoming more

and more interested in you, Dorothy, just like I am in Rion, Bell, and the others!” Edgar said to himself.

His two subordinates were shocked into silence for a while before finally managing to let out a simultaneous, stunned “Huh?”

Edgar wasn’t depressed at all. In fact, it seemed like he had just gained another wife candidate in his heart. Axe and Perona shot each other looks before heaving sighs as if to say, “Again?”

“Oh man, I got to see some really interesting stuff today. I should take what happened as a guide for when I next propose to a girl! What not to do, that is!”

“Ha ha! The negative, huh?”

“I’M DOOOOOONEEEEE! I put my all into this work!”

“R-Right... Good for you...”

After Edgar and his subordinates left, the students in the cafeteria started to talk about the proposal fiasco that had just happened. They all felt privileged, as the only ones who had been lucky enough to witness such a funny episode. That feeling of being special put them in a good mood.

However, none of the students noticed a large, silent figure looking down at what was happening from the roof of the school building.



Having escaped Edgar’s proposal scene, Rion and Rami were now inside the main school building.

“I cannot *believe* him! Seriously! He’s ten thousand years too early to try to put his hands on us, Ri-chan. If we weren’t in this academy, I’d have dropped a thunderbolt on him,” Rami said viciously after having dragged Rion by the hand sufficiently far away. She was in a truly bad mood. As if to show how bad her mood was, sparks were flashing along her hair.

“But we didn’t have to just ignore him, did we, Rai-chan? I feel bad for Ed-kun since I wasn’t able to properly turn him down,” Rion replied worriedly.

“You’re way too soft, Ri-chan,” Rami insisted. “Guys like that only perceive the world in ways that are convenient to them. Even if we denied him as

vehemently as we could, he'd conjure up some reason not to give up. And if he did that, I'd have actually hit him."

"Aha ha, so that's why you dragged me out."

"I mean, we're inside the academy, so there's no way I could get violent. I gotta think about the Beast King-chan too, since he recommended me and everything." Even though Rami had slept through the entire first exam, it seemed she was at least thinking of Leonhart in her own way. "Hey, wait. Now that I think about it, we never got to eat anything! And it wouldn't be a good idea to go back to the cafeteria after that... Agghh, I'm so pissed!"

"Ah, you're right. We hadn't started yet. There's food inside Clotho's Storage in case Mel-nee strikes. Wanna eat that?"

"Wha... Whaddya mean, you got reserves?!"

There was indeed a stockpile of food stored to assist with Melfina's voracious appetite. But, leaving those trifling reasons aside, the two decided to go up to the roof and try their hand once again at lunch. Rami looked doubtful, but Rion was almost skipping up the stairs happily while humming. Her stride was naturally faster from a combination of being hungry and curious about what the stockpile held.

"First-year Rion, first-year Rami, go up the stairs slowly. It'll be too late for regrets by the time you fall," a voice warned them.

"Ah, Instructor Horace! Sorry, I was careless!" Rion apologized.

"Yep, totally reflecting on that," Rami agreed.

As they passed by the instructor, one of the two girls didn't seem to take what was said to heart at all, but there was nothing to be done; they wanted to know what was inside the stockpile.

They ran into Bell on the way, so Rion invited her to lunch as well.

"Why are your expressions so different? Did something weird happen?"

"Ah, Bell-chan! Wanna check out the stockpile we stored for Mel-nee?" Rion offered.

"I have no idea what that means," Bell replied.

Since Bell didn't know what Rion was talking about, she ended up making the same expression as Rami by pure coincidence. However, just like the other two, Bell hadn't had lunch yet, so she had no reason to refuse and thus decided to accompany them to the roof.

"Yaay! I'm first! Mmm, nice weather!" Rion exclaimed.

The roof of the building was open to students to come and go during the day. Luckily for the girls, the roof was empty just then, so they had it all to themselves.

"I knew it. If we're gonna eat anyway, we might as well do it on the roof where there's a good view!" Rion asserted.

"Really?" Rami asked.

"Really?" Bell echoed.

"Yep, really!" It seemed there were some things Rion refused to let go of.

Suddenly, there was a *mountain* of food on the rooftop.

"What the heck is with this amount?" Bell asked after a pause.

"It's all food. This is hilarious!" Rami added.

"Uh, Clotho, I know I told you to take out the stockpile meant for Mel-nee, but you didn't need to take it all out like we usually do. We just need enough for the three of us and Alex," Rion told the slime.

Clotho jiggled in understanding, having misunderstood how much food she wanted. Most of the mountain disappeared back inside it, leaving behind just enough for everyone present.

"I'm digging iiinnn!" Rion exclaimed.

"Me too!" Rami echoed.

"Thank you for the food," Bell said.

"*Woof!*" went Alex.

After the initial surprise, the three girls and the wolf found an appropriate place to settle down and finally have their lunch.

“Ah, dang. We should have invited DarkMel, since the rest of us are already here,” Rion said.

“Not necessary,” Bell told her. “I just saw her on a bench in the inner courtyard, being fed homemade lunches by other people from her dorm.”

“Wow, she’s *super* popular, huh?” Rami commented.

“Yeah...sounds like she’s going to be full, doesn’t it? Well, anyway, Bell-chan, did something bad happen? You look like you’re kinda in a bad mood.”

“I should be asking you that, Rion. Your friend the Dragon King here seems rather irritated herself,” Bell deflected.

“Oh, you can tell?! You’re exactly right, Bell-cchi! Listen to my woes!” Rami said excitedly.

“Who’re you calling Bell-cchi?!” Bell cried.

Rion and Rami shared what they had just gone through, and Bell reciprocated. In the end, it was revealed that before Edgar had proposed to Rion and Rami, he had proposed to Bell as well.

“Whoa, that pervert went after Bell-cchi too? He’s the worst!” Rami declared.

“Yes, and it happened just as suddenly as it did with you two. I had thought he was a little smarter than that, but I suppose I was mistaken. It’s truly rare for my intuition to be off,” Bell noted.

“Speaking of intuition, when that...proposal? Came out of his mouth, it seems like Kel-nii and gramps somehow felt it happen, and they were a step away from raiding Lumiest. Mel-nee and the others managed to hold them back, but what about you, Bell-chan? You know, um...with Gustav-san, and stuff...” Rion trailed off.

“Oh, so it happened to you too, Rion?” Bell replied, confirming Rion’s suspicions.

“Uh...*too*?” At this point, Rion had pretty much figured out what Bell meant, but she asked anyway just in case.

“Even if he is the way he is, he’s still sister Sera’s and my papa, you know? The sharpness of his intuition when it comes to his daughters is crazy, I must say. In

short, he felt it all the way from Grelbarelka and...well, it was the same as with you, Rion. Left alone, he'd have run across the ocean, but Victor and the other generals put their bodies on the line to stop him," Bell explained.

"Wow, they...they did really well to stop him, I guess?" Rion wasn't sure how to react.

"Yes, well, there were very noble sacrifices, among other things...you know?" Bell hinted.

"Aha! Man, Bell-cchi's family is so *violent*!" Rami teased gleefully.

"It's not something to laugh about when it comes to Haru-chan and the others, though..." Rion muttered.

As it happened, what had finally gotten Gustav to stop was the "silver bullet" that Bell had given to Victor: the letter warning that she would break off all ties with him if he behaved badly.

"We both have it hard with our rather troubling relatives, don't we?" Bell observed sympathetically. "Oh, that reminds me. Have you heard about the exhibition match? I heard that not only were the two of you chosen as candidates, but DarkMel was as well."

"What about you, Bell-cchi?" Rami asked.

"Do you really think I *wouldn't* be asked?"

"Yeah, you're right about that," Rion agreed. "Uh...there were a total of seven first-years who became candidates, right? All of us and DarkMel make four, so who are the other three?"

"Well, logically, Graham would have to be included," Bell mused. "Other than him, no one else really stands out. The best out of my dorm would be Edgar and his lackeys from earlier, and this girl called Katerina, and they're just a little better than the low standard, at best. Well, it doesn't matter who else was added; they're all just fringe candidates anyway. There's no point in thinking about them. There's no way they'd be able to serve as Kelvin's opponent, after all."

"For sure," Rami agreed.

“Of course that’s true of Kel-nii, but those people from the Adventurer’s Guild were pretty serious too...” Rion muttered.

There was a pause as Bell thought, *Aren’t you the really scary one when it comes to fights against other people, Rion?* The thought only lasted a moment, and she made sure not to say anything or let it show in her expression. She was a good girl.

“Well, all the candidates have been decided, so the actual team should be decided soon,” Bell said.

“Hm, yeah, you’re right. There are second-and third-year candidates too, so they’ll need to really shave the numbers down,” Rion replied.

“How’re they gonna decide, though, Bell-cchi?” asked Rami.

“I mean, it’s gotta be *this*, right?” Bell formed a fist and presented it to the girl as she continued to stuff food into her mouth.



A few days after the proposal commotion, several students from first to third year gathered in the mock battle arena, one of the academy’s facilities. They had only been told the date and location, so they weren’t sure why they had been called there, although they did have a guess. After all, they were all candidates for the upcoming exhibition match and had been waiting with bated breath for the final team to be decided.

Bell let out a yawn before greeting her friends. “Oh, you’re all here early.”

“Oh, Bell-cchi! ‘Sup!” Rami greeted her.

“Good morning, Bell-chan!” said Rion.

“Good morning,” DarkMel said as well.

Of course, Rion and the other usual standouts from the first-years were present. Bell had low blood pressure, so since it was morning, she still seemed sleepy. Her usually well-styled hair was still sticking out in places.

“Jeez, they didn’t *have* to drag us here so early in the morning. I’m so sleepy...” she complained.

“I agree completely, sister Bell! I will go file a complaint with the academy and fix this!”

Behind her was a female student with ringlets, and she had referred to Bell as an older sister. Her name was Katerina, and she was the girl who had picked a fight with Bell when their rooms in the dorm were assigned. However, she was now quite different from how she had been then, in her attitude, the way she looked at Bell, and other areas.

“Good morning to you too, Katerina-san,” Rion greeted the girl.

“My, if it isn’t Rion-san,” Katerina said cattily. “Greetings. I see both your face and chest are as insufficient as ever this morning.”

“Katerina,” Bell warned her curtly.

“Yes!” Katerina perked up. “What is it, sis— Gwarkphh?!”

Bell intoned an Air Pressure spell, causing her to face-plant on the ground. Then, she shoved her right heel into the girl’s back and ground it.

“How dare the likes of you talk that way. Learn your place,” Bell ordered.

“Ah, haaahhn! Sister, mmm! That... That spot... Aaahhh!” Katerina howled. Whether in pleasure or pain was unclear.

“You seem to be getting along well with her these days, Bell-san. That’s good,” DarkMel commented.

“I think your senses are pretty warped if you look at this and think we’re getting along, DarkMel. We aren’t, by the way. I don’t know what happened, but this girl is a candidate for the exhibition match. She’s been stuck to me the entire morning—or actually, even before that. It makes me wonder if she’s a dog or something!” Bell said, digging her heel in some more.

“Ohoooooo!” Katerina howled again.

“Uh...Rai-chan?” Rion sounded confused.

“I can’t see anything!” DarkMel suddenly complained.

“Kids like you shouldn’t be witnessing a scene like this,” Rami said. Thinking that seeing any more would be bad for the girls’ education, she had circled

around them with lightning speed to cover their eyes.

It seemed like a new part of Katerina's personality was awakening. The upperclassmen were also starting to take notice, but Bell didn't seem to care, as if she was challenging them to do or say something. She simply continued to stomp on Katerina, as if that was helping her to wake up.

"It looks like the first-year candidates are us, Katerina here, Graham, and Edgar," Bell noted. "Well, at the very least Katerina won't be going any farther than candidacy, so you can feel free to forget about her after today."

"Aaah, so harsh!" Katerina exclaimed. "But even that side of you is wonderful!"

"Man, your style of 'training' is crazy, Bell-cchi," said Rami. "Ah, the principal's here. Looks like it's time to start."

Principal Art had just appeared in the mock battle arena along with Instructor Milky. He walked to the center of the stage, stopped, and surveyed the gathered students with a mic in one hand.

"Hey all, this is Art, your principal! Sorry for gathering you this early in the morning. I'll get straight to the point: I'm sure you already know why you've been told to assemble, yeah. We will be deciding the final members for the upcoming match against the Adventurer's Guild today, right here."

After hearing Art's words, several of the gathered students gulped audibly. Being chosen for the match was an honor to Lumiest's students. They wouldn't have been chosen if they didn't possess overwhelming strength in battle, after all. The selected members would also garner the attention of influential people both within and without the academy. In other words, being chosen would have a great effect on one's prospects after graduating, as well as the prestige of that student's home country.

The event had a secondary purpose as a good showing of the students' abilities, much like the Rank S promotion ceremony in the adventurer world. Even if the students lost to the adventurers in the end, they would have done so against elites of Rank A or above. If a student in the middle of his or her growth was to at least give a good showing, that would be enough for high marks.

On the other hand, if the student wasn't able to accomplish anything, it would be a stain on their name, regardless of the unfavorable circumstances. Being chosen for the match meant that the student was carrying their house's, country's, and academy's names on their back. It was a huge responsibility, and one that needed sufficient resolve.

At least, that was the official stance. In truth, since the guild made sure to choose appropriately strong adventurers every year, the students were practically guaranteed to show off what they could do, barring some unforeseen disaster. Of course, the students themselves didn't know this, so they would take the challenge seriously.

"As always, five students will be chosen. Today, we have gathered seven first-years, five second-years, and nine third-years. This pool will be narrowed down to the final five, but...first, allow me to confirm: is there anyone who would like to withdraw now? Being chosen carries a lot of responsibility and a heavy, strict obligation. Being able to admit your own weakness is a necessary skill in life and not something to be ashamed of. I, in all my transcendent beauty, declare this. Now then...anyone?"

Art once again looked around at the students. Most of them seemed nervous, but none raised their hands.

"Good," Art continued. "Then let's move on. Instructor Milky, please hand out the papers."

"Are you sure?" Milky asked. "I believe you'd stand out more if you handed them out yourself."

"Ohhh, you have a point there!" Art accepted Milky's "advice" And took the papers from her to hand them out to the students himself. Each time he handed one over, he would say something like "From my beauty to you!" with a wink. The students had a hard time holding in their laughter.

"Have the papers and my feelings reached you all? This year's match will be a little different, you see. Usually, there would be five one-on-one bouts, but this time there will be four one-on-one bouts and one team battle between pairs. The students who will participate in the paired battle will likely need teamwork as well as strength."

One of the upperclassmen asked the obvious question. “Um, Principal Art, doesn’t that mean there would be six members this year?”

“No, there’ll still only be five on the team. After all, one of the solo fight participants will be me,” he answered.

“Huh?”

Art’s unexpected answer caused a wave of commotion to ripple through the students. Art was a Rank S adventurer, and it was well-known his power was on a whole other plane of existence compared to most. Everyone knew he had more than enough ability to take part in the match, but there was no precedent for one of the teachers to join the exhibition, much less the principal. The students’ surprise was understandable.

“Okay, quiet, please,” Art commanded. “I understand very well how surprised you all are. It was a painful decision for me too. Just the other day, I received a notice from the Adventurer’s Guild. This year, it is sending at least four Rank S adventurers.”

“What, Rank S adventurers?! And four of them?!”

The commotion morphed into a tumult. The gathered students were all in the top class of what Lumiest had to offer. However, that didn’t mean they could defeat even a Rank A adventurer. The upperclassmen in their second and third years had witnessed previous years’ matches with their own eyes. They knew how strong the past representatives had been, and thus they could compare how they themselves stacked up against an adventurer. Now, they would be facing *Rank S* adventurers. There was no hope for them. Furthermore, almost all the students realized that the responsibility and pressure this year would be greater than usual.

“Uh, um...I...think I’ll withdraw...”

“Oh, me too!”

One after the other, students raised their hands and requested to withdraw their candidacy. In the end, only half the original number were left in the arena.



“May I ask a question, Principal Art?” Surprisingly, it was Bell, who stood with Rion and the others, who spoke with a sunny smile on her face and an extremely polite tone. She had put on her honor student mask, and she took a step forwards. She had fixed her hair without anyone noticing as well, and now it was back in its usual style.

As she made her appeal with an overwhelming sense of presence, the other students saw that she did not lose to Art, who was self-styled as the avatar of beauty, in that regard.

“Bell-cchi?!” Rami’s surprise at seeing Bell in her honor-student mode was amazing. But Bell ignored her, preferring to keep her eyes on Art.

“Hey, it’s...”

“Yeah, that’s Bell Baal...”

“The one who laid the beatdown on the student council president, Melissa, on her first day...”

The remaining upperclassmen started whispering to each other. Bell could hear them, but she decided to ignore them as well. Rather, she didn’t even care that they existed.

“Oooh, you’ve got the makings of a star. So charismatic. So, what did you want to ask, Bell-kun, who scored first on the exams?” Art asked.

“A total of nine students from the second and third years just withdrew, but there are still seven first-years and five third-years present. Usually, the members of the exhibition match are chosen through a round-robin tournament. I just thought that may take a little too long if you were planning to do the same this year.”

“Hm? Well, there *are* far more first-years this year compared to the usual. I don’t think there’s really anything to be done about that. Do you have some sort of suggestion?”

“I wouldn’t dare. A new student like me? That would be far too brazen. And no matter what I say, I’m sure my upperclassmen would not have it.”

The remaining upperclassmen let out simultaneous noises as Bell glanced

over at them. In that instant, they had all felt a chill run down their spines, as if something unimaginable had glared at them.

“I will take it from here, Bell-san.”

“Understood, Melissa, president of the student council,” Bell acknowledged.

“Huh? M-Melissa?” One of the upperclassmen sounded confused as Bell turned her gaze to the student council president, Melissa, who stepped forward from the group. Or more accurately, Bell hadn’t *looked* at the group of upperclassmen—she’d been giving a signal.

“I have a proposal, Principal Art,” Melissa began. “Instead of a round-robin tournament, would you give me the authority to choose the team members? In exchange, or rather since I don’t have the strength necessary, I will not include myself within this group.”

The remaining upperclassmen all let out surprised noises in unison upon hearing that.

“Oh? You’re willing to go that far, Melissa-kun?” Art mused. “Then I’d like a stronger reason than just the process taking too long, I’d like to hear why you are willing to sacrifice your own candidacy.”

“The reason is just as you said earlier,” Melissa replied. “There will be Rank S adventurers sent from the Adventurer’s Guild this year. That means the academy must send those of appropriate strength to meet them. Hmm, wait, that may be somewhat misleading. I suppose I should say that there’s a reason the Adventurer’s Guild *has* to send Rank S adventurers, isn’t there?”

Melissa looked away from Art towards the first-years. “Starting with Bell, who was speaking earlier, this year’s new students are incredibly special, and I don’t think it would be going too far to say that they are the strongest ever seen in Lumiest’s history. They already have the power needed to match a Rank S adventurer. If those girls were forced into a round-robin tournament, even mock battles, I’m sure that this arena would not hold. In the worst case, the damage might spread to other academy facilities.”

“Oh...oh come on, there’s no way...” one of the upperclassmen suddenly began before trailing off, half afraid of the answer.

“Have you heard what happens during a Rank S adventurer’s promotion ceremony?” Melissa asked in response. “And you know of Sir Caesar, the famous stage artisan, said to be a talent only seen once in a hundred years, yes? Even battle stages made by him are completely destroyed within seconds at the hands of a Rank S adventurer. The only reason Rank S promotion ceremonies happen despite that is because the Oracle of Deramis, Colette Deramilius, who also happens to have graduated top of her class from Lumiest, is able to surround the stage with an indestructible barrier. In essence, this place is far too unprepared to let the first-years fight in it. And even if we were to prepare now, it would take too much time. I’m sure that’s what Bell-san wanted to say earlier, isn’t it?”

“Yes, exactly,” Bell agreed. “Just as expected, President Melissa, you knew what I was saying after only hearing a small portion of it.”

The upperclassmen were silent. They had no choice but to be, since Melissa, who they trusted, was the one saying all of this. They of course knew that the promotion ceremonies might as well have taken place in a different dimension, and more than anything, Melissa, who was the strongest of them and in line to graduate at the top of their class, was saying that she wasn’t fit to take part in this tournament. So the three other upperclassmen who were weaker than her naturally came to the same conclusion.

“I see,” Art said. “I understand what you’re trying to say, Melissa-kun. So, do you already know who you would pick for the exhibition match?”

“If the size of the team is five, then the first-years Bell-san, Rami-san, Rion-san, and Graham-san are at the top. After them, DarkMel is quite capable, though she is weaker than the others. Even so, from my perspective, she will easily win against the Rank A adventurers the guild usually sends,” Melissa stated.

“I see. What do you think, Bell-kun?” Art asked.

“I completely agree with President Melissa, and don’t really have anything more to add.” Bell smiled, satisfied. If Gustav had been present, he would surely have gone blind from how bright and lovely her smile was.

“I have heard and understood Melissa-kun’s suggestion,” Art noted. “How

about it, everyone? If there are no objections, I think we will go ahead and accept the members Melissa-kun suggested.”

“They are the people approved by sister Bell! I would never object to that!” Katerina exclaimed.

“Well, I guess...we don’t object either?”

“Yeah, given how sure Melissa seems...”

“Exactly. I’m frustrated that I won’t get to be a representative, but we can’t afford a poor showing. I was breaking out in a cold sweat just imagining fighting a Rank S adventurer.”

Starting with Katerina, almost all the students who hadn’t been named agreed that they had no objections to the suggestion. However, “almost” was not “everyone.”

“Wait, I object,” Edgar said, raising his voice. “Bell Baal is one thing, but I cannot let the fact that you think I am weaker than DarkMel go.”

“Oho, so I guess not all my schoolmates are cowards. I object too! As the second strongest among the third-years, I can’t allow myself to play second fiddle to a little kid.”

The ones who had spoken up were the first-year Edgar, who had just the other day caused the proposal incident, and an upperclassman wearing a shiny golden uniform. It was, quite literally, too bright.

“Edgar-kun and Dia-kun, isn’t it?” Art noted. “From what you’re saying, I suppose you are unsatisfied with DarkMel-kun’s inclusion?”

“Of course,” the two replied in unison.

The golden student, Dia Dorgo, was the strongest senior after Melissa. If the selection for exhibition match combatants had gone as it usually did every year, he would likely have been chosen. However, that was exactly why he couldn’t stand that his candidacy had been dismissed by Melissa.

“Dia-san...” Melissa muttered.

“I didn’t believe it, but it seems the rumors that you lost to someone who just moved into your dorm were true, Melissa. Heh, now I’m interested in these

new first-years. I possess a golden spirit, and I won't be told that anyone is above me until we actually trade blows!"

"I see. A contest of power, eh?" Edgar responded. "I simply wanted to correct a mistake, but a mock battle might be a good chance to hear a reply for yesterday—"

Bell cut him off, forcefully stopping him from completing his sentence. "It seems there are two people who object. DarkMel-san, why not take this chance to show them why President Melissa nominated you and how right she was? Of course, you'll need to hold back so as not to break this arena." She turned her bright smile to DarkMel, urging her to get up on the stage and kindly take the two objectors down.

::This is a waste of time,:: Bell told her through the Network. ::I give you permission to beat them black and blue. Drive them into the ground, got it? As long as they aren't dead, I can take care of the aftermath.::

::Whaaat?:: DarkMel didn't seem totally on board with that plan.

Bell's real thoughts were clear as day in the telepathic conversation that was happening in secret. However, DarkMel was feeling greatly conflicted.

Art gave his consent for them to hold this deciding bout, and the three contenders climbed up to the stage, but...

"Um, let's have a good...match...please..." DarkMel hesitated, and the words barely got out of her mouth.

"Hm? Is your spirit as small as your body?" Dia mocked her. "But I will not let my guard down! You will first face me, the dandy with a spirit of gold, Dia Dorgo — Hhhguarrghh?!"

"Heh, an instant defeat, huh?" Edgar scoffed. "As expected of someone Bell Baal approves of. It seems I have another fiancée! Oh, DarkMel, would you like to become my — Wiggraaggghh?!"

DarkMel instantly took down Edgar and Dia with kindness, deciding Lumiest's team for the exhibition match within seconds.



Edgar and Dia were carried away on stretchers, and the rest of the students who hadn't been selected left the arena. The only ones now present were the five chosen students, Melissa, who had nominated the team, Milky, and Art, who (strangely) was going to be part of the group as well.

"Now that our team has been finalized, allow me to congratulate you all as Lumiest's principal," Art stated.

"Hmm? Is it just me or does it sound like you knew this would happen the whole time, Principal?" Melissa asked suspiciously.

"Hah! Hah! Hah! Of course not!" Art replied. "But this *was* all finished earlier than scheduled, so why don't we use the time for some strategic planning?"

"If that's the case, please use the student council's office," Melissa offered. "It's close, and it's empty this time of day."

"It's just like you to be well prepared, Melissa-kun. Instructor Milky, can I leave you to contact the Adventurer's Guild? They need to know that our team has been decided. We're going to work the details out now, though," Art asked.

"Understood," Milky replied.

Everyone else moved to the student council's office, which was much more lavish than Rion had expected. It was furnished with a red carpet, and there was a chandelier hanging from the ceiling like it was totally natural, among other things. Of course, the table and chairs were similarly luxurious. Even Bell gave it passing marks, commenting, "This room is pretty okay."

"Well then, Principal Art, I will excuse myself here," Melissa said.

Art stopped her. "Ah, actually, Melissa-kun, sorry, but could you stay for a while?"

"Okay... Why?" she asked in return.

"Usually, I take on the role of coach, but this year, I'm actually on the team," Art explained. "I want to have someone else step up as coach, just in case. So, Melissa-kun, I'm counting on you."

There was a delay before Melissa reacted. "Whaaat?!"

For some reason, she had been saddled with the job of being the coach of

Lumiest's team just as she was about to leave. Not even someone as practiced as her could hide her surprise.

But as one might expect from the student council president of a school as prestigious as Lumiest, Melissa Crowlord quickly gathered herself and began to carry out her new duties after only a slight delay. "We will now be starting our strategy session for the exhibition match."

"That was fast!" Rami cried, bewildered. "Hey, Student Council President-chan, you really okay with this?"

"This sort of thing is a daily occurrence in my life as student council president," Melissa told her. "It's true I was surprised, but not enough to drag anything on. If this is what Principal Art wishes, then I will do my utmost as your coach."

"Wow." Bell sounded impressed. "Would you like to work for my country after you graduate, Melissa? I'm sure you would do wonderfully as a bridge between the Northern and Western Continents."

Melissa took a moment to consider the offer. "I can't reply immediately, but I'll definitely consider it."

It seemed that, even after all that had happened between them, Bell did actually like Melissa quite a bit.

"I'll start things off with a simple rundown of how the match will go," Melissa continued, getting back to the task at hand. "Usually there would be five one-on-one bouts, but as Principal Art said, this year, one of those bouts will be a tag-team battle. So our first order of business is to decide who will be pairing up this round. Is there anyone who would like to volunteer?"

"Here! Heeere!" Rami shouted. "Ri-chan and I will totes do it! We're hella BFFs, so we'd make a perfect duo!" She'd raised her hand with the speed of lightning and started talking in a rapid stream. Of course, she never stopped speaking in her own unique way.

"Me and Rai-chan?" Rion asked, trying to puzzle out the reasoning behind her suggesting them as a pair. "Ah, I see! We both use Red Magic and specialize in lightning, so with two of us, our powers will be doubled!"

“Yeah, sure!” Rami agreed. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but you’re probably right! Everything’s good that way!” Apparently she’d spoken on pure instinct.

“I have a strong feeling that Rami-san only spoke because she got caught up in the moment, but...if there aren’t any other volunteers, I believe the pairing is perfectly acceptable,” Melissa announced. “What Rion said makes sense, and they are already friends, so they should be able to cooperate well. What do you think, Principal?”

“I’m just a member of the team, so you don’t need to look to me for confirmation every time, okay?” Art stated. “But if I were to put in my two cents, I’d agree with you for all the reasons you’ve stated.”

“Thank you very much,” Melissa answered. “What about everyone else?”

“Fighting in a team isn’t my style,” said Bell. “If someone else is willing to do it, that’s just perfect.”

Graham gave his approval. “I do not mind either.”

“Um, same for me,” DarkMel agreed shyly.

With unanimous approval, it was decided that Rion and Rami would be fighting together.

“Next up is the order in which the rest of you will fight,” Melissa said, moving on. “Anyone who has seen past matches will know this already, but the order the team members fight in is decided beforehand, and the order is expected to be communicated to the organizers. There are a lot of reasons for this, but the strongest would be tradition.”

“Rion-kun and Rami-kun will be fighting in the third bout,” Art noted. “So we will be deciding the order outside of that. By the way, it seems like the Adventurer’s Guild has already decided on their team members and the order they will fight in. Of course, I know no details, so don’t expect anything like that from me, please.”

The remaining unassigned members were Bell, DarkMel, Graham, and Art.

“If we don’t know who we’ll be fighting, there’s no point in deciding on an

order, is there?" Bell questioned them. "I'll just be first. That way I can break them right from the beginning, take the wind out of their sails."

"If that is to be so, leave the second bout to me," Graham declared. "I will be sure to bring victory to our camp!"

"All of you are right: my beautiful form is best suited to be seen last," Art said. "However, even though this is a special case, an instructor cannot very well take the spotlight of the final fight. So leave the fourth bout to me. Don't worry, I won't mess it up."

"Uh, huh? Which means, um...I'm..." DarkMel trailed off questioningly.

"You've got the big one."

"Whaaaaaat?!" DarkMel screamed from her very soul. "I...what...but I...I'm not confident enough for such a big responsibility!"

"Don't be so modest, DarkMel-kun," Art advised her. "You know, I believe you have the most latent talent of anyone here. You should be more confident, like my beautiful self. Now, be confident! Come!"

"Buhbuhbuh...but...urghhh! You're right, nothing will come from being scared...right? I'll try my best, as papa and mama's daughter!" DarkMel tried to psych herself up.

"Oooh! That is the spirit, DarkMel-dono!" Graham seemed to approve. "Let us win great honors together as warriors!"

"Um, but I'm not a warrior..." DarkMel countered, though she trailed off nervously.

Like that, the order for Lumiest's side was determined. First would be Bell, followed by Graham, then Rion and Rami, Art, and lastly DarkMel.

"By the way, Principal Art, how much *do* you know about the Adventurer's Guild team members?" asked Melissa. "Even if you don't know all of them, you surely know at least part of the group."

"Hm? Ah, yes. You're right, this is the perfect chance for me to share what I know. *Ahem, ahem.*"

Art cleared his throat, gearing himself up for some exposition. He then struck

a pose like an opera singer about to sing and started to share what he knew.

“I have only heard the names of the Rank S adventurers who are confirmed to be taking part in the match. First is the one who reigns at the top of the Adventurer’s Guild as the director, ‘Freedom’ Shin Rainyheart. She’s the most veteran Rank S adventurer around next to me, and I suppose her special trait is how slippery she is. Next is a Rank S adventurer who is also the queen of Faanis, ‘Leopardess’ Bakke Faanis. There are quite a few filthy rumors floating around about her, such as that she is taking part in this partially as a way to kill time and partially to look for good men to sleep around with. The third is Rion-kun’s older brother and DarkMel’s father, ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin Celsius. He’s a dyed-in-the-wool battle junkie, as the two of them will attest to, so it’s no wonder he would be taking part in this match. Lastly, the newest Rank S adventurer, whose promotion ceremony is still in the works, ‘Purple Butterfly’ Grostina Brujowana. Grostina is just a pervert.” Unfortunately, Art’s information contained a lot of his personal bias.

“Why was the last one so short?!”

“The remaining two are still hidden beneath a veil,” Art continued. “But at the very least, there is no doubt the last two will have comparable strength to the others. Now then, my cute and strong students, let us think up some strategies to achieve victory.”



Turning back time a little from the day Rion and the others were chosen for the team, on the highest floor of the Adventurer’s Guild headquarters in the Labyrinthine Country of Pub, an important conversation was taking place in the director’s room, which was as messy as ever. Gathered there were the strongest adventurers in the area: the four Rank S adventurers Art had talked about and the Rank A adventurers Suzu, Paul, Sinjeel, and Oddradd, who had nearly died many times over the course of their training with ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin. Now, they were barely recognizable compared to before. In this spacious room that amazingly had no place to stand, one of them was doing just that, imposingly. Another was sitting on the sofa, and another was sitting on an unknown magic item. Everybody was staying in the positions they preferred as they listened.

“So, I want to decide on who will be participating in the match from the people gathered here today. I’ve given you all prior notice, so you should recognize these Rank S individuals, right? If you don’t, I might have to use my authority as director to demote you,” Shin threatened them.

“Screw you, ‘Freedom.’ What kinda shit is that? Even if you don’t do any of that roundabout stuff, I’m coming whether you like it or not!” Bakke declared. “This job’s a real good one that’s only been given to Rank A’s before. Yeah...my heart’s all aflutter like I’m a virgin.”

“Oh?” Grostina said. “Harvesting fruits before they’re ripe is not good, Bakke-chan. They are currently enjoying the golden period known as youth. Outsiders like us shouldn’t butt in like that. You may only lay your hands on them when they become responsible *A-DULTS*,” she lectured her, emphasizing each syllable. “But even before that matter, forcing your way through isn’t a good thing.”

“I’ll also be on the team, as planned. Of course, not for reasons as impure as the others. I just want to fight someone strong,” Kelvin stated.

“Huh? Hey, battle junkie, you trying to look cool or something?” Bakke teased. “I mean, out of all of us, you’re the most impure. At the very least, I only have *one* husband.”

“Huh? Oh, no, that’s not what I—” Grim Reaper reacted, but he was cut off.

“She’s right. It’s improper to have relations with *that many* people of the opposite gender,” Grostina agreed. “Actually, I’m amazed your body can withstand all of them, Kelvin-chan. Are you amazing in *that* regard, in addition to battles? Oh *no*! That was *totally* unmaidenly of me!”

“Hah! Hah! Hah! Just what I’d expect from elites I’ve chosen,” Shin cut in. “You already get along famously!”

“How?!” Kelvin shouted as loud as he could. He had no room to throw shade on others, but it was true that the Rank S adventurers were all very freewheeling in their own ways.

“So? Since it’s a given that we’re all on the team, that leaves two more slots, and we have to choose from among those kids, right?” Bakke asked. “I heard

they've been retrained from the ground up by Grim Reaper, but...I'm a bit skeptical that they'll be able to keep up with me. You sure they'll manage?"

"Yeah, no need to worry about that," Kelvin promised her. "For the past few months, my party and I have been training them thoroughly to maximize their personal styles. I guarantee that they'll get passing grades, at least. Grostina here also stopped by to help partway through."

"Mm-hmm!" Grostina grunted coquettishly. "There was no way I'd refuse a request from both Kelvin-chan and Sera-chan. AL-SO! Didn't you say that man admired sister dear, Goldiana?! My excitement at having changed classes from little sister disciple to an older sister disciple mixed with my joy of gaining another—I was shivering and unable to stand still as I taught him *everything*, absolutely filling him with Goldiana's teachings! I give him my seal of approval! He's got great sense!"

"Oh, uh, really? Is that so?" Bakke asked hesitantly.

"Oh, yeah," Kelvin replied. "Unlike Sera, Grostina is a thorough teacher, so as soon as she started, he grew by leaps and bounds."

Sometimes even Rank S adventurers could be weirded out. As Grostina wriggled and twisted her burly body, her excitement unending, Bakke and Kelvin took a step away, putting some distance between themselves and her.

"Yes! My name is Oddradd!" Oddradd shouted. "I have indeed been taught by Brujowana-dono and gained tremendous power! Anything you leave to me will be solved; I swear it! So there's no choice but to choose me!"

"Ah! Oddradd, you bastard!" Paul yelled. "How dare you jump ahead and advertise yourself like that! Hey, you Rank Ss starting with Master! You'd be better off choosing me, Paul, over this guy! In the first place, you've already got one huge wad of muscle, so your characters would overlap!"

"Whoa there," Sinjeel interjected. "If you're talking about characters, then I am singular and unrivaled, wouldn't you say? The women of this exhibition match team are, of course, a feast for the eyes. So why not add me to the men of the team to balance things out? Look, Sir Art the Rimless will be participating from Lumiest's side, so in the end only I, Sinjeel, would be able to oppose his looks, I beli—"

“Gender and looks have nothing to do with this! What is truly necessary to be chosen is the strength to satisfy Master Kelvin!” Suzu insisted. “This may be presumptuous of me, but I, Suzu, believe that I am the most fit in that regard out of all four of us! Please, *please* give Suzu this wonderful opportunity!”

All four candidates tried to emphasize their good points, vying for the remaining slots. Their vigor and enthusiasm were overwhelming, enough that they gave the back-and-forth between the Rank S adventurers earlier a run for its money.

“Ah...well, they truly do have strong *quirks*,” Bakke remarked.

“But how do we chooooooose?” Grostina asked. “We can’t very well have these kids compete against each other here and now, can we?”

“That’s the problem, isn’t it?” Kelvin complained. “After all, these guys have ended up being about equal in strength. What do you think, Director Shin?”

“Let’s see...” Shin took a moment to ponder the question. “Why not decide with rock-paper-scissors? Luck is a part of skill, after all!”

With Shin’s words as the signal, the candidates jumped into a rock paper scissors tournament, with Paul even giving a shout of excitement. However, somehow they continued to tie over and over, and there was no conclusion in sight.

“One, two, three! One, two...three! One, two...THREE!” all four of them chanted as they threw hands.

“This...isn’t ending...is it?” Bakke complained.

“It’s taken so long we ended up deciding what order we’d be fighting in first,” Kelvin added.

“Their nearly inhuman kinetic vision and reaction speed along with the fact that there are four of them and each one must predict the actions of the others has brought this contest to a standstill,” Grostina noted. “I’m fairly sure this will actually never end. Not that I’d ever get tired of watching these buds compete so fiercely their sweat is flung through the air!”

“That would be pretty interesting, but time is limited. Oh well, I guess we

have to resort to ancient, traditional methods for this one. A lottery with no grudges held for the winners!” Shin declared, extending her right fist out towards the four candidates. “There are two strings with red tips in here. The ones who draw the red strings are in.”

“Wow, that really is a classic,” Kelvin mused.

“That works, right? There’s no doubt that our members will be decided by this, after all, though it’s completely up to luck,” Grostina responded.

“That is, if Freedom here didn’t cheat,” Bakke interjected.

“Oh, I wouldn’t do that; trust me,” Shin claimed. “If you want, you guys can check the contents of the strings first, okay? There’s really no trick or trap involved. Heh heh heh!”

Though Shin said that, her smile was suspiciously bold. Just in case, Kelvin and the others actually did check the strings and found nothing untoward. However, that didn’t stop them from being skeptical, so Grostina ended up being the one to hold the strings as the four candidates pulled them.

“No grudges, okay? You all ready?” Paul asked.

“My muscles are telling me that this one is a winner!” Oddradd shouted.

“Heh! I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Sinjeel scoffed.

“I’m ready to go any time,” Suzu said. “I... I’m not nervous at all!”

“Ready!” all four of them chimed in unison.

And that was how the members of the Adventurer’s Guild team were decided.

Chapter 2: Exhibition Match

It was the day of the exhibition match with Lumiest. The event would be held in a special venue built in the Academic City, and even more spectators were expected than at the busy entrance ceremony several months earlier. The caravan of stalls outside the city was clearly larger than before as well. That was no surprise, since this festival was essentially a meeting of the relatives of the students: royalty and influential people from all the surrounding areas.

An apt comparison would be to a normal school's parent's day or a get-together between students' parents, but on the scale of a world summit. Since this event tended to have leaders and powerful people from many countries in attendance, it was relatively easy for a person to get in if they were close enough to someone involved, even if their own child wasn't participating. There would be important people from the Adventurer's Guild there as well.

This all came together to make the event nothing but positive in terms of community building and the forging of diplomatic ties. Of course, for an event that surpassed the scale of a Rank S promotion ceremony or the Beast King Festival, security had to be similarly tight; that was how much the population would spike. So today, there were crowds everywhere, both inside and outside the city.

"Leigant's side is ready!" the manager of the teleportation gate announced.

"Okay, I'm opening it," came the reply.

Given the expected number of visitors, this was also the only day the city opened up its only teleportation gate. Since using a teleportation gate was so difficult, only the large or powerful countries had them, so arriving that way was a sign of status on the Western Continent.

"There, done. How many more places are using the teleportation gate again?"

"Uh...the Kingdom of Vaccania, the Tri Federation, the Divine State of Plutorlua, and the Holy Empire of Kagancala. Those four. I'm sure you've spent a

lot of MP on the teleportation gate by now, Director Shin; should we switch?"

"Ah, I'm fine. No problems in that regard." Surprisingly, it was Shin, the director of the Adventurer's Guild, who replied in a light tone of voice. Teleportation gates couldn't activate without permission from both sides, but Shin was there providing MP for the gates just in case.

"I... I see. I suppose I should say that's to be expected for a Rank S adventurer. You've got an unbelievable amount of MP. Normally, we would need scores of mages rotating through to provide the fuel needed."

"Well, Rank S adventurers have got to be able to handle at least this much in their spare time. I'm participating in the match after this too," Shin stated.

"R-Right... Ha...ha ha..." The manager's smile twitched.

Shin claiming that such a thing was perfectly natural sounded like a joke, but she was actually doing exactly that with a book in one hand. All the guards, technicians, and mages present, other than Shin, felt the same as the manager. But although they were free to retort as they wished in their hearts, they had no choice but to maintain outward smiles.

"Actually, this is a bit late, but you're letting Leigant and Kagancala use teleportation gates too?" Shin asked. "Haven't those countries been acting a bit fishy lately? Should we really be letting them through here?"

"You may be right, but their applications were proper and upfront, and they both have children here at the academy. Refusing for political reasons would cause more of a problem for Lumiest, since we extol equality. The number of people who can be sent through a teleportation gate is limited anyway, so, um...that's why you're here, Director Shin. I should say..."

"Huh?" Shin paused, suddenly remembering that was true. "Ah, right. You're right. I can just stop it if something goes wrong. Sorry, I was absorbed in my book and didn't notice. Aha ha ha ha!"

After Shin had been reminded of her purpose there, she cackled mirthfully. Though the people around her were all smiles, in their hearts they shouted as one, "Is she for real?"

"Then personally, I guess it would be better if someone did cause a problem,"

Shin mused. “That way I could warm up for the real thing. Don’t you agree?”

“I DO NOT!” At that, the manager couldn’t help but say something.



“Wow, amazing! There are so many people!” Rion exclaimed as she peeked out from the fighter’s entrance. Some of the seats were filled with familiar students, while others were occupied by gentlemen in clothing fit for a royal court, or women in colorful native dress. There were even visitors with such luxurious, magnificent clothing that it practically screamed they were important.

The different cultures of many countries manifested themselves in the varied clothing. That meant that wherever Rion looked, she found something new. Just watching the scene was enough to make her eyes sparkle.

“I wonder if the place is full already? I hope Kel-nii got here safely!” she said.

“There’s no way that idiot battle junkie would get lost with a fight right in front of him,” Bell retorted.

“Ah, Bell-chan! Wait, huh?” Rion turned around to see Bell in a pitch-black martial arts gi. “Haven’t I seen that somewhere before? Ah! During the Beast King Festival!”

“Oh, good memory,” Bell complimented her. “I’d actually have preferred to dress as I always do, but papa vehemently objected to it, saying it exposed too much. I can’t very well fight in my school uniform either, so I had no choice but this.”

“Well, you got that as a commemorative gift, after all. I’ve been keeping mine safe too; I’m just wearing my usual black clothes today, though.”

One of the fundamental rules of this event was that there was no designated equipment for either side. Some students chose to fight in their uniforms, as the clothes boasted good performance, as befitted their high cost, while some chose to fight in special clothes they had saved for just such a day. Since this event was basically a school festival, this aspect relied on the good sense of its participants.

However, this style of management did not apply today. Since the event had ballooned to such a high level in many ways, it was impossible to predict what kind of equipment would appear.

“Whaaat?! Neither Ri-chan nor Bell-cchi are in their uniforms?!” Rami shouted in dismay. “But we’re students!”

“So you’re staying in your uniform, Rai-chan?” Rion commented.

“I mean, it’s cuuuute!” Rami replied in her own defense.

“Is it just me or did you say the word ‘cute’ strangely?” Bell asked, her senses as sharp as ever. But the inflection was simply a habit that had caught on with Rami, and there was no deeper meaning behind it.

DarkMel and Graham, who weren’t present for the conversation, weren’t fighting in their uniforms either. DarkMel would come with equipment of the highest class made or procured by Efil and Melfina, while Graham would fight in Torajian traditional garb prepared for him by Tsubaki.

“Grrr! But I wanted to show off how cute the four of us girls are in our uniforms!” Rami complained.

“Don’t just selfishly decide things like that. Anyway, I couldn’t wear a uniform even if I wanted to. Papa wouldn’t shut up about how not okay fighting in a skirt is,” Bell responded.

“But that’s the good part!” Rami shouted, weird inflections making their way into her speech once again. “Bell-cchi, your papa gets it, but he’s totally missing the point!”

Gustav’s style meant that while something was okay for him to see, it wasn’t okay for *the masses* to see.

“Now that you mention it, I wonder what the principal will be wearing,” Rion commented. “If our uniforms are okay, will he just fight in what he usually wears to work?”

“Ah, that doesn’t seem to be the case,” Bell told her. “I saw him change into something weird, saying stuff about how he would inherit Dia’s will or whatever.”

“Something weird?” both Rami and Rion asked in unison. At the time, the two of them would never have dreamed that Art would later show up at the opening ceremony dyed in gold.

At any rate, the exhibition match between the Academic City of Lumiest and the Adventurer’s Guild was about to begin.



“Now then, the day has finally come! Hosted by the Academic City of Lumiest, the annual EX-HI-BITION MAAAATCH!”

“YEEEEAAHHH!” The audience erupted into fervent cheers in response to the announcer’s high-spirited voice. The excitement of the crowd was at its peak.

“Just like every other year, the match will take place between the strongest members of the academy and the Adventurer’s Guild. Oh, my apologies for the late introduction! The live coverage will be done by me, the ace announcer of the broadcasting club, Ranlulu Vista! My dream is to someday do the announcing at Gaun’s arena! The person I admire is, of course, Ronove-san! You can just call me Ran! And now, the color commentary will be done by Selva dorms—”

“Yes, thank you for the introduction. I am Milky Crespella, the head of Selva dorm and an instructor at Lumiest. Pleasure to be working with you today,” Milky cut in.

“The pleasure’s all mine! Instructor Milky did the color commentary last year and the year before that! When I learned that, I was quite surprised,” Ranlulu noted.

“Oh? Why’s that?” Milky asked.

“I suppose it was just my impression of you, but I always figured fights like this were more Instructor Arche’s territory. After all, she’s the one in charge of the martial arts and weapons classes,” the student announcer replied.

“Ah, I see; that makes sense,” Milky said. “True, my main speciality lies in research, so it’s understandable you would think that, though I do feel such assumptions are shallow and thoughtless.”

“Huh? Uh, um...Instructor Milky...” Ranlulu seemed taken aback.

“Now then, it’s about time for the opening ceremony to start. Please get back to your job.”

“R-Right! The opening ceremony will start soon! Please wait in your assigned seats just a little longer, everyone!”

The emceeing started with that strange, vaguely friendly or possibly not so friendly conversation. The staff and students who had watched last year’s event put on wry smiles, thinking that this year’s commentary would be as rough as ever. However, for those who were attending for the first time, the conversation reflected a problem.

“What... What an...unconventional teacher. Given that she’s affiliated with Lumiest, I assume she is from a famous house? Even if her country’s culture tends to be uninhibited, I feel that would cause problems in and of itself...”

“Heh! Your fears are understandable, I felt the same way at first myself. However, Lumiest is truly a unique environment. Though it takes the form of a place of learning, the entire world recognizes it as neutral ground. No matter where they come from or who they are, students are students, and even if they are commoners, teachers are still teachers. Singling someone out over something like this would prevent it from functioning as a school. And such unnecessary problems would in turn obstruct the learning of other students, which could be interpreted as obstruction to other countries. With a network this big, I’m sure rumors spread faster.”

“In other words, in doing that, you’d end up being viewed with disdain by other countries?”

“Exactly. If things go too far, though, some sanctions will likely be imposed. At any rate, as long as the person is attending Lumiest, everyone is simply a student. This place doesn’t just offer a high standard of education, but also allows people of high status who are ignorant of the world to broaden their experience with society in a world of equality. Almost everyone who has come today has implicitly agreed to this.”

“Hmm...I see. So that’s why Lumiest is so prized by many countries as an educational facility. But while that may be the relationship between the school

and its students, what if there is trouble between the students themselves?”

“They need to build up a lot of experiences to be able to call it a ‘full school experience,’ anyway. At the very least, that’s what I think. Well, don’t worry. Things might’ve been different a long time ago, but ever since Sir Art took over as principal, I’ve heard that discrimination based on things like status or bloodline happens a lot less. Of course, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen at all.”

“I... I see!”

The conversation was being held in the campgrounds outside of the academy as two people watched the broadcasting magic items through which they could see the exhibition arena—“they” being a couple of unknown merchants. It seemed they were using the broadcast as an accompaniment to their booze as they amused themselves by talking like backseat parents. Hobbies aside, this exchange proved that it wasn’t only those with friends or relatives involved who were interested.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! And now, please welcome the heroic combatants who will be our stars today! First, from the west gate, our home team from Lumiest!” At Ranlulu’s signal, the team from Lumiest, led by their principal, Art, started to climb up to the center of the stage from the west. They gave off an overwhelming presence and were clearly different from normal people, worthy of being described as “heroic” by the announcer.

By “different,” one would, of course, be referring mostly to their looks.

“What’s this?! Principal Art, who is participating this year by special exception, is shiny and gold! He’s bright! Too bright! And behind our golden principal is... Ooh, amazing! It’s Graham, the first-year from dorm Selva, in a strange getup that includes an iron face mask and heavy armor! What is with that equipmeeeeeent?!” the announcer shouted.

“Um, Instructor Milky, can you explain this?” Ranlulu asked.

“That large suit of armor originates from Toraj and is unique to their culture. Toraj happens to be the country that recommended Graham-kun,” Milky explained. “Given his size, it was probably custom-made to fit his build. That is all I know for the moment, but I believe the materials used to make it are quite

incredible as well.”

“So it’s armor from one of the great countries on the Eastern Continent, Toraj!” the announcer exclaimed. “Wow! So, as for Principal Art’s clothes—”

Milky interrupted, “My! Would you look at that?! DarkMel-san is following Graham-kun— isn’t she lovely? She’s wearing clothes of pure white, so I suppose you could call her a pure-white angel! Not only that, but I can feel incredible magic power from her equipment as well. I bet its abilities would be wondrous to behold.”

“I... I see... Um, then about Principal Art’s—”

Milky cut in once more. “Hee hee! Bell-san is wearing a black gi, while Rion-san is in light armor, and Rami-san is in the usual school uniform, I see. This year’s students are so diverse. Just looking at them sets my heart aflutter. Don’t you agree, Ranlulu-san?”

“I do! I really do!” Ranlulu responded. “And those are the six members representing Lumieeest!”

Ranlulu had likely realized that trying to pursue the question of Art’s clothing was useless and adopted Milky’s stance of pretending not to have seen Art’s shiny form.

“Next, from the eastern gate, the Adventurer’s Guild team! To the stage, please!”

With Ranlulu’s welcome, six figures appeared from the eastern gate.

“Huh? Hey, isn’t that ‘Freedom’? Look, the director of the Adventurer’s Guild!” someone from the crowd cried.

“W-Wait a second! I see the Rank S adventurers Leopardess, Grim Reaper, and the recently promoted Purple Butterfly as well!” someone else shouted.

“The Adventurer’s Guild didn’t send in the usual Rank A team? Still, what is with this group?”

“Four out of the six members are Rank S... Are they planning a war with some country somewhere?!”

“That would *still* be way too much power!”

Seeing the multiple Rank S adventurers take the stage with Shin in the lead, the audience both in the venue and at the campground outside raised their voices in surprise. That was to be expected, as up until now they hadn't known Rank S adventurers would be appearing.

"Whoa there! What is the meaning of this?! Instructor Milky, please explain?!" Ranlulu exclaimed.

"I believe this represents how powerful the Adventurer's Guild believes this year's Lumiest team to be. This exhibition match has been held many, many times over the years, and all of them have ended with the guild's victory. I can feel their strong will not to mark their first loss. I also believe it is an appropriate decision," Milky replied.

"What?! Could anyone have expected that?! It seems this year's match will be on an entirely different level!" Ran shouted excitedly.

The surprise then changed to cheers, and the crowd reached a fever pitch of ever-increasing heights.



Once all the team members on both sides climbed up the special stage, they came to the center and lined up, facing off against each other. Though everyone already knew who they would be fighting now that the lineups had been sent in, this would be the first time they'd be meeting face-to-face. The participants all observed the people on the other side with great interest.

"Right then, would the Adventurer's Guild's representative, Director Shin Rainyheart, and Lumiest's representative, Principal Art Desire, please come forward!" Ranlulu's voice reverberated throughout the venue, and Shin and Art stepped in front of their respective teams.

"Hey there, it's been a while, hasn't it, Art?" Shin said teasingly. "So tell me, why are you, the principal, taking part in this event? Don't you feel bad for your cute students, robbing them of their chance to strut their stuff?"

"That's my line," Art shot back. "Including yourself, you've got quite the lineup of adventurers this year, don't you? Even though my students are very promising, don't you think you've overdone it with your choices? Or what, are

you planning to go save the world after this?”

“Who knows? We might,” Shin answered. “And I think I’ll have us win this match as usual too. You don’t mind, right? It happens every year.”

“That’s some confidence. But I should warn you, if you’re going to try for some great deed, you should rid yourself of that conceit,” Art advised her. “You’ll lose people’s sympathy that way, you know?”

“Heh heh heh!” The two of them laughed in each other’s faces at the same time.

Both sides swore to fight fairly and exchanged handshakes as proof of that oath. But even during that bit of the opening ceremony, sparks were already flying between Shin and Art. Neither of them ever stopped smiling, but it was clear that they were gripping each other’s hands unnecessarily hard from the sounds being made by their fingers digging into each other’s skin.

“Ohhh, the two of them are pretty good. Even though they’re totally ready to kill each other, I don’t feel that kind of aura coming from either of them at all. The handshake aside, that’s not something that can be done without a lot of training,” Kelvin noted.

“Well, both Shin-chan and Art-chan are adventurers and people who stand above others at the same time,” Grostina said. “That handshake aside, I suppose they gained the ability to prevent others from seeing their true emotions because it’s part of what they needed to get through life?”

“That handshake aside, they’re the exact opposite of people like us, who like to clash our emotions directly with others, huh?” Bakke noted.

“Mm-hmm, you might be right!” Grostina agreed.

“Wait, am I included in this too?” Kelvin asked, surprised.

“Of course!” Bakke replied. “Actually, what makes you think you’re on their side? You’ve been doing it every day with Ange, haven’t you?”

“My!” Grostina blushed.

“Don’t react like that, Grostina! And Bakke, why did you have to make it sound so weird?!” Kelvin shouted in a panic.

“Heh Heh!” Bakke cackled impishly. “I didn’t say anything lewd, though? I’m just invested in how that little chick is doing, as her mentor in hunting. I mean, it wouldn’t be going too far to say that Ange’s love was realized because of me, right?”

“Hm hm...” Grostina made an appreciative noise of consideration. “Meaning your relationship with her is like Sera-chan’s relationship with my sister dear? My oh my, how wonderful! I would also love to aid a maiden in love someday!”

“By the way, Kelvin, would you mind me sampling you next time? I know you’re like *this* with Ange, but a girl’s gotta wonder, right?” Bakke proposed, making a gesture.

“Grk!” Kelvin managed. “I can’t make a retort fast enough!”

The Rank S adventurers other than Art and Shin were having their own free and pleasant chat. Even though they were being watched by a huge crowd, they didn’t seem nervous at all. Graham observed them while under all his armor, seemingly impressed.

“Hm, I knew it,” he said to himself. “Even though we’re about to start such a huge event, they are calm as if this were no different from their daily lives. They are truly ready for battle at all times! Rank S adventurers are not to be underestimated!”

“No, they aren’t thinking of anything that complicated. They’re seriously just having a chat,” Bell told him immediately. Beside her, Rion and DarkMel smiled wryly, unwilling to say anything.

“No, no, that cannot be true,” Graham insisted. “Also...it seems those Rank S adventurers are not the only ones we cannot underestimate. The remaining two are no pushovers either.”

The members Graham was referring to were the Rank A adventurers standing next to Kelvin. One was a small girl with a unique bun, while the other was a very large macho man. They probably don’t need any further explanation—it was Suzu and Oddradd. Suzu was overcome with emotion where she stood, probably because she was so happy about being able to share the stage with Kelvin. Meanwhile, Oddradd was showing off the muscles he was so proud of to the crowd, striking pose after pose.

“Well, you’re right...they might not be *normal*,” Bell said.

Graham was correct: in more than one way, their opponents seemed to be far from normal.

::So Suzu-chan and Occhan were chosen for the match. That’s too bad for Shin-chan....:: Rion sent to DarkMel through the Network.

::It’s too bad for Paul-san too. He was so motivated,:: DarkMel replied.

While the others were having their conversation, these two were sharing their slight disappointment with the chosen members, since they had helped polish Sinjeel and Paul, who weren’t present.

At any rate, though there were a lot of thoughts and feelings swirling around the participants, the ceremony proceeded without issue. After the oath and handshake between the representatives of both sides, and once they had gone around greeting the VIP’s who had come from all over, the opening ceremony ended. Between all that there were many things mixed in, such as Bakke yawning very obviously, Grostina chiding her, Suzu feeling satisfied, Oddradd continuously posing, and Art increasing his shine to combat the man’s muscles. There was so much going on that a part of the audience looked exhausted, but that might have just been people’s imaginations.

“Sorry to keep you all waiting! Finally, it’s time for the first bout of this exhibition match!” Ranlulu announced.

“YEEEAHHH HHHH!!!” the crowd roared.

“Ah, that was a great cheer! *Now* it feels like a match on a grand stage! This must be what it means to feel blessed to be an announcer! I’m shivering right down to my soul!” Ranlulu exclaimed.

“It’s fine to be moved, Ranlulu-san, but please get back to the match at hand,” Milky chided.

“Oh right, right! I haven’t forgotten!” Ranlulu said for all to hear. “Uh...there will be a total of five bouts in this match, which will be held in the order submitted by both sides. The list of members and their order is only known to a part of the staff, so not even I, the announcer, know what the matchups look like! I’ll find out when you all do, and be commenting off the cuff! It’s so

exciting!”

“As in other years, I will be revealing the matchups right before they happen as an administrator,” Milky said. “So let’s start by announcing the first bout.”

The venue filled with cheers before the crowd went silent, allowing Milky to talk.

“For the first match, we will have Bell Baal on Lumiest’s side. For the Adventurer’s Guild, Suzu-san,” Milky announced.

“My, what a bold arrangement,” Grostina noted.

“Agh!” Suzu let out a nervous cry.

In that instant, a magic spotlight shone down upon Bell and Suzu, who were in the lineup of participants on the stage. Even though it was still daytime, the red and blue lights were clear to the audience. It was easy to tell who would be participating in the first match.

“Whoa there, it seems the first match will be a show to watch!” Ramlulu exclaimed. “Bell-san was admitted to the school at the top of her class this year and is garnering a lot of attention since she’s rumored to be the biggest talent to ever walk Lumiest’s halls in the academy’s long history! She hails from the great nation on the Northern Continent, the Empire of Grellbareika! She is still shrouded in mystery, so who knows what kind of battle she’ll give us?! Now, the veil will be lifted from this crimson maiden’s true strength!”

“I wanted her to come to dorm Selva instead of Cielo,” Milky noted. “It’s truly frustrating; why won’t Cielo’s dorm head just explode and die?”

“Oh, um...that would be...” Ramlulu wasn’t sure how to react.

Milky’s tongue is as poisonous as always, but she poached Graham to Selva when Marle’s dorm head, Horace, wanted him as well. So she really shouldn’t be talking... Ramlulu thought. Though the announcer would never put that into words, the commentary was strong in Ramlulu’s heart.

“On... On the other hand, Suzu-san from the Adventurer’s Guild is— Whoa?! According to my documents, she is serving as the guildmaster of Toraj’s Adventurer’s Guild branch! She looks to be about my age, so she sure has made

her way through the world! She's amazing in a different way from being a Rank S adventurer!"

"Yes, I think she is very interesting as well," Milky added. "However, I wonder...was the reasoning that if the director was already participating, a guildmaster would also be fine? Hmmm...I suppose we can't afford to complain since our principal is participating as well."

"Meaning this year is full of exceptions!" Ranlulu summarized. "The Rank S adventurers took all the attention, but will Suzu show us extraordinary power as well?! This exciting battle will be happening next! Don't miss it!"



"Well then, everyone on the stage! Will everyone other than Bell-san and Suzu-san move to the waiting rooms, please?"

The participants all heeded Ranlulu's announcement and left the stage, going back to their separate entrances.

Rion wished her friend well. "Fight hard, Bell-chan!"

"Go for it!" DarkMel chimed in.

"I would have even if you hadn't told me, but I'll try hard enough to live up to your expectations," Bell told them.

"Make it a good showing, but don't be too concerned about the result," Graham told her.

"Of course I'd be concerned; I want to win," Bell replied.

"Bell is a powerful enemy, Suzu," Kelvin warned his pupil. "Go full throttle from the start; don't hold anything back."

"Understood, Master Kelvin!" Suzu said, revved up.

"I've been wondering this for a while now... What's with the 'master' thing?" Shin asked.

"I'd...appreciate it if you didn't ask," Kelvin replied.

"Ga ha ha!" Oddradd laughed heartily. "Show them your inner muscles, Suzu! I know you're actually amazing, despite how you look!"

“Oddradd-san!”

As the others left the stage, they each offered their own well-wishes or encouragement to their ally who was about to fight. Although it was doubtful that all of them were proper cheers, they were said in an attempt to raise morale and make the person feel more motivated—most likely, anyway...or rather, probably...maybe.

“The first bout is finally starting! But first! Instructor Milky, there is one thing I’m worried about!” Ranlulu said, turning to Milky.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Every year we use this stage to fight in an exhibition match against famous adventurers, but...will it hold up to a Rank S adventurer-level fight?”

Ran’s question was relevant and well-founded. And in that instant, the question spread throughout the crowd, with people asking out loud, “Ah, that’s right. Will it be okay?”

“That is a very reasonable question,” Milky responded. “But don’t worry, during the preparation phase, we at Lumiest applied every countermeasure available. First, we tackled the circular stage, which will be where all the bouts take place. The usual stage we’d been using for matches up until this year were tough enough to withstand a Rank A adventurer fighting on it. However, taking battles from the Eastern Continent’s Beast King Festival and past Rank S promotion ceremonies into account, we had no choice but to admit that would not be enough. So we requested help from a certain person.”

“A certain...person?” Ranlulu parroted. “Who would—”

“Sir Caesar, the man who is famous as a soldier of fortune in the world of stagecraft,” Milky clarified before the announcer next to her could finish.

Sir Caesar? Huh? Is it just me or did the reliability of the stage suddenly get more doubtful? a certain Grim Reaper and his party all thought at once.

“Oooh!” Ranlulu exclaimed. “You mean the prodigy of stagecraft the one hailed as their next wunderkind who now stands on the cutting edge of the industry?! I see, that certainly does sound like a reliable helper! But...to use your example, his works were all broken down to the very last spare stage

during the Beast King Festival. At least, I believe that is what is on the record...”

“You know your stuff, Ranlulu-san.” Milky sounded impressed. “Exactly. Even with Sir Caesar’s excellent skills, a stage that can withstand a Rank S’s fight has proved remarkably hard to make. We administrators know that very well. So as a compromise, we had Lumiest’s sorcerous research lab collaborate with Sir Caesar’s stage workshop to make one!”

“Whooooaaa!” Ranlulu shouted in excitement. “That sounds amazing! So it’s a melding between technique and magic?!”

“The details are a secret, so I can’t say much, but we believe its toughness is three times greater than the one featured at the Beast King Festival,” Milky said.

“Woowww!” The voices of the crowd overlapped and echoed; they couldn’t help but let out noises of surprise at that revelation.

Said craftsman was currently sitting in the audience along with his apprentices, and he seemed very satisfied with his work.

“Furthermore, we’ve given an overhaul to the barriers surrounding the stage as well,” Milky added.

“They’re there to protect the audience from any aftershocks or stray effects, after all,” Ranlulu said, nodding in understanding. “Up until now, they’ve been handled by a current student who’s proficient in magic; has that changed too?”

“Indeed it has,” Milky replied. “This year we’ve got twice as many people building and maintaining the barrier, and instead of students, they’re instructors from Lumiest and Rank A mages from the Adventurer’s Guild. With that, we also expect the strength of the barrier to be three times more than usual. As long as it doesn’t take a direct hit from something with extreme firepower, even a Rank S fight should be safe.”

“I see, that *is* reassuring!” Ranlulu exclaimed.

“I still don’t think we should be too overconfident about it,” Milky warned. “And so I’d like to ask the combatants to be careful about hitting and breaking the barrier during their bouts. Doing so will instantly count as a breach of the rules, so please understand that point.”

“You hear that, combatants? It’s a definite no-no! The consequences will be terrifying!” Ranlulu passionately reinforced her words, while Suzu and Bell, who were currently on the stage, greeted each other.

“L-Let’s have a good fight, Bell-san!” Suzu said nervously.

“Hey, could it be... Are you...nervous?” Bell asked incredulously. “You sound like DarkMel.”

“N-N-No way!” Suzu stammered, but her nervousness was unmistakable. “I... I’m not! At all!”

Although she said that, given the shaking of her legs and how sweaty she was, it was clear how nervous she actually was. Bell reflexively let out a sigh as she wondered where her satisfied look from earlier had gone.

She looked somewhat capable, but I guess it was just my imagination, Bell thought, disappointed.

Unlike the Beast King Festival, this exhibition match had no restrictions on equipment. So Bell had brought her greaves, Clarent, the most powerful weapon she had. The reason for that was simple: she wanted to thoroughly kick down anyone she came up against, whether it be Kelvin or another Rank S adventurer. However, thanks to the lineup, Bell had been matched with Suzu instead of any of the opponents she had been imagining. She’d heard from Rion Kelvin had trained the girl from the ground up, but judging from how nervous she was, it seemed to Bell that the girl was clearly on the weaker end of his trainee group. Though Bell wondered if it would be okay to fight her with Clarent, she didn’t have any alternative weapons at this point.

I’m not good at holding back either. Oh well, what happens, happens. More importantly, what bothers me is...

Bell continued pondering her situation while tapping the tips of Clarent against the stage.

“Well, whatever,” she said. “But what’s with the way you’re dressed? Those clothes aren’t something you can buy in a store, right? Are you trying to brag that you match with sister Sera or something?”

“Huh?” Suzu asked, confused.

Bell was thinking about Suzu's clothes—her qipao. Ever since she first laid eyes on Suzu at the beginning of the opening ceremony, her mind had been entirely occupied with why she was dressed like that. The general gist of her thoughts was, *The hell do you think you are, wearing matching clothes with my sister before I, her actual sister, have gotten the chance to?* The heart of a little sister was truly complicated.

"You mean...these clothes? They're my Sunday best—" Suzu started, but Bell cut her off.

"I see. So you went as far as to wear such precious clothing today to show it off to me. Is that what you're saying?"

"Whaaat?!" Suzu shouted in surprise. "What do you mean?!"

"Hmph, it seems there's no further need for talk." Bell moved on without answering. "As I thought, there's no need to hold back."

The sound of Bell tapping the tips of her boots on the stage gradually grew louder and louder.

"Uh...uh...um... Did I...say something weird?" Suzu asked.

Bell still didn't answer.

"Uh... Um?" Suzu trailed off. She was trying to figure out the reason her opponent seemed so displeased, but Bell didn't seem like she'd be explaining further. That just left Suzu confused.

"What's this?" Ranlulu spoke to the crowd. "I can't hear what's being said, but it seems the combatants are already engaging in a war of words. I can feel some incredible pressure coming from them! It's like they're telling me to hurry up and start the match! Instructor Milky, may I? They're totally saying it!"

"Well, our introductory remarks *have* gotten long," Milky replied. "Let's start."

"What?!" Suzu exclaimed in shock. "We... We're starting like this?! There's still a misunderstanding—"

"Well then, this will be the first bout of the exhibition match! And...begin!"

Suzu's pleas reached nobody's ears as Ranlulu mercilessly announced the

start of the first bout. Along with the announcement, the booming sound of a blank being fired reverberated through the venue. At the same time, Bell jumped forwards to close the distance all at once, swinging one of her beautifully shaped legs covered in a deadly weapon at Suzu's head.

Thwwm!

The blow was inhumanly fast. Almost all the audience members thought they saw Bell attack out of nowhere before anyone noticed what was happening, landing a direct blow to the defenseless Suzu's head. However...

"It seems I was right to trust my intuition and rethink my opinion of you. Also, now I know I do not like you. Why were you hiding your true self?" Bell asked.

"Huh? I was found out?" Suzu responded. "Er, if I had to say, I guess it was thanks to the influence of all the hard training I had under Ange-san? I might have been hiding, like she does with her cat hood."

However, that was just an afterimage. The real Suzu had already gotten behind Bell...and was smiling like the Grim Reaper.



Bell and Suzu glared at each other, ready to spring into action at any moment. At first glance, it might have looked like both of them were without weapons since they were bare-handed, but such an impression would have been totally wrong. Bell was wearing Clarent on her legs, as was noted before, and Suzu had countless hidden weapons on her person. Bell was likely the only person on the Lumiest team who knew that.

"Huh, so is the mass of hidden weapons you have on you also from Ange?" she asked. "Isn't packing on that much heavy?"

"Ah, we're still talking?" Suzu replied. "You're more easygoing than I thought, Bell-san. I expected you to be more short-tempered. Sorry for giving you the wrong impression. By the way, it was a misundersta— Whoa?!"

She was suddenly cut off midsentence. Instead of waiting for a reply from Suzu, who wore a faint smile, Bell had launched a new attack. She closed the distance between them in an instant, launching a fierce kick at her opponent's face. Suzu reacted by bending backwards, dodging it completely. However,

Bell's kick wasn't that simple an attack, and her assault continued after, turning smoothly into a combo.

"Another misunderstanding, I see. Or rather, I suppose this is still the same as your first impression?" Suzu asked.

"It seems your body is as light as your mouth is flippant," Bell answered. "I'd appreciate it if you'd show your power while I'm still holding back, you know? Or what, could this actually be you at your best?"

"Of course not!"

The attacks didn't stop in either the physical or verbal sense. Suzu took something out of where she had it hidden and swung it at Bell. It was an instantaneous attack, almost sewn into the gap between Bell's own attempted blows. The attack cut through the air, making use of the weapon's unique flexibility, and it was so fast that not even Bell, with her sharp eyes, could see it clearly.

A whip? No, the way it bends is somehow different... Ah, I see, a three-sectioned staff. She uses some rare weaponry, Bell thought, her interest shifting from Suzu to the weapon.

She kicked up, her leg covered in wind, blowing away everything around her. Suzu was thrown all the way to the other side of the stage along with the mysterious weapon she'd swung.

"Oh, whoa there! What a fierce opening immediately as the bout starts! To be honest, I couldn't follow it! Instructor Milky, you're on color commentary; what about you?" Rarlulu asked her.



“Huh? You need some already?” Milky responded. “If your eyes have gone bad, then I recommend glasses.”

“But instead I get a scolding from an unexpected vector?!” Ranlulu shouted.

“And yet there’s something you should be paying attention to instead...” Milky sighed. “Look, the stage... It’s still unharmed!”

“Whaaaaaat?!” The crowd roared in excitement. The rather unequal quality of the commentary aside, they had no room to even breathe because so much was happening onstage. Meanwhile, a certain craftsman and his apprentices were all assuming triumphant poses and high-fiving each other for some reason.

“Th-Those winds were quite strong!” Suzu said, impressed. “But you mixed your martial arts with magic; does that mean you’ve acknowledged my strength, at least somewhat? In the sense that only using martial arts would make me a bit too hard to deal with.”

“I wonder...” Bell responded. “The way you carry yourself passes the mark, but how far you were thrown by my wind was a little disappointing. Hmm, but I am a little interested in that three-sectioned staff, in the sense that it’s rare.”

“Whaaat?!” Suzu shouted excitedly. “Bell-san, you’re interested in this Thunderstorm Staff?! You’ve got great taste! This is a treasured family heirloom given to me by Master Kelvin, and it’s super, super amazing! He made it just for me, the only three-sectioned staff in the world! Ahhh, I can feel Master Kelvin’s feelings seeping through my hands; it fits me perfectly!”

“What... What is with you, all of a sudden?” Bell asked. Bell had intended for it to be a verbal jab, but it seemed she’d triggered something in her opponent.

A sudden shine entered Suzu’s eyes, and she looked joyful, as if her own child had been complimented. That took Bell aback, leaving her so bewildered by the reaction that she was a little creeped out.

Uh, this...isn’t an act, is it? It was probably real. It’s like her battle junkie face from before was a complete lie. Or rather, isn’t the swing of her emotions too extreme? She’s not exactly like that Oracle from Deramis, but she has the same air about her, Bell thought. As one would expect from her family, her intuition

was amazingly sharp. *Still, she called that the...Thunderborne Staff? I think? What a weird name. It definitely came from Kelvin.*

Unfortunately, that was a slight misunderstanding. And as an aside, the staff's name had come about on its own, according to Kelvin.

"Ah, my apologies," Suzu apologized. "When it comes to Master, I am unable to hold myself back. Well then, let's get back to it, shall we? Jin Scrimmage, wasn't it? I know of it from Sera. When you use it next, I'll show you how good I am."

"That's some pretty good determination," Bell responded. A small vein had popped up on her head while Suzu once again adopted her Grim Reaper smile. The next instant, both their forms disappeared as they moved all around the stage, greaves and three-sectioned staff smashing into each other.

Huh, well, she can back it up, Bell thought. I'm moving faster than before, but she's still keeping up with me. Actually, is it just me or is she mixing in some weird techniques? Even if it looks like I hit her, it doesn't feel like it. It's like... How should I put it? She's actually a bit off from where she looks to be? Her techniques just get more and more curious.

Ergh, she does nothing but strike where I don't want her to, and so accurately! Suzu thought. *She looks angry on the outside, but she's totally calm on the inside! I'm keeping her at bay somehow with Willow, but just barely!*

Suzu had grown at an unbelievable pace under Kelvin's tutelage. However, that didn't mean she was at the same level as Bell, and Suzu had no illusions about that. Though the current exchange of blows might have made it look like they were even, it was only because Bell was doing a good job of holding back just enough.

But this is just what it means to fight someone stronger than you! This is the paradise Master Kelvin wishes for every day! Suzu thought. *As his loyal servant, I need to enjoy it! She can go easy on me; fine, I'll just use that to chew her up!*

She was so happy that the corners of her mouth naturally bent upwards into a smile. Yes, to Suzu, who yearned for and admired Kelvin so much, this ideal adversity was reminiscent of Grim Reaper, and thus nothing but a reward to her. She would be leaving her footsteps right next to his as she traveled down

the road he had in the past—there was no greater honor in the world for Suzu.

“Look, I’m about to blow you away again. What will you do?” Bell asked as she let out enough violent wind to cover the entire stage.

This one was greater than the last bit of wind in both power and coverage, and if Suzu didn’t react in some way, she wouldn’t get away with just being thrown through the air.

Suzu breathed deep as she reacted by grabbing onto the chains that held her staff together and started to twirl it around. It was similar to how a wielder of a sickle and chain would swing around the counterweight. Bell couldn’t see the intent behind it, but she easily understood that the girl was trying something.

The three-sectioned staff that Kelvin had given Suzu for this day—the Thunderstorm Staff—was, as its name implied, a weapon that held the powers of lightning and wind inside of it. Thanks to a special magnetic attribute the three sections had, the staff could freely split and recombine, and though it required some getting used to, it could even be used as a normal single-sectioned staff or a pair of nunchucks. It seemed Suzu was going to try to conquer Bell’s attack by using the properties of the Thunderstorm Staff.

Meanwhile, as for what Kelvin, the culprit behind Suzu’s training, was doing as he watched his favorite disciple try to break through this trial...

“Absolutely amazing. Honestly, I didn’t expect this much from her,” Bakke commented.

“Yes, it looks like Bell-chan isn’t serious at all yet, but even so, Suzu’s growth is wonderful!” Grostina agreed.

“Yeah, I would have never expected this to happen. The stage...it’s not breaking at all! Wow!” Kelvin exclaimed.

He was more impressed by the toughness of the special stage, as it still held its shape.



As the chief of Lumiest’s Sorcerous Research Laboratory and dorm head of Selva, Milky Crespella had a lot of confidence in the special stage they’d

prepared for today's event. She had invited the greatest craftsman Caesar and used Art, an active Rank S adventurer, to conduct countless stress tests over a long period of time before building the stage currently in use.

Every time there was a flaw in the theory or in the tests, the team had gone over it all to thoroughly improve the product. She had gathered together everything needed for a perfect result: the facilities for testing and manufacturing, the materials, and the personnel. If there was anything missing, it could only be the resolve and absolute passion to create something great...although it was said that while preparing the stage, the entire team of researchers and craftsmen had gone mad.

"It was worth all that pain and hardship! The finished product is something that we're all satisfied with. Not only is it unparalleled in its resistance to both physical and magical damage, it automatically repairs itself at high speed as well. As long as there are magic practitioners on standby, it will never be destroyed, no matter what happens on it. No, never. It's impossible," Milky explained.

"Instructor Milky, did something happen?! You just started talking about this out of nowhere!" Rarlulu shouted in surprise.

In a display of great timing, just as Kelvin was feeling impressed by the stage, Milky had gone off on the subject out of the blue. Upon hearing that, Kelvin and the other Rank S adventurers all understood why it wasn't breaking and were satisfied. However, Suzu, who was on the stage just then, didn't have the capacity to listen to such explanations. She had to focus all her attention on the threat in front of her.

"Roundness: Storm."

Bell let out a noise of alarm as Suzu swung her staff down at the violent squall that Bell had created. When she did, more wind strong enough to oppose that created by Bell was released from her staff. The buffeting wind described a circle that repelled Bell's attack away from Suzu.

"Piercing Purge." After realizing that her attack had been repelled, Bell moved fast. She made a follow-up attack without even giving her opponent time to blink, throwing a sharp kick that sent out a spear of wind specialized for piercing

through things, which headed straight for Suzu's throat as she tried to deflect everything Bell was throwing at her. However, her second attack was also redirected by Suzu's wind and ultimately missed.

The barrier of wind that seemed as solid as iron was a spell coming from one side of Suzu's Thunderstorm Staff. It did not need any MP from the user; instead it was fueled by spinning the staff. Imagine a turbine spinning up to provide energy from wind. The spin—in this case of the staff, specifically—allowed the staff to convert power based on the number and speed of rotations. Suzu, who had up until then never used magic or even had any skills, could now do so through the staff, which allowed her to oppose Bell.

Huh, so it can deflect Piercing Purge too, Bell thought. She's not acting like she's seeing that for the first time. Did she hear about my moves from Kelvin? Well, even if I ask her about it, I'm sure the only thing I'll hear is some dig about Sister Sera— Gwagh?!

Bell suddenly had to make evasive maneuvers. She lunged to the side, turning to see whatever she had dodged pass right in front of her. Just after, she felt a slight pain coming from her cheek as a line of red welled up and her blood started to drip.

"I see; you're fast. I'm surprised," she commented.

"And yet you still seem totally calm," Suzu replied. "Enough to just dodge Flash on your first time seeing it!"

"Er...Flash?"

Leaving Bell's rather unfortunate misunderstanding aside, the cause of the wound on her cheek was a kunai thrown by Suzu. Actually, it was more like the kunai had been shot out by the opposite side of Suzu's staff that had caused the wind—the lightning side—like a rail gun. The principle behind how the attack worked was unclear, but when Suzu smacked one of her hidden kunai with her Thunderstorm Staff, it shot forwards.

"Hmmm, I see," Bell mused. "I was looking down on you, and it turns out there really is a gap in our abilities, but...I think I need to apologize. You're better than I thought you were."

“Well, thanks,” Suzu said somewhat sarcastically. “But I’d rather have you fight more seriously than apologize. If you don’t, I can’t enjoy this like Master does.”

“Don’t worry. I plan to,” Bell replied. “Gladius Aile!”

A blue blade of pure storm manifested with a windy roar. It was a curved blade of magic attached to one of Bell’s legs. The sense of presence it gave off was uncommonly ridiculous. It was no surprise that almost everyone in the venue had their eyes and hearts stolen by the move. Suzu also wanted to appreciate the awe that such a thing inspired, but the situation she was in wouldn’t allow it.

“Sonic Acceleration,” Bell intoned.

Too fas—

Suzu didn’t even have time to complete her thought as Bell further buffed herself, doubling her speed. With that, Bell’s speed surpassed what her eyes could follow. By the time she’d noticed, Bell was already in front of the wind wall that had been formed by Suzu’s use of Roundness. Not only that, but Bell’s magic blade had already sliced the wall in half, basically breaking it.

The... The Roundness that Master helped me build... It’s being forced open?! Suzu thought, dismayed. This move was the culmination of all her hard work, her master’s teachings, and goodwill, but it was so easily shattered. The shock she felt was immeasurable, but she didn’t have the time to get swept away in her feelings.

I don’t have more than a second! I need to use Willow to avoid it somehow!

“Air Pressure,” said Bell.

Suzu let out a noise of pain and shock. As though Bell were reading her mind, she unleashed another spell as she attacked. Suzu was suddenly beset by an intense pressure sealing off her ability to take any evasive maneuvers or use her ninja training.

So...heavy! Suzu thought. *With this, I can’t... Yanagi...*

Suzu’s life started to flash before her eyes: cooking with her mother as a child,

training with her father in her youth, adventuring as an adult, her admiration for Kelvin, and all her recent memories as well—all of them flowed across her vision in an instant, as if time had stopped around her. However, even in such a slowed-down world, Bell's attack moved at a normal speed. Suzu's Roundness technique was on the verge of total collapse, so she shook off the memories. A decision had to be made.

Then...should I try to catch it with my bare hands?! No, that's just reckless! Whether I try to defend or deflect the blow, it'll still take my arms! I knew it, my only choice is to—

Shwang!

"Ah..." Suzu let out.

Bell, however, was silent as her magic blade pierced through Suzu on the return swing after cutting down the Roundness barrier. The blade was clearly buried in the vicinity of the girl's heart, and a veritable lake of blood was flooding out of her. The battle, which had taken place at extremely high speeds, had finally slowed down enough for the audience to be able to see.

"Wha... This scene is... Bell-san's attack has pierced through Suzu-san?!" Ranlulu exclaimed. "But...that means Suzu-san is..."

"No, not yet." Milky voiced her disagreement.

"Huh?" Ranlulu couldn't help but let out a confused grunt at her denial. Fortunately, the rest of the audience had the same reaction.

"Oh?" Bell let out. "That's strange. I'm sure my Gladius Aile went through her, and there was blood everywhere... Huh?"

"Substitution." Suzu was alive. She was on the opposite side of the stage from where they had just been having their fierce exchange. Though she was on one knee, there was no sign of an injury where the blade appeared to have gone through her; she was totally fine.

On Bell's end, Suzu was nowhere to be found. The blood that should have gotten everywhere was completely gone as well. It certainly felt to Bell like she'd made contact, and the announcer, Ran, along with the rest of the audience was seeing the same thing. Even so, somehow Suzu was still alive and

in a completely different position.

Having seen it happen right up close, a number of possibilities started to run through Bell's head. "I didn't feel the flow of any magic, so it wasn't fake or an illusion made with a spell," she reasoned out loud. "Actually, from the feeling of my blade stabbing into flesh, whatever it was certainly existed physically. It sounds like you gave the technique a proper name, but this isn't something you can pull off with just skill and dexterity. I guess it's safest to just assume that was your Unique Skill. You okay? Feeling worn out at all? Ah, did it drain you physically? Is my intuition on the mark?"

"You monster..." Suzu gasped, trailing off. Sweat slowly dripped down her forehead. She'd been forced to show her hand, but the smile never left her face. "This is just fine! Bring it on!"

Suzu took something out of her clothes and immediately scattered it into the air. It was an assortment of weapons, including kunai, shuriken, and even a set of tonfas, a spear, twin swords, and a curved dao blade. All of it flew through the air before falling down like rain. From inside this shower of steel, she once again took a stance with her Thunderstorm Staff.

I suppose that number of weapons was passed down from Ange. But what is she planning? Bell wondered. *Well, whatever; I guess I'm about to find out.*

Before the mass of weapons could fall to the stage, Bell charged into it. It might have seemed reckless or desperate at first glance, but the curved magic sword on her leg, Gladius Aile, was still present, as was her doubled speed. Her actions were like saying to her opponent, "If you think you can do something about me in this state, then try it."

For her part, Suzu instantly understood the message. "Shadow: Hundred Nights!" she cried.

Bell let out a small noise of surprise. As soon as she charged in, Suzu activated her Unique Skill. In that instant, a hundred copies of her appeared around Bell, and all of them looked like the real thing.

This is a surprise, Bell thought. She isn't leaving behind afterimages by moving super fast like Ange or using magic to make fakes. It's not just the looks; the sense of presence and feeble magic power are all hers. My intuition is telling me

so!

The copies all had Suzu's face and height, were wearing the same qipao, and generally looked the exact same. From any angle, they were all the real thing. In fact, it was as Bell had surmised: their thoughts, strength, and abilities were all exactly the same as their originator.

This bizarre, mysterious power came from her Unique Skill. Thanks to the hellish training she'd endured under Kelvin's tutelage, Suzu had evolved into a Titan and gained the Unique Skill Shadow Clones. It was a truly ninja-like ability in both effect and name, as it created copies of her out of her shadows. However, these couldn't merely be summed up as counterfeit copies or clones.

Suzu's Shadow Clones take her maximum HP to create true physical copies of herself. Their thoughts and abilities are all the same as the original, the only difference being that the clones strictly have the HP that was used to make them, Kelvin thought to himself. She can put out this many even under the current circumstances... She looks like such a treasure— I mean, what a fearsome power! It suddenly puts out a hundred nearly Rank S people onto the field, after all. If things get dangerous, that stunt she pulled earlier is also possible. The demerit is that it lowers her maximum HP, which won't come back for a couple weeks even after the shadow is defeated. But...it looks like she's resolved, so it'd be boorish to tell her to be careful not to use it too much. Since that's the case, go as far as you want, Suzu! I still have a grudge against Bell for what she did at the Battle Rally, so I leave my revenge to you!

Kelvin, who was watching the match with the other Rank S adventurers with his arms crossed, cheered on his disciple in his heart. In truth, he wanted to be out there, fighting himself and taking revenge for being pierced through the heart, and he couldn't stop thinking about whether she would consider letting him have the fight instead, or about regrets that he should have taken the first match, but his feelings of wanting to cheer on Suzu were real.

It was unclear whether Suzu had picked up on Kelvin's complicated state of mind, but all one hundred of her were smiling. The mass of weapons she had scattered through the air before had been picked up by her copies, and now there were a hundred Suzus armed and ready.

No matter how elaborate these clones are, they should disappear if I beat the real one, Bell mused. *Thinking logically, the one with the three-sectioned staff should be the jackpot, but it's possible she made a clone hold it so she could blend into the crowd. And that weird technique from before where she switched places with a fake... I'm willing to bet she could do it again if she was in danger.*

The Substitution technique that Suzu had used to escape her earlier situation was a ninjutsu (in her own words) that entailed her switching positions with a clone at the cost of more max HP. Because the cost was heavier than creating a clone, she couldn't do it whenever she wanted, but as long as she was able to activate her technique, it would allow her to escape any danger.

Though Bell didn't know the details of this technique, it seemed she had already intuited how it was being done. *That makes things simple, then. Act like one of the strong and just crush them all.*

In the end, the answer she came up with was extremely simple. She just had to squish every single clone thoroughly until her opponent couldn't make more. If she managed to hit the real one on the way, it would be a stroke of luck. If she didn't, it was still the most surefire method, since Bell had confirmed the technique took a toll on Suzu's stamina.

"You've been speaking in an unfamiliar language, but I kind of get the meaning," Bell said to the collective that was her opponent. "So let me tell *you* something. If you're going to act like the challenger, then *you* should come at *me*. I'll make sure to crush every one of you."

The Suzus let out a roar as a tide of various weapons, both thrown and swung, as well as lightning and thunder, all rushed towards her. Bell faced every one of the incoming threats and raised her leg with the magic sword attached to it, ready to smack them all down.



"And that's the end of the fiiirrrsst maaaaaatch!" shouted Ranlulu. "Bell Baal from team Lumiest is your winner!"

"WHOOOOOOOOO!" cheered the crowd.

"WAAAARRRGGGHHH! BEEEEEEEEEEELLLLLLLLLL! I knew you could do iit—

WAAAHHHHHH!” There was an awfully enthusiastic shout from the crowd as well.

Hmmm...I swear I recognize that voice...but nothing comes to mind. Either that, or I don't want to remember. Whoops, now's not the time for that. I need to welcome Suzu back first.

“Well done, Suzu.”

“I... I'b zooowwyyy, mazderrr...” Suzu sobbed. “I lozd, even after fhinally getting da zbod on da deam... I lost... I lossnnnnrrrrfff!”

Suzu's expression as she came back was a mess of frustration and regret. Her voice was hoarse and her tears were never-ending.

“You managed to get that far against Bell, get that beat up, and are still doing well enough to cry and feel frustrated, you know? There's no need to apologize; everyone here knows you fought amazingly, Suzu.”

“Buh... Budd...”

“I'm telling you, you did great. Honestly, you managed to keep up way better than I expected! Even if I fought Bell, it would be a toss-up whether I came out on top or not! And all of that is made sweeter if you enjoyed the fight!”

“That's right,” Grostina said, stepping in. “It was a wonderful fight, mm-hmm! Aww, look at you, what a waste of such a cute face! Here, use my handkerchief!”

“Dthang you berry mu— Snrrfff!” Suzu interrupted herself to blow her nose.

“Whoa, you're a bit more *wild* than I expected...” Grostina said, reacting to the state her handkerchief was in now. After she had handed over the poisonously purple cloth, Suzu had mercilessly blown her nose into it. Suzu was likely so full of emotions that she didn't have the leeway to worry about etiquette.

“Even though you lost, you got some good hits in, didn't you? I felt the shivers really hard at that one point. You know, the one where the kunai you threw was dodged but another one of you hit it back, making it fly at lightning speed! It was also cool when you used the wind from your weapon to fight your

opponent's spell," Bakke complimented her.

"I think your strategy to fight with numbers was pretty good. If you weren't facing that specific girl and her good instincts, you likely would have been able to win," Shin assured her. "In fact, when she finished you off, it looked like she purposefully held back since she knew you were the real one; that girl's intuition is off the charts, for real."

"Heh hah hah!" Oddradd laughed. "You've got some good muscles for being so small! Don't worry, big sis Gros and I will avenge you!"

"You guys!" The welcome on the adventurer's side was warm, with no one complaining about Suzu's loss. That was to be expected, though.

"Oh well, as long as I win, there won't be a problem. Not a one," Shin stated.

"Of course! As long as I win, it's all good!" agreed Oddradd.

"Indeed. As long as I win, we are set," Bakke added.

No one was doubting their victory, me included.

"Oh no, it won't do to be overconfident, you know?" Grostina warned them. "You get that, right, everyone?"

"We know, we know." Bakke dismissed the warning. "Anyway, I'm up next. I'll go squeeze a round out of the kids."

Bakke picked up her sword and walked off towards the stage...licking her lips for some reason.



"Congrats Bell-chan! That was our first victory!" Rion dived into Bell's arms as the latter returned from the stage. She did so with quite some momentum, and any normal person's bones would have broken upon impact if they'd tried to catch her. It was something she usually did with Kelvin without too much thought, so it seemed it just came out of her when she was happy.

"Whoa there," Bell said. "That could've been dangerous. I'm fine, but don't do that to just anyone, okay? There's a pretty high chance you'll kill them."

"I won't!" Rion promised. "I pick my targets!"

Bell sighed. “That’s not something you should say with your head held high like that.”

“Okay then, it’s time for me to show you how happy I am!”

“Wha— Wait!”

But it was too late. Rion had latched on to Bell’s waist and would not let go. Not that Bell seemed particularly opposed to what was happening.

“Come now, you must admit that victory was something to be celebrated,” Graham interjected. “Now is the time to be drunk on the pleasure of winning.”

“We can’t afford to wallow in our joy. It’s likely the opponent Bell-san just defeated was one of their filler members. If possible, I’d have liked her to have matched with one of the Rank S adventurers since she’s our strongest member, but...” Melissa trailed off. She’d been appointed the team’s coach, and now she was staring at the team lists with a grim look on her face.

“You’re being too pessimistic, Melissa,” said Bell. “Even if the other members aren’t as strong as I am, they’ll fight well. Still, I’m happy you rate me so highly.”

“That’s right!” Rami cut in. “You should believe in us more! Even if Grammy loses, Ri-chan and I will totally win!”

“For your information, I do not intend on losing either,” Graham noted.

“Urghhh...I’m just a ball of nerves, being given the last spot...” DarkMel fretted.

“It seems our youngest, DarkMel, is feeling timid,” Bell told the others. “Shall we finish this before allowing it to get to the last match?”

“In that case, allow me to decide this next match with aplomb!” Graham agreed, thumping his armor as he stood. The way he moved gave off a real sense of weight, and he did so with perfect timing—that was exactly when the announcement for the next match went out across the venue.

“It looks like the crowd is refusing to cool down after the first bout, but it’s already time to announce the second!” Ranlulu exclaimed. “Instructor Milky, if you please!”

“Right, the matchup for the second bout is...” Milky trailed off as she looked

down to check the pairing. “For Lumiest: Graham Nakatomiuzi-kun. And for the Adventurer’s Guild: Bakke Faanis-san.”

“Wow, so it’s time for a Rank S adventurer to step into the ring!” Ranlulu shouted with excitement. “When it comes to Leopardess Bakke, the first thing one should think of is the fact that she is both a Rank S adventurer and the ruler of a country. It’s a famous story, and I want to try visiting her nation, Faanis, at least once! For pineapple shaved ice!”

“I need to correct something about that statement,” Milky cut in. “The one ruling Faanis is the king. I don’t know why, but that mistake gets made a lot. Still, this pairing is...hmmm...”

“What’s wrong, Instructor Milky?”

“It’s nothing much, I was just a little worried since, out of anyone on the team, Graham-kun happened to be matched with this woman. Honestly, I’m both worried and unhappy.”

“Huh?” Ranlulu sounded surprised. “Uh, erm...that reminds me...Graham-kun, who was admitted this year, is in Selva (the dorm you’re the head of), isn’t he, Instructor Milky? Though he may be a new student with a lot of potential, I suppose you’re worried about him fighting a Rank S adventurer? This is a shining example of love between teacher and student! Love, I say!”

It took a moment for Milky to reply, “Well, let’s just leave it at that. Graham-kun, if you feel you’re in danger, give up immediately, okay? I’m giving you this warning as your teacher.”

“Whoa there! Instructor Milky shows an unexpected soft side!”

“Hee hee...Ranlulu-san?” was all Milky said before a scream came from the lively announcer’s booth. It seemed there was a quarrel going on.

“My word, so my opponent is to be Leopardess-dono!” Graham exclaimed. “Truly a worthy opponent! Splendid! Absolutely splendid!”

“Graham,” Bell said.

“Hm? What is it, Bell-dono?”

“The stage was far tougher than I expected. Even if a move destroys part of it,

it's repaired instantly. So you can feel free to go as wild as you want. There's no need to hold back."

"Hah! I never had any intention of doing so. Well then, I'm off!"

Rion was still attached to Bell as she gave Graham her advice. After listening to it, the boy left for the stage. At the same time, on the other side, his opponent was also climbing up.

"Heya, pretty boy. Oh, I guess I actually can't tell with your iron mask and all," Bakke greeted her opponent. "Oh well, you've got the whiff of someone who's just my type; I'm sure you're a good man! Right?!"

Bakke, with her amber-colored hair waving in the wind, was wearing light armor made of dragon hide and had a longsword that seemed to be similarly made of dragon materials. Also, Graham knew she'd shouted something to him when she'd come out, and understood it as some sort of greeting.

"I do not know if I am a good man from your perspective, but I put in a daily effort to be so from mine. Be at ease; I will not put up a poor showing," he replied.

Graham, who would be facing that equipment made out of dragons, had a katana that was as long as a laundry pole. The blade was so long, he had to draw it before the match even started. This blade, which would have proved difficult for those of normal height to wield, was actually size-appropriate for someone as incredibly tall as he.

"Huh, never seen a weapon like that before," Bakke replied. "I'd love it if your *other* weapon was just as impressive, but, well, I guess I can check while we fight. It's crazy how fun your Torajian armor looks like it'd be to strip, after all."

Graham reacted with a gasp as Bakke gave him a look like she was licking him all over, all while actually licking her lips. She was going full speed on the sexual harassment right from the start. Even Graham, dense as he was, felt a shiver run down his spine.

The misgivings Milky had voiced in the earlier announcement were indeed related to what was happening onstage right now. Men who lost against Bakke always met a cruel fate, the details of which were shrouded in mystery,

although rumors abounded among adventurers. Still, those rumors had reached Milky's ears. Her warning was not her being soft on him or showing favoritism; she simply warned him because she was a teacher.

"Uh, please stop there, Instructor Milky! Look, they're waiting for the match to start!" Rarlulu begged her.

Milky sighed. "It happens every time. Just so you know, if the event's management decides you've gone too far, they'll end the match immediately. Keep that in mind, both of you."

"You really are soft on— Oh no, nothing! I didn't mean anything by it! Er, right, let's get this going! Exhibition match second bout: staaaaaaaaart!" Rarlulu shouted.

Thus, the second round kicked off seemingly as a distraction. The opening blank was fired amid the cheers of the crowd. However, even after the signal, the two combatants didn't move. They simply stood there, holding their stances with blade and katana in hand, waiting to see what kind of move their opponent would make. It was a quiet opening, a stark difference from the first round.

"Oh? You aren't going to jump me? You're really going to wait and see, with your build?" Bakke teased.

"I shall repeat those words back to you. I assumed you would jump into action immediately, given your conduct up until now. In fact, I must ask: are you taking it easy on me?" Graham asked.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I believe you have dragon blood in your veins. That leads me to the conclusion that your dressing like a normal swordswoman signals you are not giving this fight your all. I have been told by my teammates to do just that, but I do not want to fight hard against an opponent who will not do the same."

"Heh... Gah ha ha ha ha! I see. You know that much about me, huh?! That makes me happy; my dragon blood is boiling! I guess I'll take you up on that offer and go full throttle right away. Rejoice, for this is the first time I'm showing *this* in public!" Bakke shouted as she stuck both her hands into her

cleavage, retrieving something that Graham surmised was a storage magic item.

Bakke then proceeded to take out a total of nine swords—ten, including the one she had started with—and stabbed them all into the stage. It was indeed possible to damage the stage with her swords as long as they were sticking into it.

“Ten swords?” Graham sounded confused. “How unexpected. Are you planning to wield all of them at once?!”

“Huh? Oh no. Close, but you’re not quite there. I never intended to fight you with swordsmanship. I’m just...a decablade dragon!” An explosion centered on Bakke suddenly occurred. The flames ensconced the ten blades that had been stabbed into the stage, creating a tower of fire that climbed up to the ceiling.

The pillar of fire splashed against the barrier that covered the stage, but even then, it didn’t seem like it would abate. The heat traveled far enough to reach the audience, so of course Graham was feeling it, given how close he was.

“Agh! Gah! What’s going on here?! It’s so hot! Yeowch!” Ramlulu continued to emcee amid the flames.

“I told you not to touch the barrier.” Milky sighed. “I’ll have to deduct points for that.”

“Ah, that’s not fair, Instructor Milky! You’ve got your own personal barrier!”

Though there were no direct casualties from Bakke’s flames, for a time, the entire venue became hot enough to rival a sauna. Thanks to the temperature going from normal to hotter than the middle of summer, everyone in the audience was quickly drenched in sweat. That went double for those who came from Leigant, as they were weak to heat. They seemed terribly drained by the change in temperature.

“This doesn’t seem like an attack. Is it intimidation?” Graham asked himself. “No, this is a byproduct of her transforming into a dragon!”

“Correct,” came Bakke’s voice.

The fiercely hot pillar of flame dissipated in an instant. At the center of where the flames had been stood Bakke, transformed, just as Graham had said. Only,

her new form differed greatly from what he had been expecting. It wasn't the giant fire dragon she had shown during the Gaun leg of the Battle Rally.

"A humanoid dragon?" said Graham.

"Yep. I told you, this is the first time I'm showing this to the public," Bakke replied.

There had been almost no change to her height, and she still looked very close to human. However, there were several key differences. She had robust horns and a thick tail that was thumping on the stage, and was covered in red dragon scales as well. It was as if the light armor she'd been wearing before the transformation had fused with her body, buried within the scales. These changes alone clearly marked her as having surpassed humanity.

But there was something about Bakke's current form that stood out even more. She didn't have dragon wings sprouting from her back, but in exchange, her claws gave off a powerful impression. They were long and sharp and very hard to ignore; it looked like blades had been attached to her fingers. There were five on each hand, combining for a total of ten, and their shape was far too vicious for the kind of nails girls tended to sport. These "nails" clearly weren't for fashion, but for dealing death. Finally, Graham recognized them.

"Could those claws be...from before..." he muttered.

"You're quick on the uptake," Bakke complimented him. "You're exactly right. These nails are the swords that I just took out. What do you think? Pretty cool, right?"

"I would say they are both strange and enchanting," Graham replied. "But I see... That explains the name you gave yourself. To think there exists a dragon who can absorb weapons and armor into its own body!"

"Hrm, that's a little off the mark. Rather than absorbing them, my weapons and armor were originally part of my body. I harvested scales and claws from my dragon form and used them as materials to have these made. Thanks to that, they fit perfectly into my hands even when I'm in human form. Anyway, that's all just a long way to say that merging with them makes them way easier to use than grabbing them with a hand and swinging them around!"

Bakke decided to give a demonstration, casually swinging her right hand's claws towards the stage at her feet. Instantly, a huge, crimson set of claw marks appeared. The red was deep enough that it almost looked like the floor was bleeding, and it kind of was. The stage, which had proved so sturdy, had been instantly melted there. Its self-repair function activated, but it seemed like it was taking a lot longer to fix, probably because what had happened to it was very different from normal damage.



“Huh, so it auto-repairs even if it’s melted,” Bakke noted. “This stage sure is something. But I wonder if you or your armor will fare the same, pretty boy? How about it? Wanna try taking a hit from these Sculptures?”

“I may be unworthy, but I still intend to obtain a blessing from a Dragon King, just like my older sisters. I have no intention of tripping up on the way to that goal here and now,” Graham replied.

“Hah! A Dragon King, you say? Oh, come on, don’t compare me to those guys who do nothing but sit on their titles all day. I’m a dragonkin, and I’d never put myself in a dragon’s pocket, no matter how desperate they are. Even without a blessing, the Flame Dragon King—oh, I guess now it’s the *former* Flame Dragon King. Well, whatever. What I’m saying is that I’m way stronger than some Dragon King, and I’m going to pound that into your body. Not for free either.”

A wordless scream came from off stage, eliciting a “Hm?” from Bakke. It sounded like a Dragon King, who just happened to be nearby, was angry after hearing what she’d said. Unfortunately, she was unable to act on her anger since they were in the middle of a bout. She had to instead settle for charging up her electricity in frustration, the energy crackling and popping as she did so. Her buddy in lightning, Rion, was also helping to calm her down, so things would probably work out.

“I am looking forward to that. Well then, allow me to—” Graham started.

At the same time, Bakke continued as well, “Yeah, we’ve spent too long talking. It’s about time I—”

“—bring down a dragon!” Graham finished.

“—treat myself to a man!” Bakke concluded at the same time.

Both combatants’ words were full of their unique flavors as the fight ramped up. The pair advanced, throwing out their first attacks as soon as they got into range.

Crakiiiiing!

Bakke’s Sculptures, their blades dyed red, slammed into Graham’s weapon, Arayasha, a national treasure of Toraj given to him by Tsubaki. The metallic

sounds of the clash were accompanied by flying sparks, but neither side backed down. Graham unleashed a second and third strike at fearsome speed, but Bakke easily avoided them by kicking off thin air. She likely had the reach to hit him from farther away, but it seemed she didn't want to bother, instead electing to try and get in close.

“Cave Fist!” said Graham.

Bakke let out a surprised noise as part of the stage bulged and thrust upwards right below her as she was trying to tear off his armor. Just as the stage was about to hit her, she flipped around and dodged. In the end, neither side was able to land even glancing blows, but there was now a large stone statue shaped like a fist on the stage.

That fist is made of the same materials as the stage, Bakke noted internally. I see, so it's some sort of Green Magic. His swordsmanship is Rank S already, so it'd be best to assume his mastery of magic is just as good. Heh heh! He just gets better and better. He's growing so well!

She can accelerate through the air as if she were on land, and is light enough on her feet to run around as she pleases, Graham observed. She was even able to easily evade a surprise attack coming from her blind spot directly under her feet, so she has good instincts too. She certainly rivals my older sisters!

The moment both combatants put some distance between themselves, they started to sort and process the observations and impressions they had of their opponent. Both of them rated the other highly, so of course the next exchange would be even fiercer.

Bakke made her move first. “Melting Talon Rain.”

She jumped as high as she could, enough to force everyone to look up, as she unleashed countless burning, flying slashes. Every time she swung an arm, ten slashes were thrown out by her Sculptures. She would repeat this at super speeds over and over until she grew tired of continuing, resulting in an unending downpour of slashing attacks that looked like a solid red wall. A red wall that just so happened to cover the entirety of the stage.

“Cave Kannon,” Graham countered.

He had used a Rank S Green spell. Just like Cave Fist from before, it was an original spell made by him, and once more something Graham had made manifested onstage as a peculiar golem. It was the upper half of a giant's torso, with a kindly face that nevertheless said it saw through everything. It raised its many arms, preparing to counter Bakke's slashing attacks, looked up at her as she was in the air, and started a barrage of punches.

Flaming slashes and fists made of rock clashed over and over, but after a while, tragedy finally struck. A tragedy to the stage, that is.

It had proven to be far more resilient against any sort of attack, physical or magical, than any other stage seen before. It was special in that it boasted the incredible ability to continue repairing itself as long as it was supplied with magic. It was a miraculous piece created by way of collaboration between the stage artisan Caesar, who never gave up and continued to improve his craft with his disciples despite all the losses he'd suffered, and Milky Crespella, chief of Lumiest's Sorcerous Research Laboratory. They had spared no expense to inject it with the best magical engineering in the world, and in theory it was an indestructible piece that could withstand even a fight between two Rank S adventurers. In truth, it had done its job wonderfully during the first bout. However, things were a little—or rather, a lot—different during the second bout.

"Gah ha ha ha ha! You're good! What a man!" Bakke shouted.

"I could say the same to you. You have easily surpassed all my expectations!" Graham replied.

The fight was between two people who were at least the equivalent of Rank S adventurers, and they were holding nothing back as they fought each other. It was a true example of what a battlefield between two fighters on that level looked like. One destructive force that defied all common sense was being fought by another on the same scale. They clashed, found themselves even, and as a result the strength of both their attacks was spread to the stage.

"You can see it, but can you believe it?! Keen flames coming down like the heaviest of rains!" Ranlulu exclaimed. "In fact, these attacks are coming from all sides, so I'd say it's even more insidious than heavy rain! And opposing this is a

mysterious spirit, a golem that looks like the stage itself! The punches it's throwing show a repetition of destruction and regeneration. Could it actually be using the stage's self-repairing ability? Actually, things are happening so fast that I can't keep up! I'm starting to run out of breath! *Huff, huff...*"

Ranlulu was finding it impossible to follow what was happening onstage because it was so fast. Everything was rock and fire; that was about all she could discern. Not even Ronove of Gaun, whom she so admired, would have been able to understand what was happening in a fight like this. That was understandable, but Ranlulu still dedicated herself to expressing what she felt in her emceeing. Hearing her words, the audience only became more excited about what was happening before them.

Unfortunately, that was also why none of them noticed it. Their attention was stolen by the flashy attacks, and they were drunk on the thrill of the commentary. Under all that influence, no one saw that the stage was on the verge of being destroyed.

"Cave Blade," Graham announced. He was now riding on one of his giant golem's hands, and the spell covered his blade in rock. With that, his katana, which was already abnormally long, got even longer. At this point, it truly was a weapon meant for a giant.

"Huh? Enchanting your sword with *rocks*?" Bakke scoffed. "You idiot, you just ruined your weapon's cutting edge! You lookin' down on me or something, huh?!"

"No need to worry; I assure you I am being sincere," Graham answered. "Grace Cleave."

Right after casting Cave Blade, he cast a second Rank S Green Magic spell: Grace Cleave. Using the stage for materials, he had stuck rock to his katana and then transferred the cutting power of the blade, Arayasha, to the rocks around it. With that, Graham's rock katana gained a sharpness that would seem impossible from the way it looked. In fact, this effect also stretched to the giant golem he'd first created from Cave Kannon, imbuing its attacks with the slashing property. Essentially, Graham's katana would slice through anything it was swung at, and anything the Cave Kannon punched would both be

pulverized and cut in two.

“Haaaghhh!” he shouted as he attacked.

Bakke let out a noise of alarm. For the first time, one of Graham’s attacks landed a solid hit. He had sliced through one of her Sculpture claws and managed to wound her as well, though the cut was shallow.

Bakke made another surprised noise as she assessed the damage. Then, she started laughing, “Ha...ha ha ha! So you *can* get to me! Good! Right, then. I apologize for being rude before! Okay, it’s time to get into top gear! Pagattrion!”

With a burst of flames, her remaining nine claws expanded and became gigantic as well. What started as a set of burning claws grew from the tips of her fingers and changed shape to cover her. Along with that change, her amber-colored hair also shifted into more of a scarlet, seeming to have been set on fire. She gave off the impression that she could set the ground ablaze just by passing over it as she strode through the air. Now that Bakke had taken on a form that didn’t suit her still-human size, that of a fire dragon, her Pagattrion was complete.

“Let’s go...” Bakke started.

“All out!” Graham finished.

Once again, the monsters in human skin clashed against each other. Of course, the fight was even fiercer now that they were exhibiting more power. Though Bakke and Graham might have looked like they were merely sowing destruction as they pleased, they were actually being careful not to break the barrier around them. It was unclear whether this was because they didn’t want to be forced to stop due to a violation of the rules, but all their firepower was being concentrated inside the barrier. What they weren’t paying attention to was the stage beneath them.

“Oh crap,” said a voice, which was overlapped by another saying the same thing.

“Well, this isn’t good.”

Beyond the stage, the voices of a man and woman could be heard

simultaneously and completely accidentally. One was the stage artisan Caesar, who was watching the bout with his disciples in the audience. Regardless of how loud the venue was between the fight happening onstage and all the cheers from the crowd, he could clearly hear the screaming of the stage that he'd painstakingly crafted.

"Did I hear you right?" asked one of his disciples. "Is something the matter, Master?"

"Of course there is," Caesar replied. "My stage... It won't last another minute."

The disciple reacted with shock. "Wait, whaaat?! You mean *that* stage? The one that we made with all its special abilities?! Oh, no way, that can't be. It's impossible!"

"He's right!" another disciple agreed. "That is the culmination of all your skills, Master! And it's been strengthened with the help of the higher-ups at Lumiest to make it a masterpiece! That beauty from the school said it'd be fine even if a Rank S adventurer went hog wild on it! You heard her!"

"You fools," Caesar scolded them. "You'd trust that girlie over the words of your own master?"

"Uh, that's...err..." Both the disciples who spoke up were lost for words after that scolding. Just to be clear, by "girlie," Caesar meant Milky, even though she was quite a bit older than him.

"It's true we poured all our blood, sweat, and tears into it, but how many times do you think I've had my stages broken, destroyed, or blown up by Rank S adventurers? At this point, I can tell when one's about to give up the ghost just from the sound. Looks like my skills weren't up to the task again."

"But...Master..." both disciples once again said in chorus as they balled up their fists in frustration. One let tears flow from his eyes, while the other lamented his powerlessness.

Even though the special stage had been furnished with an auto-repair ability, there was a limit to it. If the energy supply from the mages was to stop, that function would cease as well, and even if there was nothing wrong with the

energy supply, there was a possibility that the stage would be damaged too much too fast for its repair ability to catch up. Caesar had accepted those limitations and recognized his loss. However...

“That’s why I’ll be using my trump card. Right, girlie?!” Though he admitted his loss, he hadn’t given up. Caesar shouted to Milky, who was in the announcer’s box, as he stuck his fist out.

Yes, I know. I’ve already finished the preparations, Milky replied in her heart, having seen what Caesar was doing. She then produced a magic item with communication capabilities from her clothes and spoke new orders into it.

“Magic supply team, increase the supply to maximum. In that state, the magic it absorbs will be increased by an incredible margin, so everyone other than Bell-san should keep plenty of space between them and the supply machine. Okay then, please start giving her as much magic as you can now.”

“Understood,” came the reply.

Along with the answer from the magic supply team came a thorny response from Bell, but Milky decided to pretend she heard nothing, a satisfied look on her face as she switched the communication device off.

“Hee hee!” she giggled. “It sounds like Bell-san has a lot more to give. She needs to work hard behind the scenes for a little longer, though.”

Milky and Caesar’s trump card was to have someone who could stand equal to the monsters on the stage behind the scenes supplying magic. Milky had set her sights on Bell from the beginning, expecting that she wouldn’t be terribly drained from her fight. Looking back at the stage now, it seemed like it had rallied from the brink of destruction.

“Huff, huff! I... Instructor Milky, dagh... Did... Did you say something?” Ranlulu asked, her breathing heavy.

“No, I didn’t. More importantly, look: the match is proceeding. I know you can’t see what’s going on, but you need to work harder at your job. I’m cheering you on from the bottom of my heart, my precious student!” Milky replied with a wink.

“You... You’re a slave driver...” Ranlulu muttered. It seemed she hadn’t heard

what Milky said into the communications device because she'd been concentrating so hard on commentating on the fight.



"Sorry about that. I tied it," Bakke said as she returned to her side's waiting room after her fierce fight with Graham.

She was totally ragged after taking so much damage, but she seemed somehow satisfied, laughing with a catlike inflection, so her apology didn't sound sincere.

"I never would have expected the match to go to time," said Grostina.

"Yeah," Bakke agreed. "I didn't think it'd stretch on that long either. I'm totally happy that I was able to go all out for the first time in a long while, but it feels bad I wasn't able to rip off *all* his armor. That bastard, still hiding all his good bits..."

Bakke and Graham's fight had greatly exceeded the event administrators' planned allotted time. This was something unprecedented in the history of the event, but considering all the bouts that were yet to take place, they had decided to call the round without letting it finish. And since both sides had been more or less even the entire time, the second round was decided to be a draw.

"Still, that was a very good fight!" Grostina told her coquettishly. "It was a true clash between two even combatants—one you can feel on your skin, with nothing in the way... Aaah, I'm so *excited*!" Grostina hugged herself as she chewed over the fight that had just happened. It seemed it had set her heart aflutter.

"Oh!" Suzu raised her hand as a signal that she wanted to comment. "Master Kelvin would not stop drooling from start to finish!"

"Indeed!" Oddradd backed her up. "It looked to me like his muscles were itching to get involved!"

"Hey!" Kelvin protested. "Suzu, Oddradd, keep that kinda stuff to yourself!"

"Oh, really?!" Bakke seemed excited. "Right on, Kelvin! Let's sleep together!"

"Why would I do that?!"

“Yeah, yeah, let’s leave the comedy routine there, shall we? It’s true that was a good bout, but in the end the score stands at one loss and one tie. We’re still losing. I would really like a win right about now, wouldn’t you?” Shin, the director of the Adventurer’s Guild, said after clapping her hands to put a stop to the arguing. “The tie was unexpected, and there are only three rounds left. If we want to win the whole thing, we can’t afford any more losses. After all, the reputation of the Adventurer’s Guild is on the line! And my reputation too!”

“Well, you’re right about that,” Grostina agreed. “If we were to lose even after putting forward so many Rank S adventurers, the most powerful the guild has to offer, that would just be uncool. Okay, then, why don’t we help you with that! How about it, Oddradd-chan?”

“Indeed!” Oddradd shouted confidently. “This will be the perfect chance to avenge Suzu, as a fellow disciple of the same master!”

The third round was to be a tag-team battle. It seemed the Adventurer’s Guild had decided to send in the muscletastic pair Grostina and Oddradd. They had already changed and were ready to fight.

“Um, so...you’re really going to go out looking like that?” Kelvin asked hesitantly.

“Of course!” Grostina replied. “This style of dress emphasizes the beauty of the muscular form very well!”

“Yep, exactly!” Oddradd shouted. “It makes total sense muscle-wise!”

“I...see.” Kelvin responded.

“Okay, we’re off now!” Grostina announced.

“Awwwright!” Oddradd shouted. “I’m gonna do it!”

The pair walked to the stage, Grostina daringly shaking her bottom and Oddradd pulling off side chest flexes as they went. Kelvin and the others, left in the waiting room, tried to see them off, but because the outfits gave off an even worse impression than expected, they couldn’t help but avert their eyes before turning away completely.

“They really went out there wearing full-body tights,” Kelvin muttered.

“Not only that, but they were flexing a weird amount. They’re right that it makes the muscles easy to see, but...it’s not to my taste at all!” Bakke declared.

“But their teamwork is the real thing!” Suzu tried to defend them. “We should be able to win this time...yeah. We should win, right?”

“I wouldn’t want to face them, at the very least,” Shin replied. “Yeah, I wouldn’t like to be the one facing them, for a variety of reasons!”

“Actually, what’s more important is my satisfaction! Now, Kelvin! Let’s get to bed!” Bakke declared.

“I’m not going!” Kelvin shouted. As always, the Adventurer’s Guild’s members were truly *free*.



“Sorry everyone! It ended in a tie!” After returning from his bout, Graham kowtowed before his teammates. He did so forcefully enough that his forehead pulverized the floor with the force of it, to boot.

“Man, you’re being way too serious about this, Grammy!” Rami told him. “There’s nothing to apologize for!”

“She’s right! Raise your head!” Rion added. “You tied in a match against a Rank S adventurer; you should be proud!”

“As Rami-kun and Rion-kun said,” Art added, “you did well. At least we’ll eliminate the possibility of losing with one more win.”

“You were amazing, Graham-san!” DarkMel exclaimed.

“A... All of you, I...” Graham couldn’t get the words out as everyone welcomed him warmly. Their smiles and applause enveloped him, and he felt the corners of his eyes grow hot.

However, someone did have a complaint even amid such a moving scene. “Haah...haaah! Wait... Wait a second, Graham! Seriously, how hard were you trying to destroy the stage?!”

“Bell-dono?!” Graham exclaimed in surprise.

It was Bell, who had been called on by Milky in haste to supply the stage with

magic. Her expression conveyed significant distress for some reason as she appeared while holding her stomach.

“That stupid perverted woman doesn’t know the meaning of holding back either, not to mention you dragged the fight on for so long!” Bell complained. “Do you have some sort of grudge against me or something?! I almost turned into that rainbow-spewing Oracle!”

“Buh— Bell-dono?!” Graham repeated, still surprised.

Behind the scenes of Graham’s fierce fight, Bell had been there the entire time, supplying the stage’s repair function with magic. Even someone of her caliber had been drained dry several times, so she’d had to drink recovery potions again and again—enough to get sick from it. Since she had a relatively small stomach, it was basically torture. Drinking too much would ruin her health, and most importantly, the urge to vomit was no joke.

Unfortunately, Graham had no idea why Bell was so angry. Of course he didn’t, since he had no way of knowing what went on behind the scenes, and he had spent the entire time being attacked by a Rank S adventurer. Graham had been fending for his life as well.

“You disappeared halfway through the fight, Bell-chan. What happened to you?” Rion asked.

“I got worked like a horse behind the scenes!” Bell complained. “Wait, urp...I shouted too much; I feel sick...”

“Oh wow, you really don’t look good.” Rami observed. “Shouldn’t you go to the infirmary?”

“Oh, I’ll go with her,” DarkMel offered. “I’m last, anyway.”

Bell took some deep breaths before saying, “You’re next, Graham! Got it?!”

“Next for what?!” Graham exclaimed, bewildered. “You have been acting quite frightening for the past while, Bell-dono!”

As Bell left for the infirmary with DarkMel, she left some rather suggestive last words with Graham.

“Um, well, I’m not sure what she was talking about, but I guess Ri-chan and I

are next?” Rami said. “Let’s go put a nice win in the books!”

“Uh, yeah,” Rion agreed. “Let’s do our best for Bell-chan! I wonder who we’re facing? I’m so looking forward to it!”

“I don’t mind if you settle the match. Go give it your all,” Art told them.

“I was useless, so please win in my stead. Good luck,” Graham added.

Rami walked off, skirt flapping in the breeze and sparks flying from her fingertips. Rion hopped energetically after her, twin swords at her waist. The two best friends, having done some light warm-ups beforehand, made their way to the stage for their tag-team battle. However...they had yet to see what would be waiting for them: the sea of muscles bursting at the seams.

“Ah, that’s right. I had a message for you, Graham-kun. Take this and go to this spot,” Art said, handing him an item.

“An MP-recovery potion?” Graham reacted with puzzlement. “Thank you, but why am I going to this place?”

“You’ll find out when you get there!” Art replied in a singsong voice.

And so, Graham went to where his next decisive battle would be.



“The second match ended in an unprecedented tie, and now the exhibition is reaching its middle stage! This third bout is also going to be a historic first: a two-on-two tag-team battle! This will be quite a bit different from what you’ve seen before, which begs the question, what kind of fight will the combatants show us?! Now that I’ve soothed my thirst and am fully prepared, I can’t hide my excitement! All right, it’s about time for the fighters to take the stage—” Ramlulu’s voice reverberated throughout the venue.

The audience’s cups were full with the aftertaste of the last fight and expectations for the next, and the emcee’s words only reinforced that. It was the same for a certain battle junkie as well.

“Ah...maybe I should’ve taken the second slot?” Kelvin wondered aloud. “He’s Sylvia and Ema’s little brother, and is essentially Rank S in strength...”

“Yeah, yeah, snap out of it soon, okay, Kelvin?” Shin told him. “The third

round is starting.”

“She’s right, Master! I’ll become Rank S someday too, so you can let out those feelings then!” Suzu declared.

“Oh, sure, then I’ll be looking— Wait, huh? Where did Bakke go?” Kelvin asked as he looked around, trying to find the woman in question. Bakke had been persistently “inviting” him to bed, but now she was nowhere to be found in the waiting room.

“She was called by the event administrators just now,” Suzu replied.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. They handed her a lot of recovery potions since she’d just finished her match. It looked like she used a lot of MP, unlike me, so she must have been more worn out than she seemed,” Suzu surmised.

“It’s just that sort of thing!” Shin said in a singsong voice.

“Hmm?” Kelvin reacted with an appreciative, pondering noise.

“Ah, Brujowana-san and Oddradd-san are onstage now,” noted Suzu.

“Oh, they’re starting?” Kelvin didn’t quite seem satisfied with the answer he got, but since the combatants had taken to the field, he didn’t give it any more thought. As it happened, though, the administration had led Bakke to *that* place.

“I will now announce the lineup for the third round,” said Milky.

“Representing Lumiest: Rion Celsius-san and her partner, Rami Ryuuoh-san. Representing the Adventurer’s Guild: Grostina Brujowana-san and Oddradd-san.”

“Oho, so here comes the rumored first-year best friends! Depending on the subject, Rion-san and Rami-san scored just as well on the entrance exams as Bell-san! I think we can expect a wonderful fight!” Ranlulu exclaimed.

“Oh? You know a lot, don’t you? As Ranlulu-san says, the two of them are almost equal to Bell-san, especially when it comes to physical aptitude. I, personally, am looking forward to seeing this round, especially since there’s no need to worry about the stage,” Milky said, though she dropped into a whisper

for the last part.

“Huh? Did you say something, Instructor Milky?” Ranlulu asked her.

“Hee hee! Oh, nothing,” Milky replied. “I was just saying that I’m looking forward to this. The Adventurer’s Guild has sent their newest Rank S member, Purple Butterfly, as one of their fighters. Normally, a Rank S adventurer’s first official fight would happen at their promotion ceremony, so being able to see the strength of a new one before that is a real treat.”

“You’re right,” Ranlulu agreed. “Grostina participated in the Beast King Festival before, where she also fought against Grim Reaper Kelvin, who’s on this team as well. According to the records, Grostina lost, but it was a fierce fight where they were nearly evenly matched. Hmm...I wanted to see that match too! This is just my own expectation, but don’t you think the two of them will have gotten even stronger since then?!”

“Oddradd-san is also one of the foremost Rank A adventurers in line for promotion,” Milky noted. “I wonder what kind of teamwork these two will show us? I feel that’s also a point worth watching out for.”

“Indeed!” Ranlulu agreed again. “It seems both pairs have come onstage! There they are!”

With that, the crowd turned their eyes to the center of the venue. From Lumiest’s side came Rion, wearing Black Recess, and Rami, who was wearing her uniform as usual, but in a more relaxed, casual fashion. Meanwhile, from the Adventurer’s Guild side emerged two monsters absolutely rippling with muscles: Grostina and Oddradd, wearing purple and green full-body tights, respectively. They made their entrance while flexing their muscles, which was a steep contrast from Rion and Rami’s entrance, which emphasized how well they got along. Instantly, the crowd was split into two distinct reactions.

“YEEEEAAHHHHHH!” Rion and Rami’s entrance had served as an oasis for the eyes, and so the men of the crowd cheered to celebrate the beautiful sight they were seeing. This cheer was the loudest of the day so far, enough to make some want to cover their ears. But it was mixed with what sounded like screams—ones that reached an equal level of volume as the cheers for Rion and Rami.

“AAAGGGHHHHHH?!” From the opposite side of the audience came a scream

on the same level of energy as the happy shouts that had been let out for Rion and Rami. These came from the seats on the side of the Adventurer's Guild, and they were filled with fear, panic, and lament—it was clear that they'd encountered something awful, as the sound was filled with negative emotion.

There's probably no need to elaborate further. Yes, the screams were in reaction to the entrance of Grostina and Oddradd.

"Mm-hmm," Grostina grunted. "Their eyes are glued to us!"

"Heh ha ha!" Oddradd laughed triumphantly. "Flexing and posing in front of a crowd feels so good!"

"Um...what kind of outfit is that, Ri-chan?" Rami asked. "It's like, gouging out my heart. Is it supposed to be a mental attack?"

"Um..." Rion pondered her answer. "She wore the same thing at the Beast King Festival, so I don't think so?"

"No way; they're being serious?!" Rami shouted in disbelief.

The monstrously muscular duo had to have been taking all the screams as compliments. Every time they changed poses and flexed anew, they elicited new ones.

"Those... Those are...Goldia-style combat uniforms!" Ranlulu shouted.

"What? Uh...um, Ranlulu-san," Milky asked, worried, "what is with you, all of a sudden? Are you actually saying you've seen those full-body tights before?"

"You don't know about them, Instructor Milky?!" Ranlulu exclaimed. "It is the clothing of the phantom style of martial arts, reached after throwing away all defensive equipment in pursuit of the depths of how humans can naturally move! That is the Goldia-style combat uniform! I never thought the day would come where I could lay my eyes on it! I'm so moved!"

"Ranlulu-san?!" Milky yelped. It was the biggest shock of the day for her. And so, the commentator's box proved itself to be unexpectedly lively. Ranlulu Vista, eighteen years old, and part of the broadcasting club, was so obsessed with studying the art of commentating and emceeing that she'd gotten hooked deep on the minutiae of martial arts. So she was quite knowledgeable about the

Goldia style.

“Hiii, Rion-chan! It’s been too long!” Grostina cooed. “I never expected to be fighting you! And your friend there looks really strong too, so I won’t be showing any mercy, okay? Mm-hmm!”

“Hah *haaa!*” Oddradd laughed. “Exactly! I feel sorry for Master, but I’ll be going all out! Our backs are to the wall, after all!”

“That should be our line!” Rion declared. “If you take it easy on us, you’ll regret it! The fundamentals of battle between people is to do everything you can to win; there’s no right or wrong!”

“Uhh...” Rami sounded hesitant. “Our opponents are muscly monsters, and Ri-chan’s giving off some incredible pressure, so this is pretty confusing, but...oh well, I’m sure it’ll work out! We win in both cuteness and strength, and all that’s left is to teach you that!”

“Still, why are the two of them wearing the Goldia-style...” Ranlulu then gasped before saying, “No way! Instructor Milky, we won’t be able to tear our eyes away from this fight! May I ask you a question now while we have the chance?!”

“Buh, er, oh...okay, just don’t shake me so mu-u-u-uch!” Milky responded.

The combatants faced off against each other as the audience was split into two screaming factions, and the commentator’s box was a morass of confusion. The third round was plunged into chaos before it even started, but start it did.

“Round three, beeegin!” Ranlulu gave the signal with even more enthusiasm than usual. As her voice reverberated through the venue, Rion drew Caladbolg and Lethal Opiate Sword while Rami covered her hands in lightning.

On the other side, the super buff duo spread their arms wide. Though it took different forms and meanings, everyone was putting out aggressive pressure.

“Now then, it’s all well and good that the match has started, but first we need to get *that* done,” Grostina declared.

“Yeah, you’re right!” Oddradd agreed.

Having more people participating in the battle meant there were more

combatants to watch out for. The first ones to make a move at the very beginning of the fight, when most would be waiting and seeing, were Grostina and Oddradd. Of course, that made Rion and Rami warier.

“Sorry! To! Keep! You! Waiting!” Grostina shouted, emphasizing every word. “The flower that shines ephemerally in the midday sun, Grostina Brujowana, will shoot through your heart!”

“Sure kept you waiting, didn’t I?! The beast that pierces the earth under a sea of green, Oddradd will tear a hole through your heart!”

Kaboom!

And then came a scene like one would see in a Saturday morning hero show, the kind of heroic entrance that kids dream of. The dramatic poses the muscle monsters took left the audience completely dumbstruck, as they’d had no prior knowledge that the two were going to do that. But they could still see *it*: a colorful set of explosions going off behind the pair. Even though everyone knew it was just a hallucination, they still saw it.

Normally, Rion’s eyes would be sparkling at how perfectly it had been pulled off, regardless of who was doing it or what the end product was. The key word being “normally.”

“Superconductive Lightning.” Unfortunately, they were in the middle of a bout. Rion paid no attention to the flashy poses and in fact took it as the perfect opportunity to strike as she intoned a spell.

She had cast the advanced version of Lightning Enhancement, the Rank S Red Magic spell Superconductive Lightning. It affected the entire party, so it buffed not only her agility and reaction speed, but Rami’s as well. Furthermore, the lightning lit up Caladbolg, completing her precombat preparations. The pair, having become even more dazzling after being enveloped in lightning, attacked the “Saturday morning heroes” in unison.

My, they’re in such a hurry. But... Grostina thought.

We’re ready for battle too, ya know? Oddradd oddly completed in his mind, their thoughts seeming perfectly in sync.

Rion’s lightning-clad blade and Rami’s fist stopped just as they were about to

make contact. Something bright had been unleashed by their opponents' muscles: purple and green light, respectively. The girls let out surprised noises as their Danger Detection skills rang loud alarms in their heads. Obeying those warnings, they instantly changed directions and retreated like lightning, zigzagging on the way back to make sure they couldn't easily be caught.

If I had continued the swing, my attack probably would have hit, Rion thought. But I feel like I'd have met with an even worse counter.

Wait a second, what the heck? They're way more than just creepy! Rami yelled inside her head.

Having put some distance between their adversaries and themselves, Rion and Rami fixed their gazes forwards once again.

"You were correct to stop your attack," Grostina stated. "My ki is rather sticky!"

What appeared out of the light in front of them was Grostina, covered in a purple aura that spread like a butterfly's wings. She winked at the crowd, and there was a sound effect like something snapping, then she threw a kiss as fan service, though it created a loud thud. This only served to make the audience scream once more.

"Indeed. And it's not just my sister disciple, the Violet Fairy. You did quite well to sense the hostile intent of my Vaja Ifrit!" Beside the purple pervert stood Oddradd, surrounded by a green aura. He had two horns sprouting from his head, which looked like an ogre's, and now his muscular body seemed like that of a daemon's. However, although his aura was vividly colored, if Grostina's could be described as poisonous, his was more vibrant. Since he was acting boldly, which fit such a burly physique, the screams Oddradd's appearance elicited were fewer.

"Looks like you've obtained the essence of the Goldia style, Occhan," Rion commented. "And you didn't have those wings before, did you, Gro-chan?"

"Mm-hmm, thanks for noticing!" Grostina replied. "My dear sister is evolving ever more by the day, so I need to at least be able to grow my own pair of wings! These lovely things must be born of something deep in my psyche. In other words, yes, you could call this my Violet Fairy, Second Edition!"

“Hey, Ri-chan, let’s rip those wings off,” suggested Rami. “And then burn them. It’s pure horror.”

“I cut it pretty close, myself!” Oddradd shouted. “But I know how to use it now, so I’ll be doing so with full force!”

“You’re totally aiming for a counter; it’s so obvious,” Rami said. “I’m not an easy enough girl to fall for that!”

“Really?” Grostina responded. “Then maybe we should get a little down and dirty. Scalespread Dance!”

With that, she flapped the wings on her back. The impression she gave off was incredibly ostentatious, but it also spread a lot of poisonous scales from her wings that filled the stage in the blink of an eye. The speed at which they polluted the area was even faster than it might have looked.

“This is—” Rion started.

“Exactly what it looks like,” Grostina answered. “I greatly respect the strategy Dahak-chan used during the Beast King Festival, so this is my version of it. Oh my, no! I said I was getting down and dirty, but I went and explained it like a pure little lady!”

“Gah ha ha!” Oddradd laughed. “My sister disciple is so nice!”

Grostina had been referring to the match between Dahak and Goldiana. At the time, the dragon had realized he stood no chance in a head-on battle, so he’d surrounded the stage in a dome of plant life and filled the inside with deadly poison. The specific toxin he’d used was still unknown, but what Grostina was spreading from her wings was also poison gas.



“While we wouldn’t mind indulging in more conversation...” Grostina started.

“The more we do so, the worse your situation gets!” Oddradd finished.

Krakooowww!

“Whooooaaaaaggghhh?!” Oddradd shouted.

“Oh?” Grostina gasped.

While the pair of them were clearly trying to lure the Lumiest team out, a large bolt of lightning had suddenly come straight at them from above. Oddradd and Grostina dodged the strike by a hair’s breadth, and the bolt hit the stage while drawing an irregular pattern. Part of the stage, which should have been very sturdy, was promptly destroyed, with pieces of rubble sent flying by the shock wave. Moreover, it seemed the attack was not a solo one.

Rumbling sounds of reverberations in the air could be heard coming from the top of the arena where the barrier was. Before anyone noticed, the space was filled with a pitch-black cloud. The lightning bolt from earlier had come from that cloud.

It’s annoying not to be able to breathe, and the poison is definitely gonna be bad for my skin! Rami complained internally. *Let’s finish this lightning quick for my beauty, Ri-chan! Blow them away: Thor’s Nimbus!*

While Grostina and Oddradd were talking, Rami had secretly been casting a spell. The clouds above them were her original Rank S Red Magic spell Thor’s Nimbus. At its strongest, it could create a dark thundercloud that covered an entire mountain, producing countless lightning bolts like the one that had just been unleashed over a long period of time. Each strike was only strong enough to completely destroy a large boulder, but since they came down like rain, the spell was very deadly, transforming it into something that could actually make a mountain it was covering disappear.

Yep, that’s the plan! Rion thought. *If we don’t know what they’ll do, we just have to not let them do anything! It’s time to hunt, Gigas Keravnos!*

While the attention of the muscletastic duo was directed at the lightning bolts, Rion cast her next spell, creating a gigantic hound made out of lightning.

It bared its fangs and growled as it locked in on its prey among the rain of electricity. Then it met eyes with its designated target.

“Oh my, no! I’m going to be eateeeennn!” Grostina exclaimed.

She flapped her wings and took to the air—although she was actually jumping through the air with Sky Walk—and it was about time for some of the audience to be knocked out or simply leave.

The stage was a mass of confusion and turmoil. In the sky, thunder rumbled and a butterfly soared, while on the ground a beast was on a rampage as a mass of muscles danced about—the only way to describe it in writing would be utter chaos, and that would be accurate, which was why it was so uncontrollable. The main thing to be said was that for a Rank S battle, it was unusually chaotic.

“Go, Gigas Keravnos!” Rion shouted.

“Oh no!” Grostina exclaimed coquettishly.

The lightning beast bounded through the air to attack her, following persistently as she ran higher. Meanwhile, the thundercloud continued to unleash masses of lightning bolts at the ground. Grostina was being pincered from above and below, but her evasive capabilities were incredible, and she had yet to take even a single attack.

“Now that I’ve become a lovely butterfly, no half-hearted attacks will hit me!” Grostina boasted.

There was no response to that, which made Grostina realize something. “Oh, you can’t talk since you’re holding your breath, Rion-chan. I forgot. What a tragedy, for two maidens to not be able to converse! Allow me to talk for you instead. You said something very good earlier: do everything you can in order to win; there is no good or bad in that regard. I believe that’s what you said? You were right. Being able to occasionally become a villainess is one of a lady’s charms. After all, I’m spreading poison just by prancing through the air, and that will allow me to finish you off!”

Rion let out a sharp, wordless breath as she added an Agito to the two Rank S Red spells that were already chasing Grostina down.

“A flying slash?!” Grostina yelped in surprise. “I can’t! It’s so *exciting*! Whoo!

Haaah! Even so, I'll continue to dance! Dance like a lovely butterfly, as fantastically as a fairy!"

Even after that extra effort, Grostina could not be caught. Unable to abide that, Rion used Sky Walk herself to chase after her opponent, continuing to unleash fierce attacks.

"Ohhh, you sure are going at it!" Oddradd shouted. "I knew it; fights have gotta be like this! Having lightning falling who-knows-where is just the way I like it—flashy! This stage, which fixes itself every time it's destroyed, is also very nice!"

Meanwhile, Oddradd was seeming terribly satisfied with the wild state of the stage. He was constantly moving to avoid the lightning, but he was also striking a new pose every time he did so to show off. At this point, it was almost like an occupational sickness.

"Hey, you think so too, right?!" Oddradd shouted to Rami. Grostina and Rion had started their fight in earnest, so he wanted to get his own serious match going. That was why he pointed at Rami as he made his declaration, but... "Huh?!"

There had been no reply from his chosen opponent. In fact, Rami was nowhere to be seen. She'd been there until just a second ago, which left Oddradd looking around, confused. His gaze made several circuits around the stage, but he couldn't find her. Thus, the mass of muscles was at a loss.

Leaving Oddradd aside and returning to the fight in the air:

"Mm-hmm!" Grostina grunted. "If these attacks get any fiercer, even a butterfly fairy like myself will be hard-pressed to dodge! So...Venomous Wasp Buzz-Buzz!"

Grostina's powerful arm sliced through the air and shook the atmosphere. At first glance, it looked like a simple missed swing, and nothing was impacted, but of course that wasn't true. Grostina had thrown out a bullet of air, something Goldiana had once used, only this one was enhanced with deadly poison. It hit the Agito that Rion had let loose, reducing the threat her strong attack held within. Not only that, but it also burst and spread more poison as soon as the bullet made contact, which further polluted the air. The move truly hit two

birds with one stone, combining both attack and defense into one.

“Whew! I’m getting a little tired, since I have to dodge the magic too!” Grostina commented. “Buuut, we’re battling pretty evenly, Rion-chan! You’ll never make me crumble like this! If you get too close, you come into martial arts range, which is my territory; but if you keep too much distance, my poison will do all the work. You’re stuck between a rock and a hard place!”

The moment Rion heard that, an intense electric shock ran through her body. She had pumped up her Superconductive Lightning to its highest output. Having turned into a flash of electricity, she zigzagged towards Grostina, running around her opponent at a distance where melee attacks could not reach.

What?! That’s way too fast! Grostina complained internally. I’m just barely able to see what she’s doing! It’s looking like I’ll have to prepare myself for some damage and aim for a huge counterraggghhh?!

Just as she was thinking up her next plan, a shock ran through her. But it wasn’t a supportive effect like it was for Rion; it was clearly an attack.

“Looks like my One-Sided Love hit the bull’s-eye! I knew it—using my breath fits me way more than magic!”

When Grostina, still tingling from the shock, turned to face the voice, she found Rami, who had gone missing from Oddradd’s perspective. At the corners of her mouth could be seen remnants of what appeared to be a lightning breath attack, and Grostina knew that was what had hit her.

My body is going numb all at once! Grostina thought. I mean, I never even knew she was there! Wasn’t she playing with Oddradd-chan—

“Sorry, sister disciple!” Oddradd shouted with impeccable timing. “It looks like my enemy went your way! I can’t fly, so please pull through it with guts and spirit!”

Gaaah! Oddradd-chan?! Grostina couldn’t move her numb mouth, so she settled for shouting in her heart instead. After that internal outburst, she went back to pondering. No, you need to calm down in these sorts of situations, Grostina! Ladies do not lose their composure! I knew she was a Dragon King, but isn’t being able to use a breath weapon even with all this poison in the air

crazy?! Rion-chan shouldn't be able to use White Magic, and Miss Dragon King should be the same! What kind of trick is this?!

She spun her mental wheels at high speed, trying to calm down and figure the situation out. Unfortunately, she was unable to determine the truth, which was that Rion had used her Unique Skill Absolute Purification to rid her surroundings and anywhere she passed of poison, leaving behind perfectly clear and fresh air.

Furthermore, everything Rion had done, from listening to Grostina's taunts to maintaining an even battlefield before breaking it with numbing electricity to pretending as if she were trying to narrow the difference to pretending to hold her breath so as not to breathe in the poison, had been part of her plan. She'd known that if she was to cover herself in electricity and act flashily with her summoned lightning beast, she would naturally garner all the attention, allowing Rami to sneakily chase after them, giving her the room she needed to breathe, and most importantly, allowing them to attack as one. This had been aided by Oddradd's easygoing nature, so Rion's strategy of crushing one of them first had been carried out with aplomb.

"Good, the Prison of Slashes is complete. Looks like you're the one stuck between a rock and a hard place, Gro-chan," Rion called back.

That made Grostina suck in a breath. Rion, who had up until then been moving around unceasingly, positioned herself so that she and Rami could pincer Grostina, then stopped in midair. All around Grostina, countless residual slashing attacks had been laid out.

"Of course, this isn't all we have in store," Rion continued. "We have to do everything we can to ensure our victory, after all."

"Yep, exactly!" Rami agreed. "This is proof of how deep my friendship with Ri-chan is!"

Rion called her Gigas Keravnos back to her, and Rami did the same with Thor's Nimbus, then they changed the form of the lightning into something else. The new shape was a giant ball, and as the audience stared up at it, it looked like twin moons floating in the sky—only these two moons were terribly bright.

"Okay then, Ri-chan," said Rami, "it's about time for the numbness to run its course for a Titan, I think, so let's do this?"

“Yep, let’s,” Rion agreed. “Prison of Slashes, close. Then—”

“Magnetic Nova!” the two of them shouted in unison.

The wall of slashing attacks that had been suspended in the air, along with the twin moons floating above, all came slowly crashing down on Grostina, who was of course left in the middle.

So... So beautiful! she thought. *Wait, now’s not the time for that! Move! Move, my beautiful and reliable muscles! Now is the time to achieve true awakening! Even if it’s impossible, at least mobilize my ki to focus on defense! Hnnnrggghh...Princess Hold!*

Right before the twin moons intersected, Grostina gave herself a firm, powerful hug and unleashed her Goldia aura at full force. The purple aura enveloped her body, personifying a beautiful, burly, vigorous maiden(?)’s embrace.

“Shine!” both Rion and Rami shouted together.

Fwaaah!

The twin moons fused as they swallowed Grostina, turning into a single huge star of lightning. As if trying to steal the spotlight from the brilliantly shining sun, this attack let out rays of bright light. The two Rank S spells that made up Magnetic Nova were, of course, unparalleled in their power. The Lightning Dragon King’s Blessing also factored into this, further enhancing the already vicious attack. It was enough to make one question whether even someone as brawny and skilled at the Goldia style as Grostina could be erased without a trace.

Seeing this divine lightning impact, the crowd shuddered fearfully, and there were even those who prayed for safety.

“Oh crap, those’re the flashiest fireworks of the day!” Oddradd shouted. “You okay, sister disciple?!”

Grostina’s only ally on the stage, Oddradd, had no way to fly, so he couldn’t get to her to support her. Grostina had been driven into a corner and was out of options as far as everyone, including her ally, was concerned. But in the meantime, the Magnetic Nova started to weaken.

“Ri-chan, I’m starting to run dry MP-wise!” Rami called out. “Running out of MP is bad for your skin too!”

“You’re right about that!” Rion said slowly as she concentrated on the attack. “Let’s finish up quick, then! We’ll need to improve this strategy; it takes too much out of us!”

Apparently, they had reached the limits of their MP pools. The noise and light resulting from the stellar nova caused by the lightning attack faded more and more until it was finally gone. Then, from inside the space where Magnetic Nova once was, something charred and black fell. It was Grostina, of course.

“Oh, what’s thiiis?!” Ranlulu shouted. “Rion-san and Rami-san’s massive spell has burst, and it seems to have charred their opponent, Grostina-san, blaaack?! That *must* mean Grostina is out of the battle, but is the Rank S adventurer even alive?!”

“Get the medics in quickly. Yes, the treatment will have to be done on-site,” Milky said into her communicator.

The sight of the charred body was so staggering that it took a moment for Ranlulu to process it, but then she started shouting nonstop, probably because she felt that Grostina was in danger. Meanwhile, Milky, who was on exposition, was arranging for medical aid. Now that someone had been knocked out of the fight, the third match would end with Lumiest’s victory.

Just before such a decision was announced, though, a certain man made his move.

“Hnnrrrrghhh! IT’S NOT OVER YEEEEET!” It was Oddradd, his muscles enveloped in a green aura. After that shout, he leaped forwards and gracefully caught Grostina. In terms of appearances, it was a tragedy, since he’d caught her in the form of a princess carry, but he pulled off the landing smoothly.

“Oddradd-san has rushed to Grostina-san’s rescue! What a hot-blooded turn of events!” Ranlulu exclaimed.

“Don’t you mean hot and stuffy?” Milky retorted.

“You could say that, but I believe most would consider saving Grostina-san from a sudden date with the stage a wonderful act!” Ranlulu replied.

“Unfortunately, Oddradd-san hasn’t had a chance to show his stuff during this bout so far, but at the very end, he’s displayed some great teamwork by acting out of consideration for his friend. I want to applaud him from the bottom of my heart!”

To Ranlulu’s eyes, it looked like Oddradd had saved Grostina. Her eyes did not lie, but whether or not the fight was over was another matter entirely.

“I said that it’s not over yet! Right, sister disciple?!” shouted Oddradd.

“Pbbfhaaah?! *Koff, kerhooffff!* Mnnrrghh!” Astonishingly, the charred Grostina started to breathe again from his arms, expelling a lot of black smoke from her body as she awoke, teary-eyed.

“Whaaat?!” Rami exclaimed incredulously. “I know we held back a little so we wouldn’t kill anyone, but seriously, is that thing even human?! It took a direct hit from our Magnetic Nova and not only is it still alive, but it *woke up!*”

“That’s weird,” Rion muttered. “I’m sure Grostina was near dead as she fell after the attack...”

They were shocked by Grostina’s revival as they landed back on the stage. By this point, her charred-black skin had already fully healed and was back to its former muscular beauty.

“Wha— Uhhh, buh...what?! Grostina-san came back to liiiiiife?!” Ranlulu was similarly shocked. “What is going ooooooon?!”

The crowd was just as confused as Ranlulu’s scream suggested she was. But their confusion was cleared up faster than anyone would have expected.

“Whew, that was seriously close,” Grostina said. “I think I saw Sister Goldiana waving to me from the other side of a river. I need to thank my body for being able to take on its defense form in time, and for Rion-chan and Rami-chan for holding back.”

“Hah haaa!” Oddradd let out. “You were beat good, sister disciple! The healing potion you set up beforehand is gone now!”

“Healing...potion?” Rion felt something was off after hearing Oddradd’s words. She and Rami had been watching Grostina carefully when she fell, and of

course when Oddradd had saved her. Through all that, there had been no opportunity for Oddradd to use a healing potion.

“Could it be...Occhan’s ability?” Rion wondered aloud.

“Oh yes, exactly!” Oddradd confirmed. “Well done figuring it out, Master’s little sister! My Unique Skill is Pharmacist’s Pot! I can store the effects of medicines within my body and secrete them whenever I please! What I’ve got stored right now is something I got from Master, and its effect is increased by my Vaja Ifrit as well! It was used up reviving my sister disciple, though!”

Rion hadn’t intended to dig that far, but Oddradd spewed all the information out on his own, so now she knew everything.

“Hm...I see,” Rion said. “I was wondering why Occhan seemed fine even while Gro-chan was spreading poison everywhere. So, you were using your ability to cancel the poison out.”

“Exaaactly!” Oddradd exclaimed.

“Hey, wait a second! You’re being way too much of a gentleman, Oddradd-chan, answering everything honestly! Also, while we’re spending all this time talking...” Grostina interrupted, but it was too late. While they spoke, magic had gathered in Rion’s hand and around the edges of Rami’s mouth. “They’re going to cast more magic!”

“Fury Bolt!” Rion shouted.

“Fallout!” Rami followed up.

The pair had decided to use all their remaining MP to immediately end the battle. Lightning was gathered and compressed at the tip of Rion’s sword, and when she swung it, the Fury Bolt flew out. Meanwhile, Rami would continue releasing her Fallout, which expelled the electricity inside her body as long as she had the breath for it. Their attacks mixed together, becoming a beam of light that flew towards their opponents.

“Wedded Bears Palm!” Grostina declared.

“Savage Palm Strike!” Oddradd shouted.

The two reacted quickly to the flash of magic coming at them. They had likely

expected to be attacked and, in perfect unison, synced their wavelengths, pairing up their auras, compressing them, and sending them out as flying palm strikes. The gigantic purple and green attacks met the bright lightning beam head-on, instantly cracking the entire stage as the inside of the barrier was filled with light.

“I don’t know how many times this makes just in this round, but once again it’s too bright to see!” Ramlulu announced. “My eyes! They hurt!”

“Grk! But...it looks like the light is disappearing!” Milky pointed out.

“Urgh...what?!” Ramlulu exclaimed in surprise.

As Milky said, the bright light filling the area had started to weaken. Then, within a few seconds, it completely disappeared, allowing the stage to be seen properly again.

“Oh crap, that was some serious power,” Oddradd commented. “I reflexively used all my ki. I’m stripped bare.”

“Me too,” Grostina reported. “Buuut! It looks like they’re the same too.”

“Urgkk...aghhh!” Rami grunted, while Rion stayed silent.

Both sides were unhurt. As for the stage itself, it was in a terrible state and in the process of auto-repairing. It seemed the last clash had ended in a tie and both sides were now exhausted. Grostina’s and Oddradd’s auras had been completely extinguished, while Rion and Rami hadn’t a speck of MP left.

“We’ve used all our Goldia ki. They’ve used all their MP. Now then, what’s going to follow is a pure clash of blades and fists. It’s time to show them our unity!” Grostina told her partner.



After that, the fight continued on without magic or Goldian auras. It was a pure melee showdown.

Even though the pair were no longer able to use magic, the cast of Superconductive Lightning that had been applied to Rion and Rami at the beginning, as well as the lightning infused into Demon Sword Caladbolg, were still in effect. So in terms of buffs, Lumiest had the advantage. Also, since Rami’s

breath attacks used converted life energy instead of MP, she could still employ that tactic.

On the other hand, this situation was perfect for Grostina and Oddradd, who specialized in close combat anyway. Their opponents might still have been enjoying the effects of supportive magic, but it was no different from the Beast King Festival. The Goldia style was all about pulverizing the enemy with love, including any magic they used before the fight. Thus, two muscled bodies would dance to their heart's content.

“Whooooaaa!!!” Rarlulu shouted in excitement. “What a wonderful fight; I’m on the edge of my seat! Most battles these days just involve magic flying everywhere, exploding like blooming flowers, but the best ones have gotta be heart-thumping punch-outs and contests of swordsmanship, don’t you agree, Instructor Milky?!”

“I’d rather you didn’t look to me for agreement on that,” Milky replied. “In fact, why don’t we calm down now, Rarlulu-san? Your tastes and hobbies are starting to leak out like you’re a sieve, just so you know.”

“Whoa there, my apologies! This hot-blooded fight reminiscent of the Beast King Festival is just so exciting, I can’t help it! My energy is at its limit! Someone please recommend me for employment in Gaun!”

“Hah! Hah! Hah! Nice!”

“Rarluluuu! Come wed me soonnn!”

Even with Milky’s warning, there was no way Rarlulu was calming down at this point. The audience, though they were supposed to be nobles and people of high station, were influenced by her temperament and cut loose with their comments.

Milky sighed. “Seriously... Well, it seems the parents are liking it, so I guess I’ll overlook this behavior. I’m sure she’ll go back to normal after this is over, anyway.”

“Watch those muscles dance! Witness this explosion, this surge of youth!” Rarlulu shouted.

“She’ll be herself again...right?” Milky wondered worriedly.

In the meantime, the bout was progressing.

“You’re good, Rion-chan!” Grostina said, impressed. “You’ve totally conquered all the hesitation and naivety I saw during the Beast King Festival!”

“I should be complimenting you, Gro-chan! How long have you been working on your teamwork with Occhan?!” Rion returned. “I bet Kel-nii’s over the moon!”

“He sure is!” Oddradd replied. “The way Master looks at me these days is pretty scary!”

“Oh crap, the guild side is full of weirdos and perverts...” Rami muttered.

The stuff about Kelvin aside, Rion was correct. The teamwork between Grostina and Oddradd was outstanding. Both of them backed up the other, and it looked as if they were dancing. In fact, they really were dancing as they fought, but that sounded sillier than it actually was. Just like a formal dance at a ball, they had their arms around each other’s waists and were making what seemed like unnecessary spins and twirls. In the midst of all this, they were attacking in unison with joined hands and even sometimes throwing their partner to where they needed to be. It was proving impossible to predict what they would do next. On top of that, this style of fighting, which might have seemed like a joke at first, worked bizarrely well.

Of course, Rion and Rami’s teamwork was also at a high level. Of Lumiest’s members, they were the most unified. However...in terms of being able to synchronize and bring out each other’s full abilities, Grostina and Oddradd were several stages higher than the pair from Lumiest. When it came to pure strength, Grostina, Rion, and Rami were about equal, and Oddradd was several levels lower. But their bonds as fellow Goldia practitioners had brought the matchup back to even.

“Take!”

“This!”

“That’s!”

“Nothing!”

The exchange of blows and slashes was a fierce storm. Both sides were even, even after clashing over and over. One side would take an attack, get hurt, and then repay that damage in kind. Such an exchange had already happened countless times, but both sides were finding themselves one move short of being able to wrest victory from the other.

“How can this be?!” Rarlulu announced excitedly. “This stalemate will not end! I find it hard to believe, but will this round end in a tie just like the previous one?!”

“Still, both teams are likely on their last legs,” Milky added. “Even though they’re evenly matched, that doesn’t mean they haven’t suffered any damage.”

“I see, so you’re saying the end is near?” Rarlulu asked.

“Most likely,” Milky replied. “The exhaustion and accumulated pain are definitely eating away at their bodies.”

Milky’s comment was right on the mark. The first half had been a clash of magic and ki, and the second half a close-quarters brawl, which had brought the four combatants onstage to the brink. If any of them were to take one more direct blow, they’d likely be rendered unable to fight.

And finally, the blow that decided the round was struck.

Uh...huh?

No...way... Now of all times?

It was just a slight bit of sleepiness. One that would normally never happen in the excitement of battle. The desire was incredibly bizarre and out of place, but it happened nonetheless at a critical juncture—to Rion and Rami.

As they began to fade from consciousness and doze off, though it was for but a moment, the pair eased up on their attacks. Normally, such a thing wouldn’t create an opening, but their current opponents were evenly matched with them, so the slightest mistake could result in a cascade failure.

“I had meant it purely as insurance, but I never expected the battle to get this heated,” Grostina commented.

“Heated! That’s a good word!” Oddradd shouted. “I like it!”

Rion and Rami let out noises of alarm as their attacks were suddenly deflected, leaving them wide open. Of course, Grostina and Oddradd wouldn't let such an opportunity pass them by, and they launched their own all-out attacks to end it.

“Raaaaaagh!” the Goldian pair shouted in unison.

The two of them had launched synchronized, intense, turning back kicks without a moment of hesitation. The attacks landed on Rion's and Rami's stomachs, easily launching them all the way back to the barrier surrounding the stage.

“It— IT'S OOOVEEERRRRRR!” Ramlulu shouted. “It all happened so fast, I could only see the afterimages, but that looked like the critical hit to end all critical hits! Instructor Milky, what do you think?!”

“Yes, let's call it,” Milky agreed.

The venue instantly erupted into cheers. The crowd had been on Rion and Rami's side at first, but having been shown such an amazing fight, the winning team didn't matter to them anymore. They simply followed their burning, passionate feelings and applauded both sides. That was how invigorating the fight had been, even for the audience.

“They still aimed to counter the finishing blow, even from such broken stances. If they'd stepped in even a little more, I'd have been the one who got got,” Oddradd remarked banefully.

“The best friend I attacked was the same,” Grostina said. “Jeez, she undid the transformation on her tail at the very last moment to try and hit me with it. Just! Absolutely! Fantastic!”

Oddradd was sporting a shallow cut from a sword on the left side of his chest, while Grostina's cheek was already swelling from a fierce blow.

“If that best friend-chan was fighting in her true form, the result might have been different!” Grostina mused. “The difficulty level might have been too much for you to fight as a team in a form you're not used to.”

“Come on, don't sweat the small stuff!” Oddradd shouted. “More importantly, Master's little sister's ability to not be affected by your poison was

amazing, sister disciple! But it looks like the medicine worked, at least! That's a relief!"

During the opening stages of the fight, Oddradd had been left stranded at ground level. During that time, when even the audience was ignoring him, he'd sneakily released a certain drug into the air using his Vaja Ifrit. The sleepiness that had assaulted Rion and Rami was because of that drug.

"It was just cold medicine, though! Master Kelvin wouldn't let me use anything dangerous!" Oddradd laughed.

"Well, cold medicine does make you sleepy as a side effect," Grostina commented. "I suppose they failed to notice until the very end precisely because it was such a mild medicine. I'll have to thank Kelvin-chan la— Oh?" Grostina was twisting and turning her body as she spoke, but then she suddenly fell to one knee. She was speaking as usual, but physically she was very much at her limit. "By a hair's breadth," she commented. "It could have gone either way; the fight was only settled by a hair's breadth. Buuut...luck was on our side, just a little. That, and our bit of preparation won it for us in the end. I'm looking forward to your future growth, little Hero!"



"Hey everyooone! We woon!" Grostina called out, and you could see a heart mark emanating from her words.

She was in a great mood as she rejoined the rest of her team, draped in victory, skipping along at incredible speeds, even when coming down the stairs.

"Okay! I'd like my victory hug now!" she declared as she stopped suddenly in front of everyone, her eyes closed and arms spread wide. But no matter how long she waited, no hug came. "Oh?" she said. "Hey, where's my hug?"

"Not happening," Kelvin replied.

"Uh, sorry..." Suzu agreed.

"I'll pass too!" Shin added.

Grostina opened her eyes to find that everyone in the room had backed up to the far corners. It seemed that even for the gathering of weirdos and perverts

that made up the Rank S adventurers, a hug was too much.

“Jeez! You’re all so shy!” Grostina pouted.

“Hah haaa! But that doesn’t change the fact that we won!” Oddradd exclaimed. “I did it, Master Kelvin! I avenged you, Suzu!”

“Yeah, on that point, I’ll just honestly praise you. Well done winning against Rion and a Dragon King. You...seriously have gotten stronger. I’ll have to pay you back for beating Rion one day,” Kelvin said.

“Yes, it really was a wonderful fight!” Suzu agreed. “Really...a wonderful fight...enough to make me jealous. I’m so jealous.”

“Hah! Hah! Hah!” Oddradd laughed boisterously. “Wasn’t it just?!”

He had both hands on his hips as he expressed his mirth, seeming extremely happy about having been complimented by his teacher and fellow disciple. Unfortunately, his teacher’s mouth was twisted ominously upwards at the ends, while his fellow disciple was releasing a heavily jealous aura. Oddradd’s great achievement had, for some reason, only darkened his future.

“Urgkk, to think I’d be made to work after the fight too...” As all that was happening, Bakke returned from being forced to supply the stage with magic.

“Ah, welcome back, Bakke. Rejoice, we won the third round,” Shin told her.

“I know. I was watching from pretty close, after all,” Bakke replied. “Sorry for doing this right after such an intense fight, but both of you are needed over there. Wait, actually, do either of you even *have* any MP?”

“My, that came out of nowhere,” Grostina commented. “I’ll answer anyway, though! I have almost none whatsoever. I don’t use magic, after all!”

“Same here,” Oddradd replied. “I’ve got basically no MP at all! These fists and the Goldia style are more than enough for me!”

“Aghhh, thought so,” Bakke muttered. “Then I guess you aren’t actually needed.”

“Hm? For what?” Grostina asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Bakke replied. “Well, the other side also sent two people to

the tag-team battle, so I guess it'll all work out. More importantly, Shin, you're next, aren't you? You're the director of the guild; don't you dare lose."

Bakke tried her hand at motivating Shin. However, when it came to said guild director...

"Whooo... Huh? What did you say?" She'd taken a cigar out of a pocket and was smoking it nonchalantly. She was even skilled enough to blow smoke rings into the air.

"Jeez, you're the same as ever," Bakke griped. "Whatever, I'll just enjoy this battle between the two oldest Rank S adventurers."

"Hey now, it's rude to comment on a lady's age," Shin shot back. "I'm telling you right now, but Art is way older than me, got it? Good, and don't you forget it. Whooo, haaa..."

"Hah!" Bakke laughed. "I guess if you're like that, things'll be fine! I did my share of work, so I'm just gonna watch from here with a drink in my hand. Hey, someone bring me a barrel of booze!"

While Shin puffed away on her cigar, Bakke gulped down her booze. It seemed those two weren't going to give any consideration to the fact that they were in a school.

"Has Director Shin really been around for that long, Suzu?" Kelvin asked.

"I don't know her exact age either, but at the very least she's been the director since before I was born," Suzu confirmed. "According to rumor, she's way older than even Guildmaster Mist in Parth—"

"Stop right there!" Shin interrupted. "Were you guys talking about me? You shouldn't be trying to lower my motivation before my fight! Any talk about age is off-limits! Absolutely!" With her cigar still in her mouth, she crossed her arms to form a huge X, then sighed. "Jeez. I'm a shy person with stage fright, but I don't even have time to calm myself down before the fight. Oh well, I'll get going now. Hey, Kelvin-kun, want the rest of this cigar? It'll be an indirect kiss!"

"Sorry, but I don't smoke," Kelvin replied immediately.

"Oh really? Too bad. And...gone," Shin said as she tossed the cigar.

“Hey, don’t litter— Whoa?!” Without missing a beat, Kelvin began to scold her, but in the next instant, the cigar looked like it had melted into nothing. Of course, there was no cigar butt to be found on the floor, and he didn’t find the thing even after looking around.

The cigar just disappeared, he thought in wonder. No, wait, I bet it was actually just teleported somewhere else. Is that the director’s ability?

“Still, I’m gonna be facing Art, huh? I hope I can fill him full of holes,” Shin muttered to herself.



“Dammit, we looost!” Rami shouted.

“They were so strooong!” Rion exclaimed.

As soon as they returned to the Lumiest waiting room, Rion and Rami shouted out in frustration. It was their side’s first loss, so they must have been especially upset.

“Sorry, everyone! We lost!” Rion apologized.

Rami did the same. “Urghhh...I talked a big game, but we failed in the end! So pathetic! Big soz!”

The two of them had bowed their heads at the same time.

“Raise your heads,” Art told them. “No one among us will blame you. In fact, what you did was impressive. It was a wonderful fight.”

“Indeed,” Bell agreed. “You weren’t up against a weaker opponent, unlike me, so either side could honestly have won. In fact, I sympathize with you for having to fight those two weirdos.”

“Indeed,” Graham added. “As someone who could not bring home a victory either, I am not in a position to complain about your results. I believe such things are unnecessary in the first place.”

Though the pair were apologetic, the other members all expressed how amazing the two girls had been and welcomed them with open arms and warm hearts.

“Um...it was...an incredible fight! Yeah!” DarkMel said last. Unfortunately, she was seeming restless and nervous, as she now had to participate in the last round. She was trying her best to smile, but it looked awkward somehow. That was understandable. As things stood, both sides had one win, one loss, and one draw. So no matter how Art’s fourth round went, DarkMel would be the one to decide Lumiest’s fate.

Rion apologized to her as well. “Sorry we couldn’t settle things early, DarkMel. It would’ve been nice if we could have lessened your burden at least a little, but it seems we ended up putting pressure on you instead.”

“Big soz again, DM-chan! I’m so useless!” Rami groaned.

“But... That... I... That’s not true!” DarkMel stammered heavily. “I... I’m totally okay!”

She clearly was not. Rami resorted to scooping DarkMel up in her arms and nuzzling her, but DarkMel’s face remained extremely stiff.

“Ah, I’ve gotta go pick some flowers. Excuse me,” DarkMel said before trotting out of the waiting room.

“She’s so nervous,” Graham remarked.

“It’s understandable. I’d be nervous if I was in the last spot too,” Rion replied in her defense.

“There’s no way you’d be so nervous now, Rion. You’d totally fight with glee,” Bell told her.

“What?! That’s the real impossibility!” Rion shouted, flustered.

“Grrr, now I’m even more frustrated that we lost. Those dang muscle monsters!” Rami cursed them.

“Teachers are meant to support their students. Allow me to fulfill my duty!” Art declared. “I will make sure to win my fight so as to put as small a burden on DarkMel as possible!” He stood up gallantly. In that moment, he looked like a true educator and seemed extremely reliable. “Well then, I’ll be off. Pray for my victory,” he bade them.

No one said anything in reply. After all, the earlier description was false. Or

rather, it would have been true...if he wasn't shiny and gold.



The fourth bout of the exhibition match, which Milky had revealed would be Shin against Art, saw the combatants take the stage immediately. And just as quickly, their eyes met and sparks started to fly.

"Yes, yes...I see. So Rion and Rami are ready. I understand," Milky said into her communicator.

"Instructor Milky?" Ranlulu asked. "Is something the matter?"

"No, I was just checking to see if Rion and Rami are okay," she replied. "According to the medical team, they're perfectly fine from a health perspective. It seems they recover fast, so they'll be up and about right away."

"Ah, of course you'd do that, Instructor Milky!" Ranlulu said, sounding impressed. "You were confirming the safety of your students!"

"Hee hee!" Milky giggled. "Such a thing is expected, since I'm part of the administrative team for this event. More importantly, you should move things forwards. The pair on the stage there look like they're about to start with or without the signal."

"What?!" Ranlulu turned her eyes back to the stage, where she saw Shin with a greatsword at the ready, moments away from taking a swipe at her opponent, and Art, both hands filled with masses of magic, ready to unleash a spell at any time.

"Come on, what're you trying to pull with those huge swirls of magic? Gonna start something before the gong? No way! Is the great Art-san, principal of Lumiest, going to cheat and make a surprise attack early? In front of all the guardians of your precious students?" Shin taunted him.

"Hah! Hah! Hah!" Art laughed boisterously as a show. "That's pretty funny. Looks like you've gotten better at joking around. Or maybe it just comes with your advanced age? I'm merely preparing to intercept the surprise attack from the false start that *you're* about to make. You forced me into this, and I'd appreciate it if you could figure that out on your own. You're definitely old enough to do so."

“I’ll flip those words around right back at you,” Shin shot back. “I’m the one preparing to defend myself from *your* attack.”

“I’m sure you mean the exact opposite. Of course I’m the one defending here. I’d bet my position as principal on it,” Art replied. The sparks that were flying between them were about to become full-blown fireworks.

“Whoa, this is turning into something huge...” Ranlulu muttered. “I know it’s kind of become a seasonal tradition, with them acting like they’re about to march off to battle during the exhibition, but...did something happen between those two?”

“Who knows?” Milky replied. “From any perspective, this is just a childish fight. So the only thing I can say is: whatever the reason, it’s incredibly stupid.”

“Heeey,” Art called out. “Calling Milky-kun, sitting up there in the commentator’s box! You’re running your mouth quite a bit, aren’t you? You know, I don’t mind spilling your secret right here and now about your days as a mad dog!”

Milky didn’t say anything, but she did stand up rather quickly.

“Instructor Milky?!” Ranlulu cried out. “Um, could you not just stand up all silent like that?! Your smile... It’s frozen on your face; did you know that?!”

The fight had extended all the way up to the commentator’s box, driving the venue further into chaos. Seeing that, the other members on both sides canted their heads in confusion.

“Hmm, this banter isn’t exactly clever,” Grostina noted.

“I know,” Bakke agreed. “I don’t know why, but Shin always gets like that at this time of year. I wonder if she has a *past* with Art?”

“Wha... That’s rude, Bakke-san!” Suzu cried, shocked. “But this is also my first time seeing the director so aggressive. The... The possibility of *that* kind of relationship aside, I really do wonder if something happened between them. What do you think, Master Kelvin?”

Kelvin, however, stayed silent, prompting Suzu to ask again, “Master Kelvin?”

Though Suzu had called out to him twice, Kelvin seemed to be deep in

thought about something and didn't react. It was understandable, as at the moment he was using his unique Parallel Processing skill at full blast to figure something out.

The opponent for the fourth round is Art. That means my opponent for the last round will naturally be DarkMel. It's not like I'm disappointed that I won't be fighting anyone strong... Well, saying that outright would be a lie, but that's not my biggest problem at the moment. And there's also the silver lining that she won't be fighting anyone for real. But the real question is how I should engage her! It's absolutely out of the question to hurt her, but if I take it too easy on her, won't she start to hate her papa? She's such a smart kid, I won't be able to trick her with just some superficial acting. Should I show strength befitting a Rank S adventurer and claim absolute victory while leaving her unscathed? But if I do that, the one-sided result would ruin her standing in school! GAAHHHHHH!

M-Master is worrying about something! Suzu thought. It must be something unimaginable to me, a problem on a wholly different dimension, to cause him this much anguish! I know I can't be of any help, Master, but at least let me cheer you on in my heart! Give it your all! Go, go!

So the situation on the sidelines was pretty chaotic in its own right.

"Agh, jeez! This is getting to be more than I can handle, so I'll just start, okay?! Ready...fight!" Ranlulu announced the start of the fight as she clung to Milky's waist to stop her from jumping into the fray, standing as she was. Though the announcer had been forced to take action by the situation around her, the timing turned out to be perfect. Even though the announcement was a coincidence, it happened at the exact same time Shin and Art unleashed their attacks.

"Die!" they both shouted at each other.

Shin was wielding Hazard Cluster, the weapon she'd once used to ambush Kelvin at her office at guild headquarters. There was a tube at the tip of the blade meant for shooting out a bullet that would spread a deadly poison throughout their surroundings, making it a very dangerous weapon. Shin swung it without an ounce of hesitation and shot the bullet.

Meanwhile, Art used the magic he'd gathered in both his hands to cast

different spells from his right and left. A red and a blue light flashed towards Shin, who was in front of him, taking the form of countless birds of fire or water. The spells, which resembled Efil's Milliard Burning Bids, covered the stage in an instant.

"Wha?! Is... Was that a false staaart?!" Ranlulu exclaimed. "No, wait, did they start as soon as I gave the signal?! Instructor Milky, you're on exposition! What do you think?!"

Milky didn't answer.

"Instructor Milky, please come back to your senses!" Ranlulu pleaded. "Come back to your seat! Stop dragging me awaaayyy!"

At present, Ranlulu had been dragged far away from her seat as she held on to Milky, who was trying to make her way to the stage. Another teacher, Arche, had come to Ranlulu's aid, likely because she thought that if the school didn't stop Milky, the situation would get even worse. As soon as she arrived, Arche tried talking Milky down.

"Poison again? This happened during the last round too. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't use such things in a place of learning. Your terrible personality is on full display, you know?" Art taunted her.

"So, magic is just fine, but poison isn't?" Shin shot back. "Lumiester sure has fallen far, for a teacher to resort to discrimination like that. It sounds to me like you're just trying to ignore your own incompetence."

After that, the two sank into annoyed silence. Shin and Art had started their fight in earnest, even while trouble was happening offstage. They put all the resentment that had built up between them into their blows, and their exchange of attack and defense morphed into something that not only wasn't teacher-or director-like, but also lacked maturity. In other words, they had quickly reached a level where they were no longer caring about the damage they caused to the barrier or stage.

Shin snickered. "What a ridiculous weapon. Do you seriously think you can beat me with that? Or are you planning to put on a performance or something? If that's the case, you can play the fanfare to my victory."

“I absolutely refuse, and I am being totally serious,” Art countered. “And it seems you’ve brought a new weapon once again. I wonder what kind of skilled blacksmith you’ve raised up this time? Is it from a dwarven artisan praised as the father of all craftsmen?”

The poisonous mist and the red and blue birds disappeared, revealing the two combatants standing on a stage that was in tatters. Even while obscured by the attacks, they never stopped arguing, and there was no sign of their verbal rally stopping either. However, both combatants could be seen with new weapons now. Shin was holding what clearly seemed to be a gun in her left hand, while Art was holding a stringed instrument that looked like a guitar. He looked ready to use it too.





Shin and Art's history stretched back several hundred years. At that time, they were still youngsters who weren't even adventurers yet—though by then, Shin was already an Apostle and Art was leading his dark elven village. Their first meeting immediately kicked off a conflict. Shin had visited the dark elven village because of a particular mission.

"Hm...you don't have good taste in glasses, do you?" Shin said. "They're all weirdly thick. It looks like you're trying to see out of the bottom of a bottle."

Shin had managed to eloquently verbally trap the otherwise isolationist dark elves into letting her see their leader, Art, but as soon as she saw him, she dropped that bomb. From her perspective, she was just giving her honest opinion, but it had been a great shock to everyone else, Art included.

Which race was the most beautiful? If one was to ask that question, most would either name elves or dark elves. That was why they tended to be targeted by villains, and their looks had been the source of much friction throughout the world's long history. That was how outstandingly beautiful the two races were.

Even among the dark elves, who were already almost *too* beautiful, Art's beauty was head and shoulders above the rest, such that every year, he won the beautiful elf contests held in secret in the village. That was why the other dark elves had never doubted that Art was basically beauty itself, his fashion sense included, but...

"Wait, is everyone here dressed so weirdly because they're imitating the leader? Oh wow..." Shin had concluded.

That statement, once again, caused a shock wave to run through the dark elves of the village as they made strangled noises of surprise. The locals were isolationists, so their thin connection to the outside world was likely one of the reasons for their response. The only thing that could be said was that by this point, Art's aesthetics were very unique and well distanced from what most thought to be good-looking or fashionable. In other words, and this is putting it mildly, he had no taste. However, most would never say that out loud, even if they thought it.

“Those clothes are lame too. Why are the sleeves all jagged like that? Did you rip them yourself or something? Wait...you did? REALLY?” Shin cried, once again eliciting a strangled noise of shock from all the dark elves.

But Shin wasn't normal, nor did she hold back. She was a freedom lover who would rather cast everything over the edge than be forced to endure something she didn't want to. In fact, at that time, Shin was such a “free” spirit that she didn't always bother fulfilling her duties as an Apostle; she was very true to herself. It was common for her to cause problems around her when she was out on a mission, and she caused Iris, who had managed many different Apostles at that point, a lot of daily trouble and headaches, as Iris had to put out all the resulting fires.

But Shin had been able to work as an Apostle for so many years despite that thanks to how capable she was. In the present, she had long since lost her power, being Selector's predecessor, but at the time, she'd been a pillar of the organization and had managed to solve just as many problems for them as she created.

However, in the end, Iris gave up and figured she couldn't keep Shin on any longer, deciding to switch her out for Riold. Shin thought it was an amicable retirement, but in truth it was more like being fired. At any rate, since she'd repeatedly made her true feelings known, Art's terrible fashion sense was outed to the entire village. Though no one believed Shin's words at first, assuming them to be nonsense, she was so well-spoken that she got the dark elves to believe her in the end, even with how needlessly persistent they tended to be.

After that, Art lost all confidence and became bedridden. It was said that eventually, he quit his leadership position and went off on a journey. His quest was to polish his aesthetic sense, regain his confidence, and take revenge on his hated enemy, Shin. Also, pretty much no one besides the two people involved knew about this ridiculously silly grudge. The only exception might be Iris (now Sister Ellen), who had been alive back then, leading the Apostles. Nowadays, the sworn enemies had somewhat calmed down (in theory), but the accumulation of grudges over the years was a scary thing, and it seemed it had led them to some pretty serious attempts to kill each other before.

One example was when Shin assumed the role of guild director and summoned Art to the Adventurer's Guild headquarters.

"You know, I'm thinking of giving titles to all the adventurers who will be standing at the top of the field," Shin said. "Titles are just cool, and I like how they can really have an impact on people! And we can put out, like, an annual publication of these adventurers, to serve as a warning to any countries considering doing something stupid. Ah, and maybe I'll even draw the illustrations!"

"Hey, did you call me all the way here just for that?" Art asked, annoyed. "I went through all the trouble of coming, thinking it would be something important, and this is what I get?"

"Oh come on, this is totally important! We'll be changing the future of the Adventurer's Guild for the way, way cooler! It'll be, like, a revolution, you know?!"

Art sighed and paused to think before saying, "And? So what? It's not like you want my approval or anything, right?"

"Oh yeah, no. I don't need that at all. No, thanks," Shin replied bluntly.

Art gave her a silent look.

"Aw, don't make that face. I mean, you're kind of a Rank S adventurer too, Art, so I was thinking of giving you a title as well. Ah, by the way, mine will be 'Freedom.' It invokes the feeling of wind. Something free that won't be restrained or bound by anything. Don't you think that's emblematic of adventurers as a whole?"

"It also sounds like it refers to an absolute idiot who doesn't care about other people's worries."

"Are you really going to say that to me now? Are you suuure? You know, I could make your title a really weird one, Art. Something as embarrassing as what your fashion sense used to be."

"Hmph. Your taunts will get nothing out of me. I'm sure you want to use my terrible aesthetic sense from the past to rile me up, but given how you've called me here as insurance before you revealed it to the public, I'm sure you couldn't

actually think of something that satisfies you, right? Come on, let's hear it. What kind of title did you put all your effort into making up for me?"

Shin paused for a short moment before saying, "Rimless..."

"Huh? Hey, what did you just say?"

"I said, 'Rimless,' like a pair of glasses without rims. You're wearing a pair right now, so it's super easy to understand, right? Actually, I was going to think of it after you came, but it came to me in three seconds just now! Okay, it's decided! Oh man, I'm so proud you made a job change from Coke-bottle glasses to something more fashionable. Don't you agree, Rimless?"

"I see, so you're saying that my talent is overflowing and endless and won't be constrained by the unwashed rabble, which could be otherwise said as having no edge, or 'rim.' In a sense, it's even more overwhelmingly free than the name 'Freedom,' am I right?"

"What? Hey, don't just interpret it as you please. There's not even an ounce of that meaning in the name I picked for you. Are you having hallucinations? Should I get some medicine for you?"

"Hmph, no need to be so jealous just because you got the truth thrown in your face. I swear, kids are so much trouble."

They stared at each other for a moment before simultaneously shouting, "Die!"

After that, the pair moved the fight to an uninhabited island, where they reportedly spent three days and nights duking it out. It was because grade-school-level arguments like this would blow up into actual death brawls that everyone around them was having so much trouble. Of course, that should be a given. However, Art ultimately became Lumiest's principal, and Shin started to get busy with the guild, so their relationship cooled down into one where they simply set each other off once in a while.



"You know, Art, you might be under the impression that your fashion sense has gotten better, but I really doubt it after seeing your outfit today!" Shin taunted him. "Seriously? All gold?! Are you some kinda nouveau riche brat?!"

And your cross-dressing just makes your character overlap with Gaun's Beast King!"

"This is the manifestation of the will left to me by a student!" Art protested. "The fact that you don't even get something as simple as this means you don't belong in a leadership role! Don't confuse selfishness with freedom! Also, this isn't cross-dressing! This is true fashion!"

"Shut up! I'll shoot you dead!" Shin yelled.

"Not if I shoot you dead first!" Art countered.

Well...maybe they hadn't exactly calmed down.



Ignoring the immature verbal duel that was happening at the same time, the fight between the two combatants was happening so fast that no one had any time to breathe. Even to Rank S adventurers like Kelvin and Bakke, it looked incredibly fierce and cutthroat.

"Jumping Bullet!" Shin declared, firing her gunsword and gun off at seemingly nothing. If their trajectory had been normal, the two bullets would have merely hit the barrier, but right after being fired, they disappeared.

"That *again*?!" Art said, immediately throwing himself aside. When he did, the two bullets reappeared just behind where he'd been, flying through his last known position. It was as if the bullets had teleported to try and ambush him.

That wasn't just metaphor, though—Shin's bullets really did teleport. When retiring from the Apostles, as a gift from Iris, she had received a different Unique Skill upon turning in the one she'd gained for being an Apostle. It was the skill she was currently using: Off Target. This skill left a special effect on anything Shin threw or otherwise launched out of a weapon like a gun or bow. The effect was that the missile, whatever it was, would endlessly track its target until it struck. Even if she shot at nothing but air, the bullet would be swallowed by a wormhole that "coincidentally" happened to appear with an exit that was "miraculously" right on the path to the intended target. Like that, she was able to change the trajectories of her ranged attacks. Furthermore, even if the target were to dodge despite these coincidences and miracles, her ability wouldn't

fade. The skill remained in effect until the attack succeeded.

Crakiiing!

Art let out a shocked sound. He thought he'd jumped to the side and dodged the surprise attack, but now the bullets had ricocheted off the stage and were on a path to hit him once again. At this point, it was safe to assume that no matter how many times he dodged, the bullets would continue to pursue him. By some mysterious and miraculous power, they were not losing their attack strength no matter how far they flew, and the coincidences would always stack so that the attack would not lose sight of Art. In short, as long as he stayed within Shin's range (which was at least the entirety of the stage), the attack would remain in effect until it hit. And the number of bullets this could be applied to was insane.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shin continued shooting additional bullets in random directions. This time, she even shot directly behind her, which should have been her blind spot.

Art's mind spun at high speed. And still the bullets only lock onto me. I see, though; she's using her own body to hide the bullets so I can't see when they disappear. Such an ugly way of fighting, as always. Still, that doesn't change the fact that it's troublesome to deal with. Normally, shooting down the attacks would be effective, but I'm sure that as long as I don't completely annihilate them, their remains will continue chasing me. It wouldn't do to make an unlucky break and increase the number of attacks coming at me even further. Not only that, but in my experience, trying to destroy those bullets won't go well. Most likely the best I can achieve is breaking them down into small fragments. It's likely the luck stat would affect it. Now then...

The conclusions he was reaching based on past experience were almost entirely correct. As he thought, the strange phenomena brought on by Shin's Off Target skill was deeply affected by luck. It was like Touya and Serge's Absolute Gospel, only specialized for a specific aspect of an attack. If it was dodged, it would always end up right back on track for some reason or another, and even if the attack was destroyed, the remnants of the bullet would all continue to chase their target as long as they remained. Not only that, but once

again, no matter what method was used to intercept the bullets, there would always be remnants left due to a miracle or just dumb luck. Dodging was not a solution, and interception was just a bad bet. That all led to the current situation, where the unfairness of reality was pressing in on all sides.

However, even as Art pondered, the attacks did not stop. In fact, there were now more bullets in the air than before. From the start of the match up until now, a total of 144 bullets had been fired. And all 144 of them were still flying like mad around the stage. They teleported and ricocheted everywhere; the situation was already out of hand.

“Man, if you had such a fun ability, you should have used it on me too! Only using it on Art isn’t fair!” shouted a certain Summoner in the crowd. Though that drew some attention, the rest will be omitted, since it has nothing to do with the fight.

“Come on, let at least one of them hit you already, Art!” Shin yelled. “Just a graze won’t be enough to stop my Jumping Bullets!”

“Hah!” Art snorted derisively. “You should save that for *after* something manages to graze me!”

Incredibly, even on such a chaotic battlefield, Art had yet to suffer a single wound. But that went without saying. Just as Shin was using her Unique Skill, Art was using his.

“Jeez, you’re not my disciple’s disciple. I wish you’d stop all this excessive dodging!” Shin complained.

“I have no idea who you’re talking about, but your disciples must have it hard!” Art shot back.

“Whoooargh! He’s dodging like Ange! What kinda ability is that?! I’m so curious! Hey, switch with me, Director Shin!” That same voice could be heard again, only now it was accompanied by the stamping of feet. However, as usual, the rest will be omitted.

Returning to the fight at hand, Art’s Unique Skill was called Hair’s Breadth, and it strengthened all the skills he possessed that allowed him to evade danger, elevating them to their more advanced versions. For example, if Art had

the Danger Detection skill, it would become Danger Omniscience. Another example would be Mind's Eye becoming Eye of Truth. Also, all of those skills were, of course, Rank S. By using these enhanced and Rank S skills at maximum, Art was able to continuously escape every difficult situation he encountered, while shedding aesthetically pleasing sweat. He was unsettlingly hard to hit so long as he was seriously trying to evade.

"You're as creepy and disgusting, as always!" Shin yelled. "That ability is like personal harassment!"

"Hmph! Who in their right mind would willingly get hit out of the kindness of their heart?" Art questioned. "Especially not when it comes from a coward who mixes in poison with all the extra bullets she keeps piling on!"

"Ah, so you know?"

Shin's Hazard Cluster was, as used on the attack against Kelvin, loaded with a couple of bullets filled with poison gas. Normally, they would start spreading the poison as soon as they impacted their target, but thanks to Shin's Off Target skill, they continued to fly around unactivated, mixing in with the swarm of regular bullets in their pursuit of Art.

But Art wasn't just dodging the attacks. He had been taking moments to strum his instrument and put on a minor performance as well. "You're the one who shouldn't hold back! It must be hard listening to my Duet of Sorrow for so long up close! Come on, you should just make it easy for yourself. Just shoot yourself already."

Shin cackled. "Never!"

Art was a master of the Musical Performance skill, and it was said that his performances could affect people's emotions. Not only that, but according to those who heard him play, different people seemed to hear different things. The effects of his playing were clearly reflected in others' stats. His allies would see all their abilities skyrocket, while his enemies would find all their abilities heavily debuffed. Of course, Shin was on the receiving end of the latter.

"Seriously, though, your playing is just as shitty as always," she said. "Also, could you stop launching attacks by plucking at your instrument? Let's follow common sense at least a little, yeah?"

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from!” Art shouted, plucking at his instrument as he did. Something flew out of it, heading for Shin at high speed.



Rewinding time a bit, back in the Labyrinthine Country of Pub:

Efil had been left back at the Golden Sparrow since she was with child. The Dragonz had stayed behind with her since they didn’t have much interest in Lumiest, their heads filled with thoughts of food (vegetables, rice, and sweets, respectively), and of course they just liked Efil that much. There was one more person who stayed as well—the one character whose thoughts were absolutely filled with food (of all kinds) above all else: the former Goddess of Reincarnation, Melfina.

“Are you sure about this, Mel-sama?” Efil asked.

“Mnng? Mgmng... About what?” Mel answered after swallowing her food.

Efil had been knitting on the sofa when she asked Mel, who was eating a (mega-sized) snack, the question. “Oh, I didn’t really mean anything by it. I just thought you would’ve liked to accompany Master to Lumiest, since DarkMel-sama will be participating in the exhibition match,” she explained.

“Ah, I see. Then the answer is, ‘Yeah, I’m sure.’ There were already a lot of people going, and I asked Ange to take care of things over there.”

Ange had originally wanted to stay behind with Efil, but she was both a former guild employee and former Apostle, so she had ties to Shin, and it seemed she couldn’t quite avoid going. She was currently stealthily watching the matches along with everyone else.

“But...” Efil protested.

“Hee hee! You don’t have to worry. DarkMel is a smart girl, just like me, so she definitely understands what’s happening around her. Also, she’s strong like her papa. There’s absolutely nothing to worry about. Mm-hmm!” Mel continued to stuff herself all the while, but she skillfully managed to give a proud grunt with her mouth full of food.

It was common knowledge that Kelvin was a heavily doting papa, but it

seemed Mel as a mama doted on her daughter just as much.

“She’s right. Stop troubling yourself with such unnecessary worries, sister Efil. You need rest! Om!” Mdofarak agreed before taking a bite of her own food.

“Indeed. If something were to happen to you, sister, we’d neber be able to lib it down. Hawmph omph!” Boga added, also before taking a big bite.

“Yep! Big bro Kelvin’s over there along with boss Gerard and sister Sera’s old man! All the world’s strongest parents are over there. Krrnsh,” Dahak declared before snapping off a bite of a vegetable.

Each of the Dragonz, Mdofarak, Boga, and Dahak, added their reinforcement to Mel’s statement all while eating their favorite foods. The food served to them by the Golden Sparrow was enough to make the Dragon Kings moan in delight. Needless to say they were very happy.

“Er, that in itself makes me somewhat worried about them offending someone or making careless mistakes...” Efil muttered, and her concerns were understandable. Having one doting parent and two doting grandparents together would definitely create some sort of synergistic effect, and it was impossible to predict what kind of result it would have.

“That’s why I’m telling you, Efil, you’re worrying way too much,” Mel said. “No matter how cute DarkMel, Rion, and Bell are, they’ll keep in mind the time and place, I’m sure. You guys think so too, right?”

“After some thought, I’m starting to doubt whether it’s really all right to trust them,” Dahak said after a moment’s consideration.

“They’ve totally maxed out their doting-parent meters, after all. I understand how sister Efil feels. Painfully so,” Mdofarak added.

“I’b super worried,” Boga said.

Mel paused but still decided to say, “See? They totally agree!”

“Mel-sama, I do not believe you should be rewriting history like that. That is not what they said,” Efil insisted.

The Dragonz, who had been entranced by their favorite foods, finally snapped back to reality.

“Jeez, everyone in this house is such a devoted worrywart,” Mel said, exasperated. “Rion has a lot of experience in battle, despite how innocent she normally seems, and of course no one needs to worry about Bell. As for DarkMel...well, she has her own strengths. You know, she could end up fighting her papa. And come on, with how angry those doting grandparents get? If that happens, there’s no way her papa would—”

Efil cut in to finish her sentence. “If that happens, Master will likely be worried about whether he should actually go up against her, and will he really be able to keep his calm with that on his mind while facing an impending fight with Gerard-san and Gustav-sama as well? Urgh...I have to say, it’s dubious. Times like this are exactly when I should be there to support Master! To be of use to him!” Efil couldn’t help but let out her frustration at being forbidden to serve Kelvin.

“Sister Mel stirred up sister Efil’s insecurities. Bad,” Mdofarak said.

“You shouldn’t do that, sister Mel. You should put yourself in sister Efil’s shoes, being so far away from big bro,” Dahak added.

“Sister Mel...so thoughtless...” Boga muttered.

“Um, you *do* know that I’m also his wife and just as far away from Kelvin, right?” Mel asked incredulously. She knew that no one loved Kelvin like she did, so she wasn’t happy about the treatment she was getting. She *was* right in that her love was so heavy it shook the world, but the way she usually acted (with all her eating) left such a big impression that it totally eclipsed that fact in the Dragonz’s minds.

“Don’t worry, sister Efil. Your love is something my liege cannot live without,” Mdofarak assured her. “No matter how far apart you are, that will never change. You rank second to none in kindness, caring, sweets, and skill with a bow. That means my liege is also head over heels for you. Just as I am for pancakes.”

“Exactly! You’re the best, like vegetable sticks!” Dahak added.

“Mm-hmm! Like freshly steamed rice!” Boga jumped in.

“Oh, really? That would be nice if it were true...” Efil said. The symptoms of

her withdrawal were starting to fade.

Unfortunately, a certain former goddess who couldn't read the room chose that moment to make a verbal gaffe. "Ah, but when it comes to bow skills, there *is* someone who can match Efil. I'm pretty sure he's in Lumiest too."

"Aggghhhrrghhh..." Efil groaned.

"Sister Mel!" the Dragonz all shouted at once.

Mel had no ill intentions in saying that. She was just fatally bad at reading the room. After retiring from being the Goddess of Reincarnation, she had basically become a NEET, the repercussions of which had recently started to become strikingly obvious.

"Efil combines her archery with fire magic and her blessing to produce firepower so high, no one can even come close," Mel elaborated. "I'm not sure how far that influence spreads, but I'd wager that skill has shown itself in how good you are at using fire for cooking, as well as your other culinary skills. In terms of pure ability to annihilate, you are far and away the best among us. Indeed, I am very aware of that fact, Efil. It's understandable, in a way, that you would be worried about someone capable of equaling your high-firepowered archery existing."

"Oh wow, that's just like sister Mel," Dahak muttered, impressed. "She's going to explain everything, no matter what anyone says to her!"

"Not to mention, I think she actually misunderstood the reason sister Efil is feeling so shaken," Mdofarak said.

Mel continued anyway. "His name is Art Desire. He's Lumiest's principal and a Rank S adventurer with the title of Rimless. He was once the head of a dark elf village, but one day he left his home. His personal history is actually quite unique..."

She even started explaining his history, all three of the Dragonz thought.

Mel would not stop, not with how much free time she had. However, because this would inevitably become long-winded, the rest of her lecture will be omitted.

“I see,” Dahak said appreciatively. “So you mean to say that this Art guy can add magic to what he does with a bow too?”

“Not only that, but he uses every element,” Mdofarak clarified. “How cheeky, mastering more elements than me.”

“And he uses an instrument to launch his arrows instead of a bow?” Efil said in wonderment. “I can’t even imagine what that would look like. It sounds like he can do that while actually playing the instrument with his Musical Performance skill. I don’t think I can imitate that...”

“Well,” Mel qualified, “he doesn’t use actual arrows. What he shoots is made entirely out of magic. So strictly speaking, instead of arrows imbued with magic, he’s using archery as a frame from which to launch magic.”

“But still...every element? There’s a whole lot of elements in magic, right? Wouldn’t dat make him a jack-of-all-trades bud a master of none?” Boga wondered aloud.

“Huh?” The dragon’s utterance had caused Efil and the others to look at him.

Mel was the only one who didn’t. She simply sipped at her tea, seeming impressed that Boga had noticed such a detail.



The stage was now packed with countless bullets and arrows of all seven colors of the rainbow. No, wait, eight colors? Anyway, the fight between Director Shin and Art had made the space dense with attacks. Part of the reason was the limited area of the arena, but the bigger reason was that both sides were throwing out attacks all over the place as well as dodging anything coming at them. It was impressive, given that there wasn’t any more space *to* dodge or add more attacks.

“That’s what makes it so frustrating. I’m so frustrated that I’m not the one fiiightiiiiing!”

“Hey, Kelvin, just so you know, you’re gritting your teeth so hard blood is coming from your mouth,” Bakke commented.

“Here, use my handkerchief, Master!” Suzu took out her handkerchief and

wiped my mouth with it.

Oh crap, I let what my instincts were saying ooze out. I know I'm okay with this in my head, but it seems my body still isn't satisfied. Jeez, I'm such trouble.

Still, Director Shin's ability was a real surprise. If I had to liken it to something, it would be like Serge's luck ability, but specialized only for attacks. It had absolutely no effect on anyone else in the battle, but it was able to stack her attacks full of her own luck. What resulted from that were coincidences and unnatural phenomena that wouldn't happen even with Serge. Ricochets were understandable, but quick-spawning teleportation gates was absolutely absurd. Not only that, but apparently the effect applied to everything that had been shot since the start of the match, and I had yet to see an upper limit on how many attacks the skill could be applied to.

"Just what I'd expect from the oldest Rank S adventurer. You've totally trained up your skills well over the long years you've been active!"

"My, Kelvin-chan! You know that talking about age to a woman is nothing but a faux pas, right?" Grostina said.

"I don't have a book on harassment laws on me, Master, but you can read this one instead!" Suzu said, handing me a book on manners and relationships in the workplace, and I gave it a quick skim.

Shoot, I ended up running my mouth off. I couldn't help it. As a rational battle junkie, I should be well-versed on how to conduct myself in these kinds of situations, I thought. But then, after a moment flipping through the pages of the book... Wow, Suzu, why were you even walking around with this? Is being a guildmaster hard? Okay, I swear to never become one. Anyway, Art's pretty fascinating too. He's managing to weave his way through that bullet hell all while playing an instrument and even shooting off arrow-like magic spells. He doesn't have Uncontainable, so could it be that he has even better evasion skills than Ange? But since he can't put his all into attacking, he isn't managing to hit Director Shin either, it looks like.

"The two of them have known each other for a long time, after all. I'm only guessing, but don't you think they'd know each other's moves pretty well? At this rate, the match is going to stretch on for a while," Grostina said.

“Wait, really? So what should I do with all this frustration I’m feeling?”

“Well, I could do something good for y—” Bakke offered, but she was interrupted by the sudden, shrill sound of a whistle. I looked to my side to see Suzu blowing into one. *You had a whistle too, Suzu?*

“Stop right there, Bakke-san!” Suzu shouted. “You’ve verbally harassed people many times already today, and as a guildmaster who protects the moral integrity of adventurers, I must insist you take this! Read it carefully!”

Bakke took what Suzu handed her and gave it a long look. “What the heck is this?”

“A book about preventing common harassment scenarios!” Suzu answered.

So you totally had a book about harassment... No, wait, I guess I should actually be praising Suzu for being able to unreservedly state her opinion to a Rank S adventurer. She’s usually pretty shy, but she does her job properly when she needs to.

“The... The fight is oooveeerrr?!” I heard Ranlulu shout in surprise.

It took us a while to process that, but then all three of us let out a “What?!”

The unexpected announcement made my brain freeze for a moment. *That’s weird. I think I just heard the announcer say that the round was over, but I’m sure I heard wrong, right? I’m sure what was actually said was something about the match going into overtime, right?*

“Um, because Principal Art conceded, the fourth round ends with a victory for the Adventurer’s Guild!” Ranlulu concluded. “Just to make sure, Principal Art, are you sure about this?”

“I am,” Art replied. “I don’t mind making it my loss. Look, I’m off the arena, right?”

“No, that doesn’t make any sense. There’s no rule saying you lose if you leave the stage. Even if you break through the barrier that’s erected around it, if it’s possible to continue the bout, we’d allow you to do so. Wait, actually, how *did* you slip out of the barrier?! You walked out on your own just now, I’m sure of it!” Ranlulu countered.

“Of course, I used magic to play a little trick,” Art answered. “Hm, well, if that’s your argument, let’s do this: we can make it a rule just for this match. I left of my own free will, after all.”

“Uh, whaaaaat...” Ranlulu muttered in disbelief.

When I looked back at the stage, I saw Director Shin looking just like I felt, as well as Art, who had stepped off the stage.

Seriously? What I thought I heard was actually correct? Wait, no, what’s with this situation? The director, the announcer girl, and, well, everyone other than Art is looking bewildered.

I still couldn’t quite believe my ears.

“Hey, what’re you scheming, Rimless?” Shin asked. “My bullets haven’t run you through yet; it’s too early to just give up. Deserting in the face of the enemy? After all that taunting? You know that wouldn’t be funny, right? And look, because you left the stage, all my bullets lost their targets. Did you do this to stop my attacks?”

As Director Shin claimed, all the bullets that had been flying around the stage, covering every inch of the arena, had stopped and clattered to the ground. Given how many projectiles had been flying around, the bullets and cartridges formed a small mountain.

“No need to be so quick-tempered,” Art said. “I said I was giving up, so obviously that’s not what I was trying to do. Our tacit understanding should have been to keep the bloodlust in moderation. But if we were to continue, I would have to try to seriously kill you. You were about to step it up too, weren’t you, Shin?”

“Hah! Of course not!” Shin laughed. “Look, we’re in public. I was holding myself back. At worst, I would have had all the poison bullets I secretly stocked up burst in the air near you. Or I might have looked for an opportunity to catch you by surprise by shooting out the blade of Hazard Cluster before making it explode too, turning it into more bullets. That was all, seriously.”

When exactly were you going to start throwing around poison? I thought, but then I guessed the answer. *Actually, wait, that thing shoots out like a Spetznaz*

knife? And it explodes too?! And I bet that would still retain the tracking function. Seriously, she's like a ball of murderous intent. Hrrrngggh, I can't stop drooling.

"Heh! So you were totally going to try to kill me. Personally, I would have loved to experience that. I would have enjoyed it thoroughly, but I didn't think our positions and this situation would allow it," Art said.

"I see, and what do you mean by 'positions and situation'?" Shin asked.

"If we were to continue, I wouldn't have been the only one exposed to danger; all of Lumiest would have been threatened. That's what my detection skills told me. That's why this will be all for today. I do feel frustrated, but as the principal of Lumiest, I will withdraw. I hope you'll improve how you act as the head of the guild."

Hm? That sounds like he's hinting at something. What the heck does he mean?

"I see, so that's what you're saying," Shin replied. "Then I'll have to put in more effort as the director of the Adventurer's Guild, and there's no way I can just accept the win. So...hey, announcer!"

"Uh, yes! Did you need something?" Ranlulu asked.

"I concede too. Also, a bit of work has come up, so go find someone else to supply magic to the stage for the next round. Got that? Okay, see ya!" Shin said.

"Buh... Whaaaaaaaat?!" The announcer's surprised voice could be heard throughout the venue. As if it had nothing to do with her, Director Shin ran off at incredible speed, breaking right through the barrier around the stage and disappearing through the fighters' entrance. At the same time, Art also disappeared.

"Wait, huh? Uh, Principal Art?! Where did that shiny gold man go?!" Of course, the announcer girl reacted as I'd expected.

"Urghh...for better or worse, she's *free*, huh?" Bakke muttered.

"Aren't those two supposed to be at the top of the ladder when it comes to planning this thing?"

“They would be, yes,” Bakke agreed.

“I’ll go get a box of cakes!” Suzu said, and she really went off to do just that.

After I saw her off, we took a moment to sympathize with the event administrators.



“The... The administrators will not deliberate about this match. We’ll be taking a bit of an extended break before the final round, so take care of anything you need to while you can! Well then, I will see you all later!” Rarlulu announced. Then, she turned around and stammered out, “Instructor Milky...what do we do?!”

Man, this must have been a real shock to that announcer. She let her true feelings out before cutting off the broadcast.

“Seriously, I wonder what happened? To both our director and their principal.”

“Yeah. It’s weird she hasn’t come back here yet,” Grostina noted.

“Maybe they’re having a secret rendezvous? Not that I actually know what they’re doing,” Bakke said.

“Again, Bakke-chan?” Grostina said, exasperated. “You’re going to get scolded by Suzu-chan again, you know?”

Bakke was drinking like a fish, but she wasn’t talking out of her ass because she was drunk. She was basically running like normal. *Man, I bet the king of Faanis has it tough on the daily. He seemed really tired when I met him too.*

“Principal Art said something about Lumiest being in danger too, didn’t he? I have no idea why, though.”

“According to rumor, Principal Art has an ability that allows him to sense impending danger even to those around him,” Grostina said. “Apparently the range extends pretty far.”

“So basically an expanded version of Danger Detection. It’s strong enough that I hear he’s been using it to manage the school and protect the students,” Bakke added.

“Huh, seriously? Wait, then doesn’t that make what he said earlier even more ominous?! What, are we gonna get hit by a terrorist attack or something?!”

“Ha ha ha! A terrorist attack?! With this many Rank S adventurers and students, who can fight evenly against them? Anybody who tries would be an idiot. Either that or a total big shot!” Bakke laughed.

“Ha HA!” Oddradd chortled confidently. “If that happens, I’ll take them down!”

“Hey, come on, this isn’t a laughing matter,” Grostina complained. “Think about why the security here is so tight. The possibility is definitely there.”

To be fair, she was right. Many influential people were gathered in Lumiest at the moment. That came with a commensurate number of enemies.

Maybe I should be cautious and have my friends who are free be on guard. Uh...I believe I had father-in-law and Gerard wait outside near the caravan since I have no idea when they might go on a rampage. Yeah, that’s a concern too.

Ange, Sera, Shutola, can you hear me? I asked through the Network.

::Ah, dearest brother Kelvin!:: Shutola messaged back.

::Nice to hear from you. Looks like you’re in the middle of a disaster.:: Ange followed up.

::But we’ve got our own problems to deal with! We’re super busy right now! Your timing is terrible!:: Sera said angrily.

Whaaat? Having Sera yelling at me as soon as I messaged them took me aback.

::Um, I’ll explain, if you like.:: Shutola offered.

Thanks, Shutola, I replied.

::After the first round, grandpa Gustav got really excited, and grandpa Gerard did the same after the third round. A lot happened after that, and now we’re just barely keeping them quiet and calm. I set up a barrier so we wouldn’t stand out and am having Georgios and the Royal Guards hold them down,:: Shutola explained.

::And I used my Blood Dominion to stop them from moving!:: Sera added.

::Finally, I injected them with a paralytic and a sleeping drug meant for Rank S monsters, completely stopping them. Seriously, they resisted so much it's almost funny. They were all like, 'This is nothing for the sake of my child and grandchild! I'll break through it with ease!' as they started building up resistances to what I was using. We even had Sera-san order Gerard-san to materialize so we could do this!:: Ange concluded.

::With how far this has gotten, it's no longer a joke, sister Ange!:: Shutola cried.

::Yeah, you're right. Seriously, what should we do?:: Ange suddenly switched to a tone that said she was at her wit's end.

So her attitude before was just a facade? I wondered. Actually, what is up with those old men that they're still totally raring to go even through all those restraints? Sera used her Unique Skill, didn't she? Father-in-law has the same ability as her, so he might have some resistance, but...I wonder why Gerard can do the same thing? No way—did he awaken a new power in the midst of all that, since it was like a trial to them? That's gotta be a joke. But...with how doting they are, I can't say for sure it didn't happen.

::We'll try to figure this out on our own, but you're next, right, Kelvin? And you're going to be fighting DarkMel? Honestly, depending on how the bout goes, it's doubtful we'll be able to hold them for long.:: said Sera.

Is... Is it really that bad? I asked.

::It is!:: Sera replied.

::Both Grandpa Gerard and Grandpa Gustav love DarkMel, so, um...if something happens that makes them mad...by my calculations, there's a seventy percent chance they'll escape,:: Shutola warned me.

Doesn't that mean they'll basically awaken for sure after the fight? I thought privately. *Shutola is saying this, so it's super reliable.*

::So you get it now. End things as peacefully as possible, Kelvin!:: said Sera.

::You might be thinking that you actually want them to turn their anger on

you, Kelvin-kun, but you know you shouldn't be involving everyone else in this, right? I'm counting on you to take care of things!:: Ange added.

::The future of Lumiest rests on your shoulders, dearest brother! Give it your all!::

After that one-sided encouragement, the girls cut the connection just as one-sidedly.

Could the danger to Lumiest actually be caused by us? I thought. Urgh, all of a sudden I'm super anxious. If that's really the case, simple apologies won't cut it. For real. Hm...just in case, let's send some bodyguards to DarkMel. Suzu's off buying some cakes, and Oddradd's match was, well...what it was, so I think he'd be looked at strangely by the academy staff. Which means... Okay, let's ask them.

I cleared my throat. "Is someone there?!" I shouted in a certain direction after searching for the presence I wanted.

"Hey, what is it, Grim Reaper? Did you get weird too? I mean, you were already pretty weird, but..." Bakke said.

"Don't lump me in with you guys. I just thought if I shouted like that, one of them would come."

"Huh? You mean a man? A good man?" Bakke asked.

"Oh my, I wonder what kind of wonderful gentleman will show up?" Grostina wondered aloud.

These guys...

A while after I shouted out, I heard some heavy, hurried footsteps. *Hmm...a bit late.*

"Sinjeel makes a dashing appearance! Did you call for me, Master?" he exclaimed.

"Hey, Master! Don't just call for us out of the blue! I was eating!" Paul shouted.

The ones who heeded my call and dashed all the way here were the two Rank A adventurers who hadn't been chosen for the exhibition match: Sinjeel and

Paul. One came dashing in while breathing hard, though he had some food stuck to the corners of his mouth. The other arrived still holding the meal he'd bought at what was probably a local shop. It seemed the pair were enjoying the exhibition in their own way.

"Suzu put all her effort into instilling a certain response into these guys, saying that they should heed their lord's call at light speed. That's why they now come to me immediately whenever they hear the call. I gotta say, this is the first time I've ever used it, but they really did come. What a surprise."

The words I used just now were words I could imagine someone like Tsubaki from Toraj saying. And then, like, a ninja would appear from inside the ceiling.

"Oh, did you do this just to confirm we would come? Can I punch you?" Paul asked threateningly.

"Calm down, Paul. There's no way Master would call us just for that," Sinjeel said. "I'm sure he has an important mission for us! I'm right, aren't I, Master Kelvin?!"

It's great that he knows what's up already. But it feels a little spooky to hear Leopardess and Purple Butterfly muttering appreciatively behind me. You two, live strong, you hear?

"Yeah, to tell you the truth..."



Meanwhile, the two Kelvin was most wary of at the moment, Gerard and Gustav, were...

"WAAAAAARRRGGGHHHHHH!"

...both shouting out their souls in unison from where they were outside Lumiest, at a spot a bit removed from the caravan where the match was being broadcast.

"Oh shut up! You're both at retirement age, but for some reason you're breaking through your limits instead. Just what *are* you two?! Jeez!" Sera grabbed their heads in an iron grip. Her palms were cut, and blood flowed from them to bind them with Blood Dominion.

Normally, as long as Sera's Blood Dominion managed to affect the head, it could take complete control of the target. In that way, it was a sort of invincible Unique Skill, but for some reason, these two old men were staying a step away from full control. They were even almost wresting themselves free of the poison and sealing chains that Ange was using at the same time, which was why the pair were able to shout like that. Thanks to Shutola's barrier, at least the screams weren't being heard by the people outside, but if the two of them were to regain their freedom of movement, none of that would remain true.

"Do you think we'll be able to hold them until Kelvin-kun's fight ends, Sera-san?" Ange asked.

"I'll try my hardest to make that happen, but I can't make any guarantees!" Sera replied. "Seriously, though, how is this happening?!"

"I think Grandpa Gustav is managing to resist because he has the same Unique Skill as you, sister Sera, but as for Grandpa Gerard...does he have a similar ability?"

"Hmm, well, if Shutola doesn't remember, there's no way I would. I believe Gerard-san's Unique Skills are Self-Transcendence, which allows him to buff himself and the equipment he wears, and Glory Within Mine Hands, which raises his stats for every enemy he defeats, right?" Sera said.

Shutola pondered for a moment before saying, "Maybe he's counting sister Sera's blood as his own equipment and rewriting it as such? And he might be doing the same with the poison in his body and the chains binding him." Shutola had touched on an incredibly scary train of thought.

"Ugh, what the heck? Did you hear what she said, Sera-san? That's scary. Be careful, okay?" Ange said.

"Is it all right if I have Georgios and the rest of my dolls retreat? I don't want them to be absorbed too..." Shutola noted.

"Hey, you two! Why're you talking like it's someone else's problem?!" Sera shouted.

While the three of them were analyzing the situation and getting mad at each other and their arrested targets, the duo they were trying to hold back was

increasing its level of resistance.

“I could force them into submission with my Retributive Persuasion, but...it won't work on them, since they don't see me as an enemy,” Shutola said.

“So we're all out of options, huh? Oh! It's pretty drastic, but we could use a simple teleportation gate to send them back to the Northern Continent. Should we?” Ange suggested.

“If we do that, the Four Demonic Generals will be wiped out!” Sera yelled. “Also, the country that we finally rebuilt after so much effort will end up with a bad reputation!”

“Ah, right...” the other two muttered. That terrible outcome was easy to imagine.

“Agh, this is so annoying!” Sera shouted in frustration. “Hey, can you two hear me?! If you keep up this rampage, Bell and Rion will hate you for their entire lives! I'll hate you too, as will Shutola and Ange over there! That also goes for DarkMel, of course!”

The second that left Sera's mouth, both of the old men in chains let out strangled cries and froze on the spot. Their huge bodies started to tremble at the same time.

“Oh?” Sera was amazed; she likely hadn't meant for the effect to be this profound. It seemed Ange and Shutola had known this would happen, though.

“Ah, you're finally gonna commit to the last resort to stop those two, Sera-san?” Ange asked.

“Huh? Last resort?” Sera responded, still surprised.

“Yep, the last resort,” Shutola replied. “I acted like we were at the end of our rope in front of dearest brother Kelvin to let him enjoy the tension, but I always figured that would be the best way to stop them. Um... I... I hate adults who act selfishly!”



Shutola's wholehearted exclamation once again elicited a strangled cry and a lot of trembling from the two old men. It seemed their mental states had taken a critical hit.

"Ah, I see! It's such a simple solution that I totally forgot about it until just now! The most effective thing is to denounce them straight-on instead of trying anything tricky!" Sera sounded like a light bulb had gone off in her head.

"Exactly. The thing they most fear is being hated by their daughters and grandchildren!" Ange said.

"So that's why you two looked so relaxed..." Sera muttered. "Oh well, whatever. Now that I know this, there's just one thing to do!"

"Yeah, go for it! Having you say it will make the move super effective, Sera-san!" Ange cheered.

"Okay!" Sera took a deep breath, and then said, "Father! Gerard! If you take this too far, I won't invite you to the wedding! You'll never see us in wedding dresses!"

"GRAAAGGGHHH!!!" The two of them screamed in agony. The shock from that finally got them to cough up blood, show the whites of their eyes, and fall to the ground, barely conscious.

"By the way, you won't be invited to Bell-cchi's wedding either," Ange whispered snidely. "Actually, rather than just 'not invited,' you'll be banned from the premises. Wow, not being able to go to either one? How sad! Even though it would be such a precious sight you'd need to somehow capture for posterity! Actually, in the worst case, they might disown you after the ceremony."

"Even Rion-chan and DarkMel, despite how kind they are, have a limit. Do you really think they'd keep treating you like they normally would if you were to mess up their school life? You're both adults, so you need to make sure you don't take your doting too far, or you'll just cause problems, you know? At the very least, you'll be banned from entering Trycen if you don't," Shutola told them in their ears.

"Dwaghhaaaghhh!!!" Now that the two detainees had fallen, Ange and

Shutola had followed up with some whispers into their ears, eliciting another round of strangled, pained cries.

The words they whispered were as sharp as blades and crushed the men's hearts, which were currently as fragile as glass. As a result, both of them foamed at the mouth and slumped powerlessly back to the ground. At the same time, something that seemed like their souls left their mouths, but they could probably do something about that themselves—they *were* adults, after all.

"The evil has been defeated. Actually, I guess I should say the idiots have been defeated? If we make one wrong move, Kelvin might end up an idiot like them too, huh? We'll need to guide him down the right path so he doesn't!" Sera said.

"You're right about that!" Ange agreed.

"Yeah!" Shutola did as well.

With that, the danger Kelvin had been fearing the most receded, leaving Lumiest peaceful for a time. Since the potential perpetrators were a former Demon Lord and a pitch-black suit of living armor, the risk was no joke. But the three who dealt with it thought this outcome was a very good compromise.

Still, I've been getting a really bad feeling for a while, Sera thought. I thought it'd go away once we made father and Gerard settle down, but it hasn't. Hmmm...

She continued to ponder the source of her ominous premonition while watching the caravan's broadcast. She knew that nine times out of ten, these kinds of premonitions came true.

Oh well! Whatever, I guess! I'm sure it'll just be something that makes Kelvin happy anyway! But the moment she also figured that Kelvin would probably be happy about it, Sera gave up on the effort in a flash. Instead, she joined Ange and Shutola in touring the stalls.

"Ah, look! They have pineapple shaved ice! I bet it's delicious! Do you want some too?" Sera asked.

"Duh! I'll totally have some!" Ange replied.

“I...don’t want that much, so I’d prefer to just try some of yours, if that’s okay. I can’t eat a whole bunch like Mdotharak, so...” Shutola said shyly.

“Wait, huh? Why not use Mel(san)’s name there?” the other two couldn’t help but ask.

::Achoo!:: The sneezes of both a certain hungry angel and Dragon King could be heard over the Network.



“I will now announce the results of the deliberation,” Rarlulu said for everyone to hear. “The fourth round, Principal Art versus Director Shin...will end in a draw as a result of both sides abandoning the fight! Given this result, and checking the match record, the two teams each stand at one win, one loss, and two ties! In short, the last round will decide it all! Oh man, who could have predicted the twists and turns of this event?! The last fight will be one to watch, everyone! Take it away, Instructor Milky!”

“Thank you. It’s time to announce the pairing for the last round. Fifth round! For Lumiest: DarkMel Celsius-san. For the Adventurer’s Guild: Kelvin Celsius-san,” Milky said.

“Whooooaaa there! The same family name?!” Rarlulu shouted. “What could that mean?!”

The broadcast had the crowd instantly heating up. The commentary then went into detail about how the fighters for the round, Kelvin and DarkMel, were father and daughter. It also covered what Kelvin had accomplished since becoming a Rank S adventurer, and how excellent a student his child, DarkMel, was.

“Haaah...it’s finally time. But...for my opponent to be papa... I don’t think I can win...” After hearing the announcement, DarkMel left the restroom and heaved her umpteenth sigh of the day.

She had always known that she was weaker than all the other members of the team. She still planned to give it her all despite that, but now she was being thrust into a spot where the entire match depended on her. Because of that, she had been in this state the whole time, wound up tight like a spring.

“Ah, so this is where you were, little lady,” a voice called out to her.

“Huh?” DarkMel reacted with surprise.

The man who had called out to DarkMel was Paul, one of the bodyguards Kelvin had sent to her side. Sinjeel was right beside him, striking a pose. Also, for some reason there was a pile of stall food next to them as well.

“Paul-san? Sinjeel-san? Um, that large amount of food... What were you...” DarkMel trailed off rather than finish the question.

“We thought you might be nervous, Lady DarkMel. Being as considerate as I am, I bought some delicious food for you. This should help you recover your energy, right? Yep, yep! Eating something good is a great way to ease one’s nerves,” Sinjeel explained.

“Oh, um...thanks?” DarkMel still sounded confused. “But, um...I don’t think it would be a great idea to eat right before my bout...”

“What?! But Lady Mel is always able to fully recover as long as she has food, and she even went a little easier on me during training after!” Sinjeel shouted in surprise.

“Oh come on, that kinda thing definitely only applies to her. You can’t just treat DarkMel the same because she’s Mel’s daughter...” Paul reasoned, and what he said was right on the dot.

“Um, but why are you two here?” DarkMel asked. “Are you touring the school grounds?”

“Nope,” Paul answered. “I don’t give a shit about this school. Master told us to guard you.”

“Master Kelvin is an extremely doting parent, after all,” said Sinjeel. “Now, Lady DarkMel, please allow us to accompany you to the stage. We will make sure to bring you safely to Master’s side!”

“Uh, buh, okay?” DarkMel had yet to completely wrap her head around the situation. To be fair, it wasn’t something that could be understood with any normal thought process. At any rate, since she had no real reason to refuse, she decided to just let it happen.

“Oh dear, to think that the plan to conquer her by the stomach failed. But from the looks of things, it seems I still succeeded in allaying her nervousness a little? Great! That was my true plan all along!” Sinjeel exclaimed.

“Wow, you never change, do you?” Paul said, exasperated. “By the way, little lady, how *do* we get to the stage? We ran around a lot trying to find you, so to be honest, we’re a little lost.”

“You’re...lost?” DarkMel repeated.

“This place is so uselessly huge. It’s only natural for us to get lost. You agree, right?” Paul explained.

“Hee hee! Maybe,” DarkMel giggled. It seemed the pair’s improvised gag routine managed to bring her smile back.

“To get to the venue, going straight down this passage would be—” DarkMel started but was interrupted.

“Stop right there, little lady. Don’t go any farther,” Paul said.

“Huh?” DarkMel had tried to head in the direction she was pointing, but for some reason Paul had stopped her. What’s more, Sinjeel moved to stand in front of her, as if protecting her from something.

“Uh, what happened?” DarkMel asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Sinjeel replied. “I just felt something I didn’t like for a moment. Hey, you over there, the one who’s hiding. How about you show yourself? I know you’re there.”

“Hah...so you sensed me,” came the reply, and a large figure showed himself. He was clearly larger than his hiding spot. He was also very familiar to DarkMel.

“I-Instructor Horace?” she asked, confused.

“Instructor...who?” Paul asked.

“Um, he’s one of the teachers at Lumiest,” DarkMel answered. “He’s the head of Dorm Marle.”

“Right...which means he’s high enough up to have some responsibilities. So, big shot, what do you want with our little lady? And how does that lead to all

that hostility you're radiating?" Paul asked. He didn't have the slightest reservations, even when speaking to a teacher.

That was understandable, though. After all, just as he'd said, Horace was clearly hostile.

"Hostility? I have no idea what you're talking about," Horace replied. "I just came to bring the first-year, DarkMel, back to where she needs to be. As you might have heard from the earlier announcement, she will be fighting in the next round. She's been away from the waiting room for a long time, so several instructors went out to find her. This area is one I'm in charge of, so I just happened to see her. There's nothing strange about that, I believe."

"Feh! You're better off not attempting such an obvious lie. If that's the case, why were you hiding there? Of course, whether you're lying or hiding, you should hide that murderous intent of yours a bit better. Don't underestimate the detection skills that we almost died to obtain from Ange's training. Seriously! That wasn't a joke! We were nearly trained to death!" Sinjeel placed an odd amount of emphasis on his words.

"I saw a student speaking with some suspicious men, so I was watching to confirm the situation," Horace countered. "But I see that any more of this would be pushing it too far. Hmm, so even Rank A adventurers have become somewhat skilled. Forgive me for underestimating you." He bowed deeply to Paul and Sinjeel.

Has the misunderstanding been cleared up? DarkMel wondered, but Paul and Sinjeel still didn't relax. In fact, they had drawn their weapons and were even more wary than before.

"So I'll just have to resort to more forceful means now," Horace said.

The two bodyguards sucked in breaths of surprise as Horace straightened himself and a jet-black ring suddenly appeared over his head. At the same time, he sprouted wings of the same color. He looked just like a fallen angel.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa there! What the hell are you?! I just came to lead the little lady to the stage!" Paul shouted.

"That's a bit rude. You should say 'escort' instead..." Sinjeel started, but he

interrupted himself. “Wait, now’s not the time for that. All right, what should we do?”

The pressure Horace was emanating now was incomparable to when he had first stepped out and engaged in conversation. Even DarkMel was able to feel his desire to kill on her skin. Also, because they had trained under Kelvin, Paul and Sinjeel were easily able to understand how powerful the *something* in front of them was. It was definitely more powerful than them. In other words—

Interesting. I’ll crush it! Paul thought.

It’s a rare, powerful specimen. I’ll take this opportunity to defeat it! Sinjeel thought.

—it was an enemy worth devouring. And here, the side effects of being taught by a battle junkie showed themselves.

“Wh-What is it that you want, Instructor Horace?” DarkMel couldn’t help but ask.

She was the only one who was still thinking properly, as her two bodyguards were in the middle of exhibiting battle junkie symptoms. It was a very respectable question.

Horace responded by giving DarkMel a slight smile and saying, “I told you already, first-year DarkMel. Or should I say, fallen angel DarkMel. I am here to bring you back. As a fellow fallen angel, that is.”

Afterword

Thank you all very much for buying *Black Summoner Volume 17: Academy Battlefield*. There's only a little longer until the start of the anime broadcast! Hello, it's Doufu Mayoi, and I can't help my excitement. To everyone who picked this book up after reading the web version, thank you as always.

Being excited is totally fine, though. In other news, it's already June, isn't it? Yes, that means the year is already half over! Half of me wants the anime to air already, and the other half is in despair over the passage of time. My heart is in chaos. Actually, wait, didn't I say the same thing last year too? Hmm...well, anyway, let's just ignore the small stuff. That's how I maintain peace within my heart. Also, let's watch the anime. A whole new version of the *Black Summoner's* world will unfurl before us. Also, editor, let's put out some *Black Summoner* figures. That way, my heart will be filled with even more calm. Wait, what? We can't?

Finally, regarding the creation of this book and the *Black Summoner* series as a whole, I'd like to thank my illustrators Kurogin-sama and DaiXt-sama, the staff that is working on the anime, my proofreader, and who can forget about all you readers? Well then, I pray we meet again in the next volume. Please continue to take good care of *Black Summoner*.

—Doufu Mayoi

Bonus Short Stories

Sera's Teachings, Suzu's Sufferings

Kelvin's training of the Rank A adventurers Suzu, Paul, Sinjeel, and Oddradd in preparation for the upcoming exhibition match was in its final stage. The training was too harsh and extreme to describe, and the trainees were constantly vomiting blood and sleeping like they were in comas. However, the management of their health and nutrition was on point, so no matter how much they suffered, strangely, they were totally fine the next day.

This was thanks to them scarfing down their highly nutritious food, and Kelvin and Mel's efforts to thoroughly apply recovery magic. All this effort meant that they were perfectly able to dive into the hellish training the next day, surviving even though it felt like they would die. It was only natural for them to grow stronger after living like that for a while...though, as mentioned before, the details of that training were so harsh that anyone with a normal amount of mental fortitude wouldn't even last a few minutes.

At any rate, although the training method was seemingly perfect(?) in that it would make them stronger as long as they kept at it, there were faults to it as well, one being that their teacher, Kelvin, was busy, so he couldn't watch over Suzu and the others twenty-four seven. While they were usually trained by Kelvin, it wasn't rare for him to ask his friends to help instruct them when he couldn't be around. Today was one of those days, so Kelvin Sera was in charge of training Suzu in his stead.

Unfortunately...the choice to give Sera a teaching role was a mistake. Her motivation was high, but as we already know, her ability to actually teach was abysmal. It was so bad that it actually looped back around to be kind of amazing. So, although Kelvin had tried to let Sera off easy, Suzu took his gentle words as approval for some reason.

"Sera-sama's combat style has many things in common with mine, I think!"

she proclaimed. "Please, give me this chance to learn from her!"

"Oh, no... You could say that, but Sera's not..." Kelvin struggled to find the words.

"Aw, who is she? She's such a nice girl!" Sera exclaimed happily. "And she *really* gets it! Yeah, she totally does!"

"Uh..." Kelvin couldn't really say anything more.

Sera loved what Suzu said, and that pumped her up even more. Now that it had come to it, Kelvin knew that she would never back down, so he heaved a sigh as deep as the ocean and reluctantly agreed. He then suggested that they at least keep Shutola around as a translator, but Suzu refused, saying that she would take hold of this chance on her own. And that was how they had reached the current situation.

"So, what do you want to learn from me, Suzu? Tell me honestly. Yeah, no need for lies or restraint. Hit me with all you got!" With that, Sera took a battle-ready stance for some reason.

"Um...okay! I will! How do I become more upfront so I can tell Master my feelings?!" Suzu shouted as she tried to hit Sera with an Azuma.

"What?! Hey, wait, Suzu! You think of Kelvin in *that* way?!" Though she easily caught the attack, Sera couldn't hide her shock at what the girl had said.

"Huh?" Suzu paused as she tried to think of what Sera was talking about. Then, "Ah, no, you're wrong! Totally wrong! I just admire and respect him greatly! My feelings towards Master are one hundred percent reverence! That will never change!"

Suzu used Substitution to free her caught leg.

"Huh...so that's what you mean. That's a relief. Okay! I'll teach you a special trick!" Sera declared. "When you want to communicate your feelings, just go *braagh* and then *shwaah*! That's the most important thing!" Sera kept her in check with some punches as she let out some inscrutable sound effects.

"Uh, *braagh*, then *shwaah*?! You want me to be that...bold?!" Suzu blushed as she dodged Sera's attack at the last second.

“Then, if you’re still not satisfied, go *pyargh* and then *shwabam*! That’ll finish things off!”

“I...never would have thought of that! Wow, Sera-sama! You’re on an entirely different level!”

Shockingly, as they sparred, the conversation between them flowed well. The contents of their conversation aside, it sounded like Suzu actually understood what Sera was saying. Indeed, she understood Sera’s sound effects perfectly. Had Sera’s ability to teach actually improved?

Let’s switch over to Paul and the others’ viewpoint as they watched the pair from afar.

“Hey, Sinjeel, can you understand what they’re talking about?” Paul asked.

“Heh! Sorry, but I learn through theory and logic. You should ask Oddradd; he’s like them and learns through feeling,” Sinjeel replied.

“Sorry! I don’t get it either!” Oddradd shouted.

As expected, the answer was “no.” It was just a miracle that Sera’s and Suzu’s wavelengths matched so that they could actually talk.

“Yes, that’s it, Suzu! *Pweh pweh* and then *krkh*! That’ll get ’em in one!” Sera exclaimed.

“Thank you! That was really easy to understand!” Suzu replied just as loudly.

Meanwhile, the others watched in amazed silence. It really was a miracle.

MdoMel’s Fresh Sweets Discourse

The Dragonz were busy escorting Efil through the reserved area of the Golden Sparrow, a popular inn located in the Labyrinthine country of Pub. The Dragonz were serious, since they knew nothing could be allowed to happen to Efil and her baby.

“I have brought your order, Mdofarak-sama. These are our inn’s best fresh sweets,” came a voice.

“They’re here! The traditional Torajian sweets!” Mdofarak gushed.

Ouka, the proprietress of the Golden Sparrow, brought over a plate of colorful traditional Japanese confections, which put Mdofarak in a good mood as she skipped over to receive the plate. At first glance, it might have looked like she was just entranced by the sweets, but it was actually a clever trap set by Mdo. She was trying to elicit a moment of carelessness in any enemies by showing an opening of her own. As one might expect of the Light Dragon King, she had no blind spots.

“Is it finally here? The second serving?”

The group’s ravenous former goddess, Melfina, had come with Mdo. She probably had her own plans in doing this, as she also showed an opening while drooling over the food—proof of her appetite. Rather than an opening, however, it was more like she was completely defenseless. But Melfina also had a strategy and a deep reason for this behavior. Well, no, that’s stretching it. Her expression was obviously that of someone who only thought about food. Let’s also retract the earlier statement about Mdo, since she was the same.

“Hey, come on, both of you calm down. You don’t need to be in such a hurry; it’s not like the food’ll run away.” Dahak had been watching them, exasperated, as he munched on a vegetable stick.

Mdofarak sighed. “This is why amateurs are such a pain. Dahak, freshness is everything when it comes to these kinds of sweets. Good manners means enjoying them when they’re at their best. If we act carelessly and take too long, we’ll miss the peak of deliciousness.”

“No, there’s no way it would lose its freshness so fast that you have to move like the wind to get to them!” Dahak argued back.

“Eggfwhactwhy! We muft enphwoi fwheese quiggwhy!” Melfina exclaimed with her mouth full.

“What’re you even saying, sister Mel?! Please don’t talk with your mouth full!” Dahak retorted.

Mdo and Melfina had unexpectedly turned things around on Dahak, so they were the ones astounded by his ignorance. The two were totally confident in their assertions, even though they truthfully gained nothing by rushing to the sweets the way they did. Dahak tried to argue, but they paid him no heed.

That was when someone else broke their silence. “I understand what you want to say, Mel-sama and Mdo-chan, but please maintain the bare minimum of good manners. Your food isn’t so fragile as to lose its taste after only a few minutes.” Of course it was the Celsius family’s perfect maid, Efil.

“I’m sorry, sister Efil, but it’s useless. These two don’t listen to anyo—” Dahak started to reply, but was interrupted.

“Mrrgh, if sister Efil says so, I suppose it’s true. I was thoughtless,” Mdofarak murmured.

“Indeed. Even though I was talking to a familiar friend—Dahak—doing so with my mouth full was a faux pas. I regret my actions deeply,” Mel apologized.

“It sounds like you understand. Thank you,” said Efil.

“Uh, what?!” Dahak cried, confused.

Their earlier defiant attitudes had disappeared like mist as the pair readily obeyed Efil. They were like two dogs showing their bellies in obeisance.

Ah, right...they are talking to sister Efil, I guess, Dahak thought. He was a little unsatisfied with the outcome, but he let it go in the end. After all, Efil’s influence was incredible.

Shutola and the Popular Stall

At the edge of the caravan that was beyond Lumiest’s walls, Gerard and Gustav had collapsed, the whites of their eyes showing. This was because Sera and Shutola had spent a while berating them. The merciless verbal attacks carried out by the men’s precious daughter and granddaughter had led to the collapse of their usually indomitable spirits, and even now, their mental states were broken. As for the outcome...well, let’s just say that they deserved it.

Since the pair were currently wandering the border between mental life and death, there was no way they would be up and about anytime soon, so let’s set them aside. Let us instead focus on Shutola, Sera, and Ange. After bringing down Gerard and Gustav, they had decided to enjoy the stalls that had been erected around the caravan.

“Mmm, delicious!” Sera gushed. “This shaved pineapple is really good! The cool and refreshing ice with the nice fruity flavor is perfect!”

“The taste *is* great, but so was the performance,” Ange added. “It was amazing how the guy shaved away at such a big block of ice with a sword to turn it into a statue! And who would think of using those shavings to make treats?!”

“That happened at stalls in Gaun too,” Shutola informed them. “The act of using the preparation process to draw attention helps sales in this hot market. They really thought a lot about how to sell things, as I would expect of a country with two Rank S adventurers. Yeah, I have a lot to learn here!”

“You’re studying even now, Shutola? Come on, enjoy the festival a little,” Sera urged her.

“Hm? Oh, I’m enjoying it plenty,” she replied. “This exhibition match means there are cultural exchanges going on all over the place, so I can learn about what’s going on in various countries through the smallest interactions. It’s the perfect chance to do so. This is exactly when I need to stuff information about all these countries in my head. Ah, I’m so busy!”

Her gaze darted every which way as she scarfed down the shaved ice that Sera and Ange had shared with her. Her eyes were sparkling with interest, so it seemed she really was having fun. At the very least, that’s what it looked like from the outside.

“Jeez, you’re such a workaholic,” Sera sighed. “Though from the outside you just look like an innocent kid who’s enjoying the festival.”

“Aha ha, you’re right about that,” Ange agreed. “But what if the things she learns from the stalls here are applied to Trycen, resulting in a really popular stall down the line?”

“No way. Such a quick turnaround would be impossible, even for Shutola. Hm, actually, maybe not. I suddenly get the feeling that a trend is going to start,” Sera said.

“Oho, well then!” Ange whistled appreciatively. “I wonder, will Sera-san’s intuition be on the mark again?”

“Maybe. Shutola looks super motivated.”

“Mmhmm!” Shutola made an excited snort as she continued to observe the goings-on around her with deep interest. In the near future she would create an incredible stall, but that’s a story for another time.



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by Doufu Mayoi

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