

# The Diary of A **MIDDLE-AGED SAGE'S** Carefree Life in Another World



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## Prologue: The Old Guy Panics

Zelos was alone in a field of rocks, swinging his pickaxe.

When he'd started, he'd only gotten some iron ore and a smattering of rarer ores. As he'd continued to dig, he'd started finding all *sorts* of different ores. At this point, he was fully absorbed in mining.

His stamina was just as insane as it always had been; it was rare for him to get fatigued, making him perfect for this kind of manual labor. His awakened skills—Limit Breaker, Criticality Breaker, and Zenith Breaker—weren't just for show.

"Yup. I really *do* have some crazy stamina, if I do say so myself. Mostly thanks to my awakened skills... They were pretty much the only broken skills in *Swords & Sorceries*."

"Awakened skills" in the *Swords & Sorceries* VRRPG not only raised the level cap for your overall level, but they also made you more effective at everything you did, including various job skills. When you put all three awakened skills together, they synergized, becoming a combo so powerful, it practically seemed like a cheat code for the game.

*I kind of just got those skills without even realizing it, didn't I? And I have no idea how. I wonder if they're a thing in this world too? If they are, then that'd mean... Actually, you know, I'd rather not think about it.*

Zelos's knowledge was based on how things had worked in the game, and he wasn't sure how much of that applied to this world he was in now. He'd tried to confirm what he could, but there was still a lot he didn't know.

At the moment, though, at least one thing was clear: He was mining at a ridiculous pace, far faster than any heavy machinery could've managed. That by itself, of course, was plenty irrational.

"Hmm... It sure seems like there are a lot of gems here, doesn't it? I'm not even getting that much ore at the moment. There are crystals too, but I'm not sure what I should do with those... Aha! Maybe I could use them to make



presents for Luceris and Jeanne!”

And so, Zelos had completely forgotten why he’d come here in the first place.

“I’d get a fortune if I sold them, but I feel like it’d probably be better to turn them into magic tools. Let’s leave aside just a handful to pay for my expenses, and use the rest to make— Hmm, yes, what *should* I make...?”

Gems and magic stones were precious in this world. Magic stones were basically the crystallized distillation of the fluid and mana within a monster’s body. They could be easily fused with magic stones of the same magical attribute to create a larger one with a larger pool of mana and more powerful spells. However, as you used the stone, it’d gradually get smaller, and eventually, it’d disappear.

Stones were generally best used in magic tools that were used frequently.

Gems, on the other hand, could only hold so much mana, but they were more convenient, since they didn’t shrink over time as their mana was consumed.

Larger gems could hold more mana and more powerful spells, but if you failed to properly enclose the mana or magic inside, the gem’s physical bonds would break down, causing the gem to disintegrate into sand. At that point, it wouldn’t be useful in anything but paint. *Artists* would be happy about it, sure—but to a mage, it would be a painful loss.

As a result, mages generally only tried to turn gems into magic gems when they were making things like magic tools for self-defense.

“I guess I’d like to make some prototypes and get feedback from people who use magic. So Zweit and the others, as well as Iris—oh, and Luceris too, right? What about something that boosts healing magic, then? Mmm, yes... That doesn’t sound half bad.”





Already in full crafter mode, he acted like making that kind of magic tool would be no big deal. Of course, it had slipped his mind, for the moment, that he was an anomaly.

While making them might have been a trivial task for *him*, any of this world's inhabitants would consider such items extraordinary. And Zelos wasn't thinking about what that might lead to.

"Now, then, let's get back to mini— Hmm?"

Through his mask, Zelos watched two things pop into his field of view: a compass arrow pointing in a particular direction, and a flashing red emergency light.

"Crap! I forgot all about the assassins! Dammit, I've gotta *go*..."

Zelos hurriedly took his Harley-Sanders Model 13 out of his inventory and put in the key—a feature he'd added after learning a painful lesson.

Zelos sent mana to the bike's mana-powered motor, which quietly started to growl. He turned the throttle, and the bike's wheels started to rapidly spin, tearing away at the ground as the bike accelerated.

It wasn't long before a mysterious black object was zipping through the Ramaf Woods...

The barrier around the Harley-Sanders Model 13 allowed it to plow through the forest in a straight line—a line that unfortunately happened to cross a plant monster called a treant, which had only been looking for a meal.

Moments later, Zelos's motorbike was gone, and his path was left covered by a bed of wood chips that had just moments ago been a treant.

Treant wood, by the way, was a valuable material for magic staves. You could sell it for a pretty penny.

Given the situation, Zelos hardly had the time to collect the wood himself. But some time later, some students who came across the wood collected it to turn into staves.

The students eventually sold the wood chips in bulk to crafters, providing the students with a bit of pocket money. Meanwhile, the crafters who bought the

chips were able to make a whole plethora of treant wood staves—which were in turn bought up by the students.

This new supply of powerful staves helped narrow the gap between the noble students—who already had excellent magic conduits—and the regular students at the Istol Academy of Magic. This, in turn, caused a monumental shift in the students' grades...but that was a story for another day.

Zelos didn't know it, but he'd just made a big move toward solving a deep-seated issue at the academy.



# Chapter 1: Zweit Comes Under Attack

“How long are you gonna keep sitting on my back?” Zweit said, trying to tell the girl perched on his back to get off.

But the girl stubbornly clung to him. “I can’t let you get away. Not if I want to eat...”

With the girl restraining him, he couldn’t move. He’d tried, but it just tired him out.

But he hadn’t missed the girl saying that she “couldn’t let him get away.”

It sounded like she was an assassin hired by Samtrol.

“Get off already. I mean, you’re not exactly heavy, but...it’s getting annoying.”

“No. If I let you go, I won’t get any food...”

“If you think you’re strong, how ’bout you come work for *us*? I’m sure we’d pay you a decent amount if you’re any good.”

The girl hesitated for a moment. “I dunno. I don’t *want* to kill people, so...”

It was becoming clear to Zweit that this girl wasn’t an assassin by choice—that she was just in her profession because it was her only option if she wanted to live.

And so, he thought perhaps he could win her over to his side. *Maybe that’s how I get out of here alive.*

But things were never that easy.

“Would you mind not trying to seduce my little girl here?” a new voice—not the girl—chimed in. “I swear, you can’t take your eyes off an attractive man for a second...”

When Zweit looked to where the voice had come from, he saw a woman wearing a black evening dress and a ridiculous amount of flashy jewelry.

Actually, no; it wasn’t *just* a woman. There was also a boy about Zweit’s age,

dressed in knight's armor, drawing a sword and getting into a stance.

He had a collar around his neck with a red magic gem set into it, the sign of a serious criminal.

"Who the hell are you...?"

"Oh, but do you really need to know?" the woman said. "I'm not exactly a big softy. I don't feel the need to introduce myself to a boy who's about to die."

"Ah... So you're the assassins that idiot hired, huh? Or, what—the last remnants of some group my dad took out?"

"I thought I just said I wasn't going to bother introducing myself. On the off chance that we somehow mess this up, I'll be the one getting chewed out for it. Not that we *will* mess up, of course."

The woman's voice was cloyingly sweet, not too unlike the voices belonging to the prostitutes around Stihla that sometimes called out to Zweit. It left him uneasy.

Regardless, her words made it clear she was a killer. With what little information he had, Zweit decided to scope out the situation with a bluff.

"Hmm... Are you sure you want to be here right now?"

The woman paused, thrown off guard. "What do you mean by that? I don't like that you're acting so calm..."

"Oh, it's no big deal. But just...think about it. My dad already knew you guys were going to try to pull something. Safe to assume someone's been leaking all your plans, right?"

"So what? However impressive your father may be, he won't be able to do anything to stop us, *boy*."

"You're not very smart, are you? Sure, maybe he wouldn't be able to do anything to you...*if your group were still standing*. But he may be destroying it right about now, y'know? I could see him doing that."

The woman—Sharanla—was starting to worry.

If Zweit—their target—was telling the truth, it was entirely possible that even



if they killed him here and now, they might return to find that their organization had been destroyed.

He *had*, after all, been given some insane monsters—the coccos—as his guards. It was fair to assume their plans had been leaked.

Zweit also seemed awfully calm for the situation he was in. He didn't appear panicked in the slightest.

*Better use this while I've got the chance...*

With Sharanla distracted, her mind racing through all sorts of different possibilities, Zweit used the opportunity to sneakily activate the magic amulet Zelos had given him.

From the way these assassins had gotten caught up in conversation with their target, he'd assumed they were amateurs and figured he'd have no problem buying himself a moment to act. Still, he breathed a silent sigh of relief as soon as he confirmed he'd been right.

"I can never tell what Dad's thinking, but I know one thing: He's ruthless with his enemies. Wouldn't surprise me if he already had an idea where your hideout is."

Zweit had just used one of his trump cards. He didn't want to let his enemies know that, of course, so he did his best to keep the conversation going.

In part, he was trying to stall for time. But now that he knew help would be on the way, he was also trying to get as much information as he could out of these assassins.

"Is your father really all that amazing? You haven't even given us any proof. I'm not sure I can believe you, boy."

"Fair enough. Still, while it may be weird for me to say this about my own dad...the guy's insane, you know? Trust me, he'd have *no* problems using his son as bait to crush some group he wants gone."

"H-Huh?! Then what about my freedom?!"

"Freedom?" Zweit asked. "You've got a thrall collar around your neck, so you're a criminal slave, right? What'd you even do?"

The slave boy, Reinhardt, suddenly averted his eyes, desperate to avoid Zweit's gaze.

The pink ninja girl, however, didn't miss a beat. "He tried to make a slave harem," she butted in from behind Zweit. "He failed."

"*Oh*. So *that's* what it was. You tried to force yourself on a lawful slave and got caught... Are you an idiot? Slaves still have human rights unless they've committed some serious crimes, y'know?"

"I didn't knooooooooow!"

"He really *is* an idiot, isn't he? Every country has its own laws, so you really should learn them before you go to a new country. But he didn't, and he just went straight to buying a slave and trying to put his hands on her...which is how he ended up like this."

"And so you got bought yourself as a criminal slave, huh? Can't say I feel sorry for you..."

"C'mon! Every guy dreams of having his own harem, right?!"

"Uh...no. I'd be fine with just one woman I've really fallen for. Besides, having to deal with loads of women seems like a pain. Like what Dad does."

"*AND YOU CALL YOURSELF A MAN?!'*" Reinhardt XIII screamed with everything he had.

But as Sharanla had said, every country had its laws—and those laws were there to be followed. Reinhardt had ignored them outright, and now he was reaping what he'd sown.

"For starters, lawful slave merchants are sort of like middlemen for employers and job seekers. They have to pass a whole lot of checks from the state before they get permission to operate, and they sell their slaves to businesses that are short on workers. The slaves can earn back their freedom by paying off their debts, and sometimes decide to keep working at the same job. That's all just common sense, right?"

"So they're sort of like employment agencies, then. But what do the slaves do if they get sent somewhere bad?"



“Anyone who becomes a slave has their name recorded in a register in whatever territory they’re in. They can’t leave that territory—or, well, since they’ve got debts in that territory, they need to get a permit before they can go anywhere else. And the people who buy the slaves have to protect their rights. They can’t just work their slaves to death. If they tried, they’d end up as a criminal slave themselves! And slaves can take their owners to court too.”

“Why are there such strict laws around slavery?! It’s insane!”

“Why are *you* trying to act like the victim here? They may be slaves, but they’re still people, so of course they keep their rights. As long as they don’t have criminal records, they’re no different from regular citizens. I don’t know whether that’s the same in other countries, though, mind you.”

Those who were sold as slaves all had their circumstances. Generally, they couldn’t find work through regular means, or they were living in poverty and had nowhere else to turn. Slave merchants were almost a refuge of sorts to people like those—and just because they were enslaved didn’t mean they had their rights stripped away.

It was sort of like using your own body as collateral to get a loan. You’d work without pay for a while until your loan was paid off, and your owner was obliged to keep you properly fed, clothed, and sheltered.

“Did you seriously think slaves were out there selling themselves because they *wanted* to? They’ve all got their reasons, y’know?”

“But they’re slaves! You expect them to serve their master, right?! Who expects to get dragged to court just because they went in for a kiss?!”

“Just imagine *you* had someone you’ve got no interest in coming up to you and saying, ‘I order you to kiss me.’ Could *you* do it? Even if it was some obese old lady with caked-on makeup? What if she asked you to ‘keep her company’ at night?”

“U-Ugh. No. If that happened to me, I’d run away.”

“See? That’s why you got charged. Because you tried to force something on someone who didn’t want it. And now you say you don’t want someone doing that to you... You get the contradiction, right?”

Reinhardt couldn't think of a retort. He shrunk down, depressed.

His only real argument was a stubborn *This is a fantasy world! Why are the laws so damn strict?! This is no different from Earth!* And that was the thought process that'd gotten him charged for sexual harassment and abuse of authority.

"Still, though... So you got sold off to a criminal organization, huh? They're never gonna set you free—you know that, right?"

"Why not?! If what you're saying is right, then I should be able to sue my master too if things get bad, shouldn't I?!"

"No, well... An official, state-approved slave merchant shouldn't have been able to sell you to a criminal organization in the first place. Anyone dealing in the slave trade—whether it's lawful slaves or criminal slaves—needs to present ID. Each territory's slave traders have a special ID that records their name, their family structure and so on. So if they sold a slave to a group of criminals, it'd catch up to them in no time."

"What are you getting at?"

"What I'm saying is, the only way someone can get sold to a criminal organization is if there's some forgery or something going on. Besides, I've got no idea how good you are with that sword, but your owner's never gonna just throw away a useful pawn, right?"

"Th-Then... What's gonna happen to me?"

"Here's the thing: the moment you were registered as a criminal, you were considered to have lost all your rights, starting from when you committed the crime. And sometimes, well...people turn a blind eye if someone like you gets passed on to the black market. Of course, there are a lot of people out there who work criminal slaves to the bone..."

No criminal organization would let a slave go free as long as it still had a use for them. It'd work them to death, and just leave their body to rot when they died.

Reinhardt had wanted a slave so badly. And now, through his own idiocy, he'd ended up as one himself.

“The thrall collar you’ve got on—it’s got a red gem in it. That means you must’ve committed a pretty serious crime, y’know? They wouldn’t usually use something like that for sexual harassment. Did you... Did you do something else too?”

“I, uh... I fought back against the guards who came to arrest me. I thought they were robbers or something. But no, apparently they were from the government...”

“So sexual harassment *as well as* violence against guards, huh? Yeah, that makes sense, then... Sounds like you had it coming.”

“I didn’t even kill anyone! C’mon...”

Reinhardt was crouching down, forlorn, his arms around his knees.

“That’s enough about the stupid boy. Sorry, but we really *do* need you to die now, okay?”

“Yeah, I figured... Even if my dad dismantles your whole group, I guess you’re still criminals yourselves. Makes sense you’d want to get rid of me now that I’ve seen your faces...”

“Glad you’re quick on the uptake~! Not like our little idiot boy over here. Anyway... Nobody?”

Surprised to suddenly hear her “name” called, the girl—still clinging to Zweit’s back—tilted her head in confusion.

“You’re on his back, aren’t you? Can’t you just finish him off from there?”

“Mmm... I can’t. I’m too light, so he’ll run away if I stop restraining him.”

“Aren’t you a ninja? Shouldn’t you have some kind of secret weapon hidden inside a bracer or a pocket or something?”

“Why would I put it in my pocket? It’d be dangerous if I fell over. I don’t want to stab myself.”

“I thought ninjas were meant to have weapons hidden all over the place?”

“That’s prejudice. Ninjas only use hidden weapons when we’re running away. And we don’t have that many of them... I thought old people were meant to

know better than that.”

Ninjas were essentially spies. Their main role was information gathering, and they only fought or sowed chaos in the rear lines of a fight when they were faced with an emergency that left them no other choice.

They avoided flashy sword fights, and prioritized covert action. Since they emphasized mobility, they preferred to exclusively carry small, mobile weapons such as shuriken.

“Did you just call me ol— Ahem. I thought ninjas were supposed to be good at assassinating people?”

“No. We’re spies. Ninjas and assassins aren’t the same thing. Get with the times.”

*She called me old again...* “Wh-What’s even the difference?”

“We just gather information. Assassination is someone else’s job...”

Silence ensued for a moment.

Ninjas were often misunderstood. Japanese people often conceived of them as a group of shadowy individuals doing dirty work in the dark of night, but ninjas actually earned their pay by positioning themselves throughout the land and gathering information for their masters, and they used that pay to support their families. They weren’t that different from your average farmer.

“Oh, fine... Just hold him there like that, then. I’ll finish him off myself...*right now!*”

As soon as Sharanla finished speaking, she threw a knife. But the knife was repelled by something in midair and fell to the ground.

Zweit panicked for a moment, but breathed a sigh of relief when he realized it must be the effect of the special amulet he’d gotten from Zelos. For now, he’d be safe. But he still couldn’t let his guard down.

“Wha—?! A magic tool... One that automatically protects you, is it? You’ve got quite the item there...”

“I got it as a gift. Just to let you know—pretty much whatever attack you throw at me, it’s just going to bounce off. The guy who made it isn’t exactly



normal.”

“*Tch...* Damn thing. But once it runs out of mana...”

“We’ll see about that. I thought I just told you the guy who made it isn’t normal? I don’t know exactly how long it’ll last, but I think it’ll be a while, at least.”

“It...sounds like you have something *else* up your sleeve too. I don’t like how confident you are.”

“Good guess. You’ll all be done for soon. I’ve already sent the signal—by now, the ultimate bodyguard’s on the way. It looks like you activated a boundary, but I don’t think it’ll last too long once he’s here...”

Sharanla was feeling an urge to click her tongue in frustration.

What she’d used was a magic tool known as Isolation Field, and once it was deployed, anyone inside couldn’t leave the boundary until the effect ran out. What was more, it was a magic tool from ancient times that had been dug up, so it was nearly impossible to buy another one.

She’d intended to use it to get Zweit alone, but the way it worked meant that *they* were trapped inside as well. None of them knew just how long Zweit’s magic tool would be effective, but in the current situation, it looked like they’d have a hard time killing him; a drawn-out fight seemed inevitable. And if reinforcements were coming for Zweit, they might start guarding the area around the perimeter. That meant Sharanla and the others wanted to retreat, and fast—but they couldn’t go outside of the boundary until Sharanla’s own magic tool stopped working.

In short, there’d been a big flaw in their plan, and it was too late for them to do anything about it.

“How much longer are you going to sit there depressed?! Help me already!”

“B-But, Sharanla... Even if I kill this guy, it won’t secure my freedom, will it? I didn’t even *want* to kill anyone... I just figured I’d have to toughen up and do it. But now, it’s... It’s not even gonna do anything for me, is it? Aha ha ha... I just can’t find the motivation any more...”

“Ugh, *fine*... I’ll put in a good word with Darling for you, okay? So quit moping and lend me a hand!”

“Can I really trust you? You’re not just saying that, are you? Not just going to make me kill someone for you, and then pretend you never said anything? I can kind of see it...”

*Ugh, who taught him that... Cocky little pawn. Fine, then. There’s no other choice. I’ll have to do something about the target myself...*

Sharanla drew a dagger and came slashing at Zweit.

*SCHWIIIIING!*

It was repelled with another shrill sound. The attack couldn’t reach him.

She tried again and again, but the same thing happened every time.

It was at this point that Sharanla realized Zweit’s magic tool was going to be more of a problem than she’d first expected. It gave him a spherical boundary that completely surrounded him, and the barrier was able to reinforce itself with pinpoint accuracy at whichever spot it was hit by an attack.

As she took a closer look at the amulet, she noticed it seemed to be gathering mana from the environment, making it clear it was designed to operate for long periods of time. It didn’t seem like it was going to run out of mana easily.

In other words, it was similar to the Isolation Field Sharanla had used. The only differences were that one was an item you set down, while the other was something you wore; and that one had a wide area of effect, while the other only worked within a small range.

“Can’t you just be a good boy and let us kill you? You’re being a real pain, you know that? Everything’s going wrong!”

“Why the hell should I care? I’ve got no reason to make life easy for a bunch of criminals.”

“He’s right,” Nobody said. “And it seems weird to just kill a person because someone doesn’t like him... It’s not *fancy*.”

“Whose side are you even on, Nobody?!” Sharanla replied, fuming.

The pink ninja girl didn't really seem to care, though. "A shinobi must dedicate herself to her duty."

"That's a pretty grown-up thing to say for someone your age. You sure you're not older than you look?" Zweit said.

"Oh. Are you falling for me? That'd be dangerous for you, you know?"

"Uh," Zweit said, pausing. "It would, yeah. In a lot of ways, if you know what I mean. And that's not a risk I wanna take."

"If you know what I mean'? You perv."

"Where'd *that* come from...?"

Zweit's life was at stake here, but somehow this was becoming more like a scene out of a rom-com.

One would've expected a bloodbath to be playing out right now, but the encounter was moving along listlessly, if at all.

Not that Zweit had a problem with that, of course. He was fine with anything as long as it let him buy time.

Reinhardt was *less* happy. "Y'know, I think I *will* kill you..."

"Huh? Why now? I thought you were just saying that killing me wouldn't help you?"

"You're hitting on a girl right in front of my eyes! And she's a *loli*! Of course I'd be jealous, you asshole!"

Reinhardt was envious, and he was taking it out on Zweit.

"Uh... Are you sure you're okay in the head? She's a *kid*. Putting your hands on her'd make you no better than a degenerate. I mean, sure, there are some nobles out there who get married with pretty big age gaps, but most of those are political marriages, and they don't actually *do* anything to the younger one until they come of age. There might be exceptions, I guess, but..."

"But I... I *wanna* touch a loli!"

"You're... You're not even trying to hide it, huh? I guess you really *are* a degenerate. I can see how you ended up as a criminal slave. You're certainly

true to your desires...”

“Thanks. I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“It’s not a compliment!”

Reinhardt really was a scumbag. Unable to even keep looking at his stupid face anymore, Zweit shifted his gaze to Sharanla. He didn’t say anything, but the disgust was clear in his eyes.

“D-Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t think he’d be this much of an idiot either!”

“But you’re on the same side, right? *Do* something about him.”

“I only met him a few days ago. There’s nothing I *can* do. I’m not his guardian!”

“S-Stop talking about me like I’m embarrassing!”

Both responded as one: “No, you’re *definitely* embarrassing...”

Flying into a rage at the word, Reinhardt drew his sword again and started chasing Zweit around.

Zweit, for his part, had already gotten up, and was running for his life—with the ninja girl still on his back.

For Sharanla, the whole thing was a complete and utter nuisance. But if she tried to attack Zweit without being careful, she was liable to get caught up in Reinhardt’s slashing frenzy, so she couldn’t do anything about it.

Emotional idiots like him were always a pain to deal with.

What had been meant to be a quick surprise attack had gotten dragged out into a growing hassle.

\*

The coccos had a problem.

Zweit, the person they’d been tasked with guarding, was on the other side of a boundary, and the area was walled off by a barrier that stopped them from getting inside. They were so close to some strong-looking prey, yet the boundary prevented them from doing anything but watch from atop a tree,



frustrated. They wanted to get in there and fight as soon as possible.

“Bocaw.” (“What do we do? Leader will likely get angry with us if we don’t do anything about this.”)

“Co-kah, co-kah...” (“Is there really no way we can get inside? Those other cretins nearby seem weak, so I doubt *they* would be a problem, but...”)

“Bok. Bo-kak.” (“For starters, we stay calm and observe. There could be a hole somewhere.”)

The three coccos observed as best they could, their eyes as wide as saucers.

If they panicked, they might miss something important, so they tried to hold back their urge to fight and keep observing the barrier.

As they did, they saw a dove fly out of the top of the boundary.

“C-Cobak, keh?” (“D-Did you see that just now?”)

“Keh. Bakok-kaw.” (“I did. It would seem the barrier does not extend to the sky.”)

“Bako bacoba...” (“Then I suppose going in from above should be the plan. But we cannot fly that high...”)

The coccos were only capable of low-altitude flight. The way their bodies were built meant that they were simply too heavy to soar through the skies; catching the wind and flying through the clouds was beyond them.

Of course, there were birds the same size as them that *were* able to fly at high altitudes, but the coccos’ wings weren’t the same as the wings of those other birds.

“Bo-kekko.” (“Then we must leap from the top of the highest tree we can find.”)

“Boh, koh.” (“Indeed. Even *we* are able to glide.”)

“Kokekke.” (“We might get swept off course by the wind, but we still have to try it.”)

Nodding in agreement, the coccos started looking for a particularly tall tree.

All because they wanted to get to the strong opponents, of course...

“W-We need to hurry up! Need to get back to camp as soon as we can! Or else Zweit’s going to—”

“You say that, but with all these monsters around, it’s hard to make much progress...”

“Damn that Samtrol, using a thing like this. I swear, I’m gonna murder him...”

Diio and the others from his group had been returning to the camp to call for reinforcements when they’d come under attack by monsters. Now they were engaged in combat.

They’d been warned earlier that there might be an ambush today, but they hadn’t expected to get split up. And before they could call for any reinforcements, they had to pass through the gauntlet of monsters that had been lured in by the felscent. Their retreat wasn’t exactly going to plan.

“D-Don’t tell me... Did Samtrol specifically spread felscent along our escape route?!”

“With everything he’s done already, it wouldn’t surprise me. He’s probably got some moronic plan by which he ‘saves’ us himself to try to win back some approval.”

“He *is* an idiot. I could see him doing something like that to try to get back in our good books without putting in any real effort.”

“He would, yeah. The idiot that he is...”

Knowing Samtrol’s personality firsthand, these students from the Wiesler group were able to calmly analyze the situation. And that analysis led them to the assumption that Samtrol had set the whole thing up to try and play the role of the hero.

“Stop talking, guys, and *help* us! The two of us alone aren’t gonna last long!”

“Wonder if I should give up on the whole mercenary thing? This shit ain’t worth it...”

The two mercenaries with the group were desperately taking down monster after monster—but as time passed, the number of monsters around them was

going *up*, not down.

At this rate, it was only a matter of time before they'd run out of stamina and end up as monster food. The students, meanwhile, could only use intermediate magic at best, if they were lucky, and it ate up a lot of their mana to boot, so they couldn't just fire it off carelessly.

All the while, the horde of monsters continued to swell, as if it were mocking them.

"So this is as far as we can make it... Well, I guess now we have to just blast open a path back by force. Okay, everyone, we're gonna use our magic all at once."

"S'pose we have to, huh... Would've liked to save it for later if we could."

Diio channeled mana into his staff and prepared to fire off a spell toward the monsters. But...

*BOOOOOOOOOOM!*

Before he could finish, the swarm of monsters ahead was blasted away by powerful magic.

"Ooh, that was a good hit~!" a voice said in the wake of the explosion. "We shouldn't have to worry about money for a bit if we can sell the materials from these, huh?"

"Uh, Iris... Even I can't disassemble this many monsters, y'know?"

"We can just get the stones, can't we? Don't they sell for a pretty good amount?"

"We don't have time to take this many apart, though, that's the thing... Just look how many you killed."

The attack had come from Iris and Jeanne, the guards from Celestina's party.

Diio and the rest of his group were happy to have reinforcements, of course...but they were also lost for words at the sheer firepower of the area magic Iris had used.

"Please don't go off ahead like that, Iris! There are a lot of monsters."

“It’s fine, it’s fine~! The monsters here are weak, so even I can take ’em out with one hit. I mean, you should be able to bludgeon them to death pretty easily yourself, right?”

“Don’t call it ‘bludgeoning to death’! You make it sound like I *enjoy* fighting like that!”

“Am I wrong? Mages usually don’t fight at the front line, do they? I haven’t seen many using maces, at least...”

Upon learning that the one who’d come to save them was Celestina, Diio—who had feelings for the girl—felt a flame igniting in his heart.

Though technically, of course, the one who’d saved them was *Iris*...

“C-Celestina...” Diio said. Love was blind, and he had no eyes for anyone but Celestina. “You came all this way to save us...”

“If it matters, there seems to be another group of monsters on the way,” Carosty said, pointing. “What shall we do about it?”

As soon as she gestured, a great many monsters came rushing in from the direction she’d pointed. As long as everyone stayed here, it seemed they were liable to get caught up in a melee between monsters.

Iris, however, just took a moment to think, and then clapped her hands together.

“All right—they’d be a pain to deal with one at a time, so I’m just gonna blow ’em all up at once, okay? *Explode.*”

The onlookers responded with a unified “Huh?!”

*KABOOOOOOOOOOM!*

A tremendous explosion burst forth, annihilating the monsters—and a good chunk of the forest.

Afterward, Iris had to spend a while trying desperately to prevent a forest fire. It was her own fault, really.

Zelos had gradually started to influence her—not that she’d realized that herself.



Watching the enormous explosion from afar, Samtrol and his cronies were left speechless.

Just as Diio and the other students had expected, Samtrol's group had set the whole thing up, intending to swoop in at the last moment and look like the heroes. But a number of obstacles had popped up along the way.

First of all, they'd used too much felscent, drawing too many monsters to the area. Samtrol and his cronies had underestimated what would happen, thinking they'd have no problem whatsoever dealing with some monsters...but the sheer scale of this monster horde had left them too scared to act.

The next obstacle was Iris. Just as they'd been trying to think of a way to save Diio and the others, the girl had appeared all of a sudden and stolen their glory.

And the pièce de résistance had been Iris's Explode spell.

Similar to the heirloom magic of the four great ducal houses, Explode tended to be treated as advanced strategic magic, kept as an ace up the sleeve of any mage who had it. They would never have expected some random little girl to use it.

On top of that, she must have defeated quite a few monsters to even get to Diio's group in the first place—yet despite using all that magic, she showed no signs of running low on mana. All in all, it was no surprise the group was left speechless.

To be fair, she *had* recharged her mana with a mana potion or two on the way here...but Samtrol and his allies didn't know that.

"What the hell is up with that girl...? How's she able to use magic like that?"

"Don't ask me! Either way, I think it's pretty obvious at this point—we've lost our time to shine."

"Yeah... She's on par with a court mage. We sure she isn't a disciple of the Mage of Purgatory or something?"

"I could believe it... And that spell she cast—it was Explode, right? She's obviously an insanely strong mage. If the guy's got people like that working for

him, aren't we kinda screwed?"

Every last part of Samtrol's plan was falling apart—and his face was growing redder and redder with fury.

"That fucking duke! How dare he screw up my plans! I'm so mad, I could—"

"We'd better retreat. There's nothing we can do at this point."

"Yes, it's probably best we go back. With the way things are looking here, I think *they're* probably going to fail as well..."

It was clear now that the situation was far beyond what the bloodline supremacists had expected. They were all badly shaken.

Of course, not everyone here was *actually* a bloodline supremacist. Plenty had simply been brainwashed by Bremait's magic. Magic that could be fairly easily undone if the target received a large enough mental shock—like, say, the shock from witnessing Iris's Explode spell just now.

As a result, the brainwashing's clutch on them was weakening, and they started preparing to go back to camp of their own accord.

If Bremait had been here, he would've been able to recast the brainwashing magic to reinforce it. But the reality was he *wasn't* here, leaving Samtrol with no way to stop these students from leaving.

"Stop! What are you doing?! I haven't told you to—"

"Shut up! We tried following you, and look where it got us! I guess Zweit was right all along."

"You know... Surely not, but... You didn't have us *brainwashed*, did you? My memory's a little bit... No, it's more like I have this feeling that something's just really *wrong*. So? What do you have to say?"

"Right? Now that I look back, there are all sorts of things that seem weird..."

The more potent the magic that was cast on someone, the stronger the recoil when it disappeared.

They were still under the effects of the brainwashing to some extent, but they'd started to regain enough of a sense of self to oppose Samtrol, and there

were already some who were clearly viewing him with outright hostility.

It was only a matter of time now before Samtrol would be completely alone.

*“Tch... Damn you, Zweit! I’ll get you back for this insult, I swear it...”*

But Samtrol still didn’t even think he was in the wrong. All he could do was double down on his petty grudge.

## Chapter 2: The Old Guy Hurries

Sharanla and Reinhardt continued slashing at Zweit, but as every attack was repelled by a barrier, they hadn't managed to kill him yet.

Sharanla clicked her tongue, frustrated with the amulet protecting Zweit. They couldn't just retreat, though. Zweit had seen their faces now—and if they ended up on a wanted list, they wouldn't be able to live in this country anymore.

They'd tried to mess with the son of a duke, after all. There'd be no escaping the death penalty if they got captured.

And that meant they *had* to kill him, here and now.

"Can you hurry up and die for us already?" Sharanla asked, annoyed. "I'd like to go home, you know."

"I'm not stopping you! Just go! If your home's still there, that is..."

"Drop dead, normie! *Brave Zapper!*"

*SKREEEEEEEEEE!*

But even Reinhardt's mana-charged strike was deflected by Zweit's barrier. He was blasted back too. It looked like the barrier was even able to hit opponents with a counterattack of sorts.

"Shit! What even *is* that tool he's got? Didn't think I'd get countered like that. Damn, that hurt..."

"I suppose we have to be careful here, don't we? If we use some powerful attack on him without thinking, it might bounce right back at us instead. Can't say I was expecting it to reflect our attacks..."

"Mmm... Seems like a pain."

"Say, Nobody... You've just been clinging to that boy's back this whole time, haven't you?"



“It’s fun.”

Sharanla and Nobody stared at each other for a moment, silent.

To the girl, this was a *game*. She wasn’t helping in the slightest with their assassination attempt.

She was still clinging to Zweit’s back, having fun as she was thrashed side to side. While expressionless as always, her face seemed somehow lively—though it was hard to say what exactly she was enjoying so much about the whole situation.

“Would you mind not using my back as a toy?” Zweit asked. “Seriously, just get off already...”

“No.”

“Don’t give me ‘no’! I’m getting tired here!”

“But you said I wasn’t heavy.”

“Okay, I did, but...you keep grabbing onto my neck. And whenever you do, your bracer pushes against my throat. Can you at least do something about that?”

“You say that, but you’re enjoying it, right? You’ve got a girl clinging onto you. I bet your heart’s pounding. Right?”

“I’m not into little girls!”

“Stop making me jealous, man!” Reinhardt exclaimed. “Why can’t I have a little girl hug me?! Hug me and say, ‘I love you, Big Bro ≡’?! Just once!”

“My god, you’re a moron.” Sharanla sighed. “Children are just annoying, nothing more. I’d much rather have *money*.”

Zweit and Reinhardt responded together: “Those are the words of a woman who can’t get married. Someone who leeches men’s money. There’s no doubt about it—she’s a whore!”

“Who are you calling a whore?!”

The young men, having reached some unspoken agreement, refused to respond.

As for Nobody... Children were naturally innocent, but you could never quite tell what she was thinking. It made her kind of scary. Any attack at Zweit was deflected by the barrier from his amulet, but he still reflexively tried to defend himself each time the assassin lunged at him with a sword. And that made the girl's arm—which continued to dig into his throat as she got thrown around—feel all the more suffocating.

"Can't you just strangle him like that?" Sharanla asked.

"I'm a kid, and you're telling me to kill someone? You demon. You should be old enough to know better."

"How rude! Who are you calling a demon?!"

"Mmm... If I can't say 'demon,' then how about 'evil old lady'?"

"Stop calling me old! I'm still young! I've still got it! And I'm not *evil*!"

"But you *are* evil. You're an assassin. That makes you bad."

Sharanla didn't have a response for that one. The girl was right, after all.

Assassins were practically evil personified. Even children knew that.

"Ugh..." Zweit groaned. "Not being able to do anything is annoying me. Just standing here getting attacked isn't my style."

"Feel free to retaliate if you'd like, boy! I doubt you'd manage to hit us, though."

"You sure about that? You could wind up dead if you're not careful."

"Hah! You really think some low-level normie'd be able to kill *us*! Go die in a fire!" Reinhardt said.

"What do you mean by 'normie,' anyway? Are you saying I'm popular with women? Because I'm not. That's my brother. That prick..."

There was a long silence between the two young men. And then, they spoke together:

"My comrade!"

All of a sudden, they were exchanging a firm handshake.

A strange bond had started forming between these unpopular young men.

“He’s lying to you. Of *course* he’s popular. He’s the son of a duke, remember? I’m sure he has all sorts of girls clambering over each other to get to him. He’s just saying that to get you on his side and buy time, you buffoon.”

“H-Huh? I mean, yeah, now that you mention it...”

“Me? *Popular*? Are you insane? Just about every woman that tries to get close to a ducal house is in it for the power or the money. The sort of woman who’d poison her husband just to get his inheritance. Scumbags like you, in other words. And I don’t want anything to do with them!”

“What are you trying to say?! How dare you start just treating me as some villainess out of nowhere?! You need to learn some respect for women!”

Zweit was mad at this woman and everything she stood for. Marriage-hunting as a noble was quite the hassle, and he was taking the opportunity to vent about it.

“I... I want a *real* relationship! I want to meet an honest woman and I want us to fall deeply in love with each other, more than anything from my wildest dreams! Just give me one woman like that and I’d never ask for anything else!”

“Y-You’re right! One woman who actually has feelings for you would be better than any number of whores. Better than *her*!” He pointed to Sharanla. “I get you, my comrade! I’m with you!”

“Comrade!”

“How rude! Stop calling me a whore! You don’t even know the first thing about me...”

“I know you’d do anything for money, at least—right? You just want to take it easy and rake in cash. Otherwise, you’d be off working a proper job—not *here*, as an assassin. It’s hard to trust the character of someone who’s trying to kill me.”

“Yeah!” Reinhardt said. “I mean, you only got all lovey-dovey with Garlance because of how much influence he’s got, didn’t you? If he suddenly lost it, you’d abandon him the second it happened! You’re obsessed with money, you never

want to work... What kind of person does that make you?"

Again, Sharanla fell silent. Reinhardt had hit the bull's-eye. She had no retort.

She'd only decided to get close to Garlance because of all his money, figuring it'd let her live a life of lazy opulence—and she was perfectly fine with selling her body if it'd get her there. Of *course* people would start calling her a whore.

Not to mention, she didn't care about other people in the slightest as long as she could live in luxury. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone more self-centered.

And of course, there was no way a woman like her—a woman who covered herself in flashy, jangling jewelry, even if it *was* all magic tools—would be willing to work a proper job. She was the very definition of a nouveau riche woman with tacky taste.

"My family's actually pretty frugal, y'know?" Zweit said. "I mean, if every noble started splurging with taxpayers' money, the country'd fall apart. So I don't need some high-maintenance woman who wants to just spend, spend, spend. Being from a ducal house isn't all fun and games. We've got plenty of responsibilities, and we can't just make money out of nowhere."

"Huh. Sounds like it's tough being from a powerful family... What happens if you need to have a political marriage? And what if it's with a whore like *her*?"

"Then she'd be pretty much confined to a mansion. When nobles arrange a political marriage, the couple often ends up living separately. So publicly we'd be married, but by that point, I would've gotten a proper look at what kind of person she really is."

"So you don't want to deal with any whores, huh...? Well, I guess they're far better than politicians who just throw around taxpayers' money."

"Whores after money wouldn't be able to get close to a ducal house anyway. They wouldn't get brought up as marriage candidates in the first place; there's a lot of emphasis on having good conduct. You can't give your political opponents an easy target. Sometimes, you even need to *deal with* them behind the scenes."

"Jeez! Ducal houses sound terrifying..."

Zweit and Reinhardt were hitting it off.

In front of them, however, Sharanla's shoulders were trembling with rage.

"Whore, whore—is that the only word you know, you damn brats?! How about I send you both to meet your maker right now?!"

Zweit and Reinhardt responded in unison: "Th-The whore's angry with us. But everything we said was true..."

"You're *still* not going to stop?! Even if it might be true, listening to you say it to my face makes me mad, you know?!"

The two of them continued to speak as one: "So she's admitting it's true, huh...? Yeah. I knew it..."

"I'm going to kill you."

"Crap! I don't wanna be killed by a whore!"

Sharanla's eyes narrowed to slits. It seemed like she really *did* mean to kill the two of them.

When people had an inconvenient truth thrust before their eyes, they could respond in one of two ways: they could reflect on themselves, or they could get mad. And Sharanla was in the second camp. She swung her blade furiously, time and time again, each strike letting out a shrill metallic *ting* as it bounced off Zweit's barrier.

It never actually reached him, though—and that was only making Sharanla that much angrier.

"Die already, you little brats!"

"Little brats? What, are you older than you loo— *Whoa!*"

"I'm glad I've got the barrier, but I still don't exactly feel safe right no— *Whargh!*"

Zweit was exhausted enough already, and the situation was growing more and more chaotic with every moment.

"Aha ha ha ha... It's time for you to die, brats. You all just *had* to insult me, didn't you...?"

“There’s a saying,” Nobody chimed in. “‘One man’s flaw is another man’s lesson.’ If you don’t accept the truth and change, you’ll end up alone. Life seems long, but it’s actually short. And you’re already kinda old...”

“*Damn* it, little girl—you too?!”

“You’re a philosophical one, huh? Wouldn’t have expected to hear all that from a kid.”

“Stop pouring oil on the fire! The wh—ahem—she’s going Super Mode right now! It almost feels like her hair’s about to turn blonde and she’ll have a bunch of new bits pop out of her, like she’s some kind of mobile weapon!”

Sharanla was giving off the vibes of a certain alien, or a particularly insane real robot, suddenly powering up.

Zweit and Reinhardt were trembling with fear, scrambling to run away...but there was no getting away from Sharanla now that she was this emotional. She was as hard to deal with as she was selfish.

“Loyalty isn’t a thing in the underworld,” Nobody said. “If you’re not useful anymore, you get thrown away. And no one needs an old lady who gets mad at everything...”

Zweit and Reinhardt winced.

“Oh, you’ve said it now... Do you know how many people there are out there who could replace you?!”

“I’m not sure. I’m the third one, so...”

Again, the young men responded: “The third *what*?!”

After impassively insulting Sharanla, Nobody was suddenly playing innocent.

She was beyond adding oil to the fire at this point; no, she was dropping *nukes*. Yet she just tilted her head to the side in apparent confusion, her face as blank as always.

Was she doing all this on purpose? If she was, it was hard to imagine anyone being a bigger nuisance.

“Okay. That’s it. All I can trust is myself and money. Everyone else can just die.



Yes, that's right. Die for me... Aha ha ha ha ha..."

"This is bad. She's lost it."

"Yeah... If someone pointing out her actions is gonna make her so mad, then maybe she should just stop doing that stuff in the first place... I dunno, maybe leeching off other people like that is just *natural* to her? Would she really snap back at people telling her about it if she really knew what she was doing?"

"Maybe she's mad because she's...going through menopause?"

"Wha—?!"

Another bombshell of an insult. Sharanla's face went blank.

And then, suddenly, she took something that looked like a chess pawn out of thin air and thrust it forward, like she was showing it to Reinhardt.

*Huh. That thing just now looked the same as Teach's spatial magic...*

"So. Boy. You think you're free to do whatever you want, do you? Well, do you know what this is?"

"N-No. What is it? Are we gonna play a board game or something?"

"You see... This goes with that thrall collar you have around your neck. It's called a Surveillance Pawn. And when you give it a bit of mana..."

"GYAAAAAARGH!"

Pain and numbness enveloped Reinhardt's entire body as if a jolt of high-voltage electricity had just surged through him. The pain left him writhing around on the ground. Sharanla watched with a cruel smile, almost seeming like an entirely different person from before.

"Th-That's dirty..."

"Children shouldn't make fun of adults. Besides, it's important to discipline your pets, isn't it?"

"Oh, so— *Hah!*"

"Wha—?!"

Without warning, Zweit cast Divine Silver Barricade, lopping off one of

Sharanla's arms. And as her arm dropped to the ground, the Surveillance Pawn fell out of her hand.

But then, in the next moment, her arm was suddenly attached again, just like it had always been. It was simply *there*, as if it had never even been cut off in the first place.

"That's some strange magic you have. I couldn't even see it... Quite the annoying little thing you have there, isn't it?"

"You too, by the looks of it. What was that—a substitution doll? Or was it a sacrificial offering? Something that uses a mana-filled arcana or a doll as a standin to stop you from taking damage. A tool used by witch doctors. It's my first time seeing one."

"*Galeblade!*"

"Tch!"

Reinhardt suddenly unleashed a wind-imbued slash at Sharanla, who leaped out of the way. As soon as she did, he rushed in and plucked the Surveillance Pawn off the ground.

"Now that I have this... I'm free. You saved me, comrade."

"I mean, I don't want us trying to kill each other when neither of us wants to fight in the first place. Anyway, you sure you're okay...?"

"Somehow, yeah. Still... I didn't think she'd get *this* hysteric."

"You brats just can't stop yourselves from insulting an adult, can you? All right, then. Playtime's over. Time to get serious!"

Sharanla disappeared into her own shadow, as if she'd sunk into the ground itself.

"Is that Shadow Dive?! Damn it," Zweit groaned. "Dark magic's hard to detect..."

"An assassin move, huh?" Reinhardt said. "She'll be hard to find now. Where'd the whore even get to...?"

"It seems like the spell's attribute is 'shadow,' but...how is that even different

from 'dark'? I don't get it."

"Don't ask me. I can't tell the difference between— Wait, is now really the time for this?! We need to find where she went!"

Still perched on Zweit's back, Nobody pointed to a nearby tree. "But... She's there, though, isn't she?"

"What?! Th-Thanks! *Fireball!*"

"You were gonna try and work me to death this whole time, weren't you?! Take this—*Crimson Slash!*"

"*Ngh*— Look at you, betraying me at the drop of a hat! What horrible little brats you are!"

As soon as her hiding spot was pointed out, Sharanla retreated without delay. Reinhardt's attack swept past her, missing by just a hair's breadth. Sharanla was stunned by just how *frustrating* this whole situation had become.

"Hold on! Nobody! Don't you owe Darling for saving you?!" Sharanla said. "Why are you just betraying us like this?! You could strangle the boy from where you are, I know you could!"

"Mmm... My dad told me that if you borrow money from criminals, you don't have to pay it back."

"What happened to your whole 'duty' thing?! Are you going to turn your back on us? After all we've done for you?!"

"I paid my debt when I saved Garlance's life. But I knew you'd just use me as a pawn and throw me away, so...I'm using you instead. The same way you use people for money. I'll get my food however I need to."

Sharanla was speechless.

Reinhardt and Zweit, meanwhile, were thinking the same thing: *What's up with her? She's terrifying, seriously...*

They'd already thought she was a strange girl. But by the looks of it, she was a cunning, tenacious one too.

She pretended to just be a clueless little child, but she was manipulating a

criminal organization for food, and she was more than willing to toss it away as soon as things got dicey. It was hardly the thought process you'd expect from a child.

Zweit and Reinhardt were left scared of the frightening potential of her scheming mind.

"B-But... It's only thanks to Darling that you've even been able to stay alive this whole time! You haven't finished paying back your debt, you ungrateful girl!"

"My granny always told me... 'It's fine to manipulate bad people. But if someone who's in a hard spot helps you, never forget what they did for you.'"

"Your granny's messed up! I swear, every last one of you..."

Garlance might have said he'd rescued Nobody, but it was becoming apparent that the girl had actually just been using him.

"What kind of crazy family did this girl even come from?! I mean, the first part totally sounded like something you'd hear in some hard-boiled crime drama..."

"It's...not the thought process of your average kid, yeah. How was she even raised that she turned out so cunning like this...?"

Depending on how you looked at it, she was more of a pragmatist than anybody else there.

She *looked* like a child, but her mind was that of an adult. The perfect coolheaded ninja.

"Besides... You're going to lose. I'm not stupid. I don't bet on fights I can't win."

"Me? Lose? You may all be annoying little brats, but I won't have a problem dealing with you. Even if you put up a fight..."

"No. Not us."

*SWOOSH!*

All of a sudden, some kind of razor-sharp blade shot out of the sky and lodged itself firmly into the ground.

“Wh-Who’s there?!”

“Who’s *this*?!”

“Who *now*?!”

Silhouettes shot past overhead. Silhouettes cast by white-winged—

“It’s the widdle coccos! ≡”

Three chickens swooped down from the skies above. The ultimate bodyguards had arrived on the scene.

The mysterious blade lodged into the ground? Aocco feather.

“Bokaw...” (“What’s... What’s the situation?”)

“Boca-kaw?” (“I am not sure. It would...appear that two of the enemy forces have changed sides?”)

“Ku-bok... Cak.” (“Hmph... Then the only enemy remaining is this female here? What do we do?”)

It seemed like the birds were a little displeased by the turn of events.

They’d arrived on the scene looking all triumphant, only to find that the enemy had had a falling out, leaving the birds with just one enemy. They weren’t even sure which of them was going to fight her.

“Coccoooooos! I wub yooouuu! ≡”

“Bokah?!” (“Gwah?!”)

Nobody had suddenly released herself from Zweit’s back and leaped straight onto Senkei.

“Bo-caaaaaaw!” (“Senkeeeeeeeiiiiii!”)

Trapped in Nobody’s grasp after she’d made a diving leap, Senkei was very suddenly out of the battle. But that was the perfect opportunity for the other two birds.

“Bok...” (“So Senkei’s out of the running. Now it’s just...”)

“Bokabok...” (“Me and Ukei...”)

And so, Ukei and Zankei decided to choose who would fight in a fair, peaceful

way:

“Bek, buk, bok!” (“Rock, paper, scissors!”)

As for Senkei...

“Bocaca ba kebaw! Go-bok!” (“Let go of me! I will not be able to fight if you keep— Gwah?! Where are you touch—?! Oh, *oh...* ≡”)

Senkei was trembling with pleasure. Getting fluffed felt pretty good, by the looks of it.

Nobody had subdued Senkei with the finger technique of an expert masseuse, and she was well and truly getting her fill of fluffy feathers as she went about it. “Mmm... This is the best... ≡”

It seemed like the little ninja girl was the coccos’ natural enemy.

Zweit and Reinhardt, meanwhile, were just...confused. “What the hell are those two doing...?” they said.

Even the most ferocious of beasts had their weaknesses—and just like that, Senkei was out of the picture. The remaining two birds had finished their game of rock, paper, scissors, with Ukei emerging the victor and preparing to fight.

Zankei looked incredibly depressed.

“Boka.” (“You face me.”)

“How much more humiliation do I have to go through today... You’re dead meat, I swear it!”

“Ko-caw? Boh... Caw.” (“Flying into a rage now that she’s cornered? Hmm... Looks like this won’t be a very exciting fight.”)

Right as Sharanla gathered up mana and was about to sink back into her shadow with her trusty Shadow Dive, Ukei closed the gap in an instant and let loose a flurry of powerful wing strikes.

Sharanla hastily used a magic-tool bracelet she was wearing to deploy a barrier. Despite her efforts, the sheer power of the blows—so much *stronger* than she’d been expecting—pulled her out of the shadows and sent her flying meters backward. The impact left her hand numb.

“Wha—?! How was it that fast...? What’s *wrong* with these damn birds? Have they been holding back until now?”

“Bok...” (“Is this really all you have?”)

Ukei looked somehow disappointed, then released what sounded like a sigh. It seemed like this fight was a letdown for the bird.

And that reaction only angered Sharanla all the more. She clicked her tongue in irritation.

She thought back to the projection that Samtrol’s group had shown her, and regretted not making better plans against the cocos. One-on-one battles like this were all about reading your opponent. But Sharanla was an assassin, accustomed to attacking in situations in which she had a big advantage. She was sorely lacking experience when it came to being challenged in a head-on fight.

Moreover, they were all separated from the rest of the world by a boundary, so she couldn’t run away even if she wanted to. Her own sly trick had completely backfired on her.

“This fucked-up little *chicken*, daring to look down on a human...”

“Bo-kawk.” (“Let’s hurry up and finish this. You’re a letdown.”)

“That attitude of yours is making me mad... I’ll turn you into yakitori!”

“Caw...” (“What a cliché old line...”)

Ukei wasn’t even seeing her as a proper opponent, which was a careless decision.

Having decided they weren’t going to get anything valuable out of the fight, Ukei used Shukuchi to close the gap and let loose a powerful blow, intending to finish the fight by destroying her organs.

Ukei had charged the blow with plenty of mana. They could *feel* the impact. It had to be a critical hit, but—

“Baw?” (“Hmm?”)

What *had* just felt like a clean hit a moment ago suddenly felt like nothing at all.

Instead, lying on the ground in front of Ukei was a wooden doll—a substitute for Sharanla—that had been torn to shreds.

Ukei finally realized their big mistake.

“Boka!” (“Damn it!”)

“*Die*, you fucking bird!”

Sharanla morphed into a jet-black gust of wind and came slashing at Ukei from every direction. It was another assassin move—this one known as Shadow Surge. It not only unleashed a flurry of powerful slashes in an instant, but also turned the user’s own body into incorporeal shadows, rendering them temporarily immune to physical counterattacks.

And as the cherry on top, it hindered abilities that detected enemy presences, making it hard to tell where the next attack was going to come from.

This was the scary part about dark magic and assassin skills: They were stealthy, letting their users sneak up on their enemies undetected with ease.

Ukei’s lightweight body was blasted down into the bushes.

“Aha ha ha... Good. That’s one dead. Two more birds to go, hmm? Let’s get this over and done with...”

With Ukei defeated, Sharanla started to decide on her next target. She licked her lips as they curved into a confident, leering smile.

But then, all of a sudden, a huge amount of mana began to emanate from the bushes where Ukei had fallen.

Immediately, Sharanla turned around, and saw Ukei—a little injured, but still perfectly fine.

“Co-caw...boka cobo kaw ka-bok bok.” (“I let my guard down because my enemy was weak...and they took advantage of it. I suppose I still have a lot to learn.”)

“Wha—?! I’m sure I hit the damn thing. Why is it still alive?”

“No way... Did the cocco just use Battle Breathing?!” Reinhardt said.

“Seriously? It strengthened its body to protect itself in that split second?!”



“Mmm... Actually, it was Toughness Breathing,” Nobody replied. “It used mana to harden its feathers and protect itself. That’s amazing...”

“They’re insane, aren’t they? It’s about what I’d expect from the cocos Teach raised, though...” Zweit said.

While Sharanla had done an impressive job of capitalizing on Ukei’s carelessness to attack, Ukei wasn’t weak enough to die from just that.

If anything, it seemed like Ukei *appreciated* the attack—for showing them that they’d been lacking in manners by underestimating their opponent.

“Bo-keh. Coco bo-caw.” (“Allow me to apologize for my rudeness. I will take you on with my full strength now.”)

“Wh-What...? I’m getting a bad feeling from this.”

Ukei was serious now.

Their small body was gradually swelling as their white feathers turned the color of burning crimson flames. A long, snakelike tail sprouted from their tail feathers; their legs grew thicker, adopting a form better suited to fighting on the ground; and their claws grew sharper, more vicious. Sharp teeth that looked like they could rend flesh grew inside their beak, and a heroic-looking crest sprouted on top of their head.

Now, this didn’t necessarily mean Ukei was evolving or going through a sudden growth spurt. It was actually a special ability—possessed by Ukei and the other birds from the band of coco subspecies—that allowed them to temporarily change into an evolved form.

Ukei and the others didn’t want to rely on evolution to get stronger, so they perpetually kept their mana under control to prevent it from happening. And as part of that process, they’d gained the ability to change into an evolved form like this at will.

Plenty of monsters out there were able to transform like this. Some of them could even camouflage themselves as humans, so it was a fairly well-known ability...but Ukei and the others were the first *birds* to exhibit it.

Not only could these cocos transform into this advanced form at will, but

they were also able to use some of a cockatrice's abilities while they were still in their cocco form, hence their poison and paralyzing claws.

This transformation ability, by the way, was something the coccos had learned before coming to live with Zelos—and he hadn't seen it, so he wasn't even aware they even had it.

“GRAAAH!” (“Shining cockatrice mode!”)

“H-Hang on! What's happening here?! This is nothing like what you were before!”

Just moments ago, the cocco had been small enough that it could sit snugly on your legs. But now, it had transformed into something huge—more than three meters long. And if you included the tail, it was probably about *six* meters long.

Its huge body suddenly seemed to blur...and then, without warning, it was right there in front of Sharanla. The next moment, a mana-charged wing strike came swinging at her, hard.

“Eep!”

Sharanla managed to dodge by a hair's breadth...but it was a terrifying experience.

The force of the strike created a blast that radiated outward, its frictional heat immediately burning the surrounding trees to a crisp. Sharanla wouldn't be getting away with just a scratch if something like that hit her head-on.

The blast wave slammed against the boundary, creating a thunderous noise and shaking the entire barrier. In the right circumstances, it seemed like it could even be strong enough to *break* the barrier.

“Y-You've got to be kidding me!”

Sharanla wasted no time trying to escape with Shadow Dive...but Ukei wasn't kind enough to just let its enemy get away like that. Once a monster identified a target, their instinct was to keep fighting until it was defeated.

Ukei unleashed a Petrification Breath, and the nearby trees and flowers immediately turned to stone, and then were reduced to rubble. Now, even if

Sharanla was hiding in the shadows, she had nowhere left to run. It was the worst possible scenario for her.

Strictly speaking, this wasn't actually petrification, but rather an attack that used mana to temporarily modify the target at the material level by hardening its molecular bonds. If you got hit by something that stiffened every fiber in your body—temporary or not—and were then smashed into smithereens...you weren't going back to normal. It was a terrifying attack, and you couldn't prevent it unless you had high enough magic resistance. It cost a tremendous amount of mana, though, so it wasn't something that could be used over and over again.

*"Eeeeeep!"*

The attack had chased Sharanla out of hiding. Her black cloak had started to petrify and crumble to pieces, and she hurriedly threw it away, desperate to avoid suffering the same fate herself.

"Damn... I'm glad I trained up my status resistance skill. Didn't think petrification would be that strong..." Reinhardt said.

"Yeah. Me too..." Nobody murmured.

"I'm fine because of my magic tool here, but what even *is* that...?" Zweit said. "It's insane. Those aren't the cocos I know... And, I mean, how it looks, and those abilities—that's a *cockatrice*, right?"

Now that Ukei was serious, they had more power than they could properly handle, and they were swinging it around to their heart's content. At this point, it was clear that Sharanla had made an enemy out of a truly terrifying creature.

No amount of strength could stop even the tiniest moment of carelessness from proving fatal. And now that Ukei had learned that lesson, they were going all out as a show of respect toward the foe who'd taught it to them. Sharanla, for her part, had no choice now but to try and contend with that power as best she could.

"Hey! Help me out here! Are you really just going to stand there and watch a woman get attacked by a monster?!"

"Uh, you may be a woman, but you *were* trying to kill me... And even if it's a

monster, that *is* my bodyguard you're fighting there. So... No way I'm helping you. Besides, you're an assassin..."

"Hey, remind me—what did you do to me earlier? You used that thrall collar to torture me, right? Do I really need to help you?"

"Mmm... A warrior heading to battle must be prepared for death. There is no complaining if you must go from being the slayer to the slain."

None of the spectators wanted to save Sharanla. Of course they didn't.

*"GROAAAAAAH!"*

It seemed like a monster's instincts came to the fore when they transformed like this. Ukei was relentlessly swooping down on Sharanla.

An epic game of tag was unfolding before Zweit's eyes.

Senkei, by the way, was still unconscious, having ascended to heaven. And Nobody must have gotten her hands on Zankei too at some point, because the others suddenly noticed that *two* of the birds were out cold from sensory overload. The girl clearly had a talent.

\*

A motorbike roared through the forest.

Covered in a magic barrier, it simply plowed right through any trees that couldn't be avoided. Zelos had been fully absorbed in mining, until a warning had snapped him out of it and made him head over in a panic on his Harley-Sanders Model 13.

*Gotta hurry... I mean, he'll probably be fine for about half a day as long as he's got the amulet, but you never know what could happen. If I don't hurry, he could — Hm? What's this?*

Suddenly, he spotted something like a wall.

Or...it was *sort of* a wall. It was made of translucent mist, though.

*A boundary, eh? Hmm... Probably from a magic tool. But are there any mages around nowadays who are good enough to make a tool that can cover such a big area? Either it's something from ancient times, or...something made by a*

*fellow reincarnator, perhaps?*

Going by all the information he'd picked up since his own reincarnation, Zelos couldn't imagine mages of modern-day standards capable of creating a magic tool like this.

The only explanation was that it was a magic tool excavated from some ancient ruins—or some *other* factor was involved.

*I could end up fighting someone from my world, eh...? It's not like the possibility never occurred to me, but they'd probably be a pain to fight, wouldn't they? I might even end up having to fight against someone who's got some sort of crazy equipment I sold to them back in the day... Ugh, what a pain.* Going by what he knew about Iris's situation and his own, he figured it was safe to assume that most reincarnators would have carried over the equipment and power levels they'd had in *Swords & Sorceries*—which made them unbelievably stronger than the native residents of this world.

That was also true of their equipment itself, of course—but the even bigger issue was the level gap.

Most reincarnators would have spent time in the world of *Swords & Sorceries* killing monsters to gain experience points, making them increasingly powerful and allowing them to obtain advanced skills over time. To anyone born in this world, who hadn't seen their progression, it probably seemed like cheating.

The other thing bugging Zelos was the mental aspect.

Self-defense was one thing, but he couldn't imagine that any reincarnators born on Earth would be willing to become assassins here. Iris was one example; she was clearly hesitant to kill anyone. She was powerful enough to kill a bunch of bandits or something with ease, but when push had come to shove, she hadn't been able to bring herself to do it, and she'd been captured as a result.

Zelos didn't want to say that was a *bad* thing, but this world wasn't a forgiving place; that kind of naivete could get you killed here. Sooner or later, most reincarnators would have to confront reality.

*Still, I guess there could be some reincarnators who are fine with killing people... At the very least, I can think of one person who'd do it.*

The person coming to mind was the black-clad mage he'd fought with before. It hadn't been a full-on fight—more just the two of them feeling each other out—but at the very least, the man had managed to fight on par with Zelos.

Though...to be precise, Zelos hadn't actually fought at his full strength yet.

He was already monstrously powerful, and he knew it. Somewhere in his heart, there was something that made him avoid fighting all out.

*That guy didn't hesitate to point his sword at another person... And judging by how strong he was, he must have been one of the top players. What a hassle... Still, just thinking about it isn't going to get me anywhere. If there are criminals, I need to catch them or "deal with" them. It's that simple. But if I have to fight someone like that...yeah, it'll be a pain. Ugh, I'd really rather not...*

While he was mentally prepared to fight another reincarnator to some extent, the thought of it actually happening still left him feeling dejected.

After all, he was the one who'd set it all in motion. He hadn't been aware at the time, but Zelos and his group's victory over the Dark God had, in a sense, gotten all the reincarnators caught up in this mess. And some of them probably held a grudge against him for that.

Though that didn't mean he would be willing to just sit back and let them kill him, mind you...

*For now, protecting Zweit's my top priority. Let's destroy this barrier, shall we? Hmm... Can I destroy it?*

Sighing inwardly, Zelos channeled mana to the panel that served as the motorcycle's dashboard.

As he did, the rectangular container attached to the motorbike's sidecar started gradually rising up on a movable frame, and flaps at the end of the container opened up vertically. The sound of components setting into motion could be heard from inside—*ka-chunk, ka-chunk!*

"Mana charge, complete. Magic formula activation, check. Operations normal. Bunker Shooter, online."

Inside the container was a long gun barrel, at the end of which was a

cylindrical, rotating block housing six loading chambers.

A user could load up to six mana tanks to fire a single spike. Essentially, it was a siege weapon created by combining a pile bunker and the cylinder you'd find in a revolver.

"Bunker Shooter, fire."

The spike shot out from the sidecar to the left of the motorbike...and penetrated right through the barrier designed to keep intruders out.

The barrier that made up the boundary was maintained by a magic formula. If an attack from outside managed to pass through even once, the formula making up the boundary would be destroyed, and the barrier would vanish, unable to maintain itself.

However, Zelos had made a major miscalculation.

The container fitted to the sidecar was blown backward by the incredible recoil of the shot, and the Harley-Sanders Model 13—with Zelos still on it—began to rapidly spin on the spot.

"Whoaaaaaa?!"

But that wasn't his only problem: there was also the attack magic that had been engraved into the spike.

It had been, of all things, Explode—a powerful area spell. And when the projectile struck the barrier, the spell activated with enough force to destroy a fort.

While the mana tanks inside the cylindrical block's chambers were small, there was a huge amount of mana compressed and stored inside each one. So when you fired a spell that was powered by the mana of *six* full tanks, it was going to be...

*KA-BOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!!!*

The earth rumbled as a monstrously loud explosion echoed. A cold sweat ran down Zelos's brow.

"Oh... I suppose it *would* be way more powerful in this world, huh...? Damn. Yeah, I should probably seal this one away too. Aha ha ha..."

He laughed through a dry throat.

His Bunker Shooter had always been a powerful weapon, that much was for sure. But when he'd used it in *Swords & Sorceries*, it certainly hadn't been able to just...*annihilate* the whole area of impact. It had generally done about as much as a single wide-area spell. *Here*, though? Its power was just on a whole other order of magnitude. An entire chunk of forest was simply *gone* now, nothing but charred ground and smoke left behind by blazing heat.

*I've gone and destroyed nature again... Let's leave that aside for now, though. Is Zweit going to be okay...?*

Zelos decided to escape from reality by replacing one concern with another. He started his Harley-Sanders Model 13 back up and shot off through the forest again.

In his mind, he told himself: *I need to get rid of all my old weapons. They're just crazy...*

Zelos had a *lot* of those crazy weapons, though. Just thinking about how long he'd need to take them all apart left him sinking into depression as he rode through the forest.

It was only now that he was realizing he, a single man, had an entire armory of magic weapons powerful enough to take on entire countries.



## Chapter 3: The Old Guy Unleashes His Inner Rage

“GRAAAAAAH!”

Now that Ukei was transformed into a cockatrice, their kicks were strong enough to fell heavy trees.

Sharanla had taught the cocco the dangers of letting their guard down. Having learned that lesson, Ukei was no longer holding back, pummeling Sharanla with every ounce of force they could muster.

Sharanla, for her part, felt like she was perpetually at death’s door. But she was still alive for now, thanks to the substitution dolls and sacrificial offerings that she swapped in for her body every time she took a direct hit.

“What a horrible creature... I shouldn’t even have to be doing this, you know! Monster subjugation isn’t my thing!”

Sharanla’s level was comparatively low, so she needed an array of magic tools to strengthen her body and make up for her lack of mana. Most of her physical capabilities came from her items.

As was perhaps obvious at this point, she too was a reincarnator, and she’d obtained most of these items by killing other players in *Swords & Sorceries*. She hadn’t gotten a single one by gathering the right materials and crafting it; they were all the spoils of murder, trickery, or thievery.

But no matter what she’d tried, she’d never managed to win against the absolute top-end players, and any attempts had only resulted in her own death.

The worst of it had been when she’d attacked the Destroyers. When she’d tried, they’d wasted no time turning the tables on her by forcibly equipping her with a cursed item and tossing her into a dragon’s den.

The support items she used as surrogates for her body had prevented her from dying, but the cursed item she’d been equipped with attracted powerful monsters. When she’d tried to run, she’d found her only path out blocked by an attack spell, leaving her trapped.

In Sharanla's eyes, then, the Destroyers were the most horrid villains to exist. Even her fellow gankers had warned her to not go after the Destroyers, but she'd refused to listen to them.

And Ukei's onslaught now was reminding her of that encounter.

"She's really holding out, huh?" Zweit said.

"Uh... It's less that she's holding out, and more that those items she's got are preventing her from dying, right? Honestly, it seems like some kind of special hell... How many of those things does she even have, anyway?"

"The cocco's so strong. I want one..."

The two young men responded to Nobody with a single word: "*Seriously?!*"

The petrification attacks the coccos sometimes used were really more of a poison that just hardened the target's body tissue. The Petrification Breath that Ukei was using now, though, worked by stiffening matter before destroying it. It was terrifying to think about—and Zweit and Reinhardt couldn't even begin to understand why the girl would *want* a monster capable of that sort of thing.

She, of course, just wanted to fluff them some more. But the two young men, who were unaware of that, could only come up with much *scarier* reasons she'd want a cocco of her own.

Maybe they could've figured it out by looking at the other two coccos, which lay unconscious beside the girl as a result of sensory overload from thorough fluffings.

"It's already this crazy with just the *one* of them fighting. What'd even happen if all three of them fought at once?"

"Stop. Don't make me think about it. Just remind me to never get on the bad side of one of these things..." Reinhardt started trembling.

"What level's that woman, anyway? Teach told me Ukei and the others are already above Level 400, but..."

"Level... Wait, Level 400?! No way! They're stronger than that! *She's* probably about Level 200, give or take, and she's just barely managing to stay alive with a whole heap of magic items..."

Most monsters would progress to the next stage of evolution when they reached a certain level. All species were able to evolve at least twice, but your average wild cocos went through several additional evolutions until they eventually reached their final evolution: the cockatrice.

It wasn't like some game in which a monster would immediately turn into something completely different, though. Instead, changes appeared more gradually—the monster might start to grow horns, for example, or slowly become larger.

A monster's habitat would also affect how strong it became and the abilities it obtained. The harsher an environment, the more powerful, evolved monsters it would produce—and it was already known that those harsh environments were home to a range of different coco subspecies. But even the cockatrice wasn't *this* insanely powerful.

Ukei and the others were simply much stronger than normal cocos, even if they were plain old cocos at the end of the day. And that was *before* you considered their ability to temporarily transform into their final evolution.

Sure, there were other monsters out there capable of transformation—werewolves and weretigers, for example. But those monsters transformed strategically, trying to appear weak so they could attract unsuspecting prey. In fact, rather than transformation, it was perhaps more accurate to say that they disguised themselves to look vaguely human. They were able to change their forms, but changing *everything*, right down to their skeletal structure, consumed a lot of both mana and stamina. And it took a long time to complete that disguise.

Moreover, monsters that transformed themselves like that restricted the number of abilities they could use while disguised. They could only use about half of their usual strength, which was a pretty big drawback.

Because of that, the leader—the strongest one in a pack of monsters—would disguise itself and act as bait while the rest of the pack waited to swarm whatever prey had fallen victim to the trap. In short, it wasn't a perfect ability, and you needed to be smart to use it.

With that in mind, creatures like Ukei and the others—who could transform

into an evolved form at will—were clearly abnormal. *Special*.

Normally, a monster's evolution was a one-way street. Any biologist watching this *temporary* evolution would almost certainly recognize Ukei as a whole new species.

Reinhardt couldn't hide his surprise at this cocco and its unusual evolution.

*What the hell is this thing, seriously? I thought this was meant to be the world from Swords & Sorceries, but I don't remember anything like this in the game...*

While Reinhardt was struggling to wrap his head around things, Zweit was analyzing Sharanla.

"She's really sticking it out for a while with just magic tools, huh? Seems like she's getting slower, though."

"Probably because she hasn't actually trained her skills. So as she runs out of items, she'll get weaker. I mean, even I started as just an Apprentice Swordsman, and I put in the effort to hit level cap, y'know? She was probably just a scrub, I bet..."

"It *does* seem like she doesn't even know the meaning of hard work, if that's what you're saying..."

"I get the feeling she wouldn't survive a second if she couldn't leech off other people. In a normal situation, I'd never want anything to do with her. I mean, she's perfectly happy to treat people like tools and throw them away when she's done..."

Zweit didn't quite understand every word Reinhardt had said, but somehow, the two of them were managing to hold a conversation.

And as they talked, Ukei, wreathed by bright-red flame, was performing a dropkick aimed squarely at Sharanla. They were felling more big trees with every attack.

Now that Ukei was no longer underestimating their enemy, they were like a wrathful, rampaging god.

"What are you all standing there and watching for? *Help* me already! Or are you just going to let an adorable lady get pulverized by some vicious monster?!"

Unable to escape Ukei's relentless attacks, Sharanla was becoming more desperate by the second.

The bystanders collectively shot an incredibly nasty look in response to Sharanla calling herself an "adorable lady."

"An adorable lady? Where? I can't see one."

"I can see a fluffy little animal, but...nope, no woman like that."

"Mmm... Calling yourself adorable? You must be vain. Or have low self-esteem."

"You really don't hold back, huh...? You're not wrong, though."

"Are you actually the really sharp-tongued type? But that's exactly what's so fascinating about you! By the way, little Nobody, we've known each other for a while now, right? How about you tell me your real name so we can be friends~?"

"I don't want to."

This was a very casual discussion to be having in the background as Sharanla continued to barely dodge a barrage of vicious attacks.

"Remember this, all of you! I swear, I'll tear you all limb from limb— *GYAGH!*"

"See? This is how she really is. So much for an 'adorable lady.' She's as selfish as they come..."

"Yeah. Happy to just throw anyone else to the wolves as long as *she's* safe, I bet. Why do you reckon she spends her time seducing men and convincing them to give her money? I never wanna have to deal with a woman like that. Where are the sexy elves of my dreams...?"

"What's so bad about that?! Fine; I manipulate other people and then throw them away when I'm done with them. But *everyone* does that! That's just how people are— *Eeep!*"

She'd sunk as low as a person could sink. She didn't get to finish her response, though—just before she did, she got sent into the air by a clean hit from Ukei's uppercut, then promptly smacked back down to earth by a kick.

In short, though, she was a useless parasite, trampling all over people's goodwill until she became so much of a nuisance that her victims snapped. And when they did, she'd get out of dodge without hesitation or an iota of guilt. She was the sort of person with whom nobody ever wanted to get involved.

And then, as the talking and fighting continued...

*KA-BOOOOOOOOOOOM!*

The sound of a tremendous explosion echoed through the forest. Everyone turned to see what it was.

The barrier surrounding the area had been shattered, leaving nothing but fragments that were quickly fading away. Shortly after the sound came a shock wave that kicked up a mighty cloud of dirt.

Zweit and the others were left pressed against the ground, unable to do anything but wait for the shock wave to pass.

"Wh-What was that?! What happened?!"

"Ahh... Yeah, there's only one person who'd do something like this. I bet it's Teach..."

"Wait—your *teacher*?! That's gotta have been something even stronger than Explode, right?!"

"That could've hit us too if we weren't lucky... C'mon, Teach, think about this kind of thing a little more, would ya?"

"So squishy... So fluffy... ≡"

Zweit immediately grasped the situation; meanwhile, Reinhardt was cowering against the ground in fear as he waited for the shock wave to pass. Nobody, for her part, was in bliss, snuggled up against two coccos at once—Senkei and Zankei, specifically—both still out of commission.

When the shock wave had fully passed, everyone looked up to stare at the enormous, smoking crater.

The shock left the three of them gobsmacked and agape.

"What happened to Ukei and that woman?" Zweit asked.

“The big chicken thing’s fine, if that’s what you mean. Didn’t even flinch at that huge explosion... *Damn*, that thing’s crazy.”

“And the old lady is... Oh.”

Nobody pointed to the sky—and as everyone looked, they saw Sharanla, falling to the ground in a tailspin. Just like that, she hit the ground without resistance...at which point, the area became filled with wood splinters.

It looked like she’d been saved by a substitution doll.

Not long after, a jet-black motorbike emerged from the clouds of dust and drifted to a stop. Except... As it skidded across the ground, it plowed right into Sharanla, sending her flying through the air again just moments after she’d landed.

It was such a heartless move, and such perfect aim, that it looked like it *had* to have been calculated. Zweit and Reinhardt were left stunned again.

Zelos breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, looks like I made it in time, eh? Are you okay, Zweit?”

The two young men again responded as one: “Uh, before that... What’d you just do?”

Hitting Sharanla like that *must* have been an intentional move—and one with a lot of bloodlust behind it. And yet here was its rider, calling out to Zweit in such a casual, cheery tone of voice. Almost as if nothing had happened at all...

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Once the boundary was destroyed, Zelos zipped through the forest on his Harley-Sanders Model 13—though he had to take a detour to avoid the crater left by the explosion.

He was worried. What if he was late coming to the rescue, all because he’d foolishly gotten distracted, and the assassination attempt had somehow succeeded? Those thoughts weighing on his mind, he rode his bike with desperate energy.

That was when he saw—no, *recognized*—a certain person.

It was a woman. A woman whose slightly droopy eyes gave her a gentle look

at first glance, but whose garish clothes made her look like a lady of the night. A woman adorned from head to toe in the opulent, tacky jewelry of the nouveau riche. It triggered a memory in his mind.

A memory from his younger days, when he'd been living in a company dorm...

\*

"What's with that jewel? And that ring? You're unemployed. I can't imagine you have the money to buy any of that."

"Does it matter? Ugh, fine. If you really have to know, they're presents from a lover. Mr. Masuda, from the third floor."

"Wait— The managing director?! So you're seducing some old guy with a wife and kids now?!"

"Hmm? He gave me presents out of the kindness of his heart. What's so bad about that? I just went out for a meal with him, and he was nice enough to buy these for me."

"Stop screwing me over! Are you *trying* to get me fired?! If this blows up, I'll get kicked out of my company for it—you know that, don't you? Just think of how it'd look!"

"Hand over some money to make up for it, then. Five million yen should do for now."

"Get a job, you damn parasite!"

\*

Zelos's flashback only took a moment.

As soon as he saw the face of the woman running through the cloud of dust—running like she was trying to escape from something—a strong emotion welled up inside him. Then all of a sudden, it surged to the surface, erupting like magma from a volcano, obliterating all other thoughts from his mind.

That emotion was...hatred. Loathing. Bloodlust. It had all been bottled up in a little corner of his mind until now, but the moment he saw the woman's face, it came welling back up at full force. With not a single moment of hesitation—no worry of *what if I've got the wrong person?*—he twisted the throttle as hard as



he could, accelerating his Harley-Sanders Model 13.

He heard a bit of a strange sound—*KA-PING!*—but he paid it no heed. He confirmed where the woman had fallen, aimed at her with his motorbike like he was trying to finish her off, and ultimately slammed into her with a high-speed drift. It was a powerful drift too, combining the full force of Zelos's mana and his custom motorbike. And as he made impact, Zelos felt somehow...refreshed.

The air was filled with splinters from a broken substitution doll.

Zelos breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, looks like I made it in time, eh? Are you okay, Zweit?"

"Uh, before that... What'd you just do?"

"Did I do something strange? All I've done, I'm sure, is knock a piece of *garbage* out of the way... There a problem?"

The two young men hesitated before responding. Then... "No. No problem."

Zelos had a smile on his face, but it only made him scarier.

He'd just run over someone with his motorbike—with a drift, to boot—and topped it off by calling her nothing but "a piece of garbage." Sure, Sharanla was a horrible person every way you looked at it, but it still left the others wondering—*Did he really need to go that far?*

And yet Zelos had *indeed* gone that far, without an ounce of hesitation, and he'd been calm and composed as he did it. You couldn't blame anyone for calling his personality into question.

"Bwahk..." ("My apologies, Leader. I failed to finish her off...")

"Ukei?!" Zelos said. "Hold on. Did you...evolve?! Well, you sure look different now, don't you? What *happened* to you?"

"Grahk! Grah!" ("It's a special ability we have. To be frank, I would rather avoid using this form if possible, but...")

"A special ability? *Very* interesting! And I can't say I was expecting it. Really."

"Hold on a second! How are you having a *conversation* with that thing?! It doesn't make sense!"

“I kind of get the general idea of what they’re saying, but I dunno if I could exactly call it a *conversation*... Maybe it’s because he’s their owner?” Zweit wondered.

Being able to hold a proper conversation with Ukei—a ferocious, mysterious life-form—was already plenty enough to make Zelos seem like he was not just abnormal, but entirely beyond the realm of common sense.

Zweit didn’t bother saying any of that, though. Maybe it was because all this just felt like par for the course when it came to Zelos.

“Oh?”

“Mm?”

Zelos’s gaze fell onto a nearby girl. When he saw her equipment, he realized he knew her.

He dredged up her name from the back of his mind, and while he worried for a moment that he might actually have the wrong person, he decided the quickest way to find out was just to ask.

“Are you...Anzu, by any chance? From the Six Shadows party?”

“Mm. It’s been a while, Destroyer. How’s the genocide been going?”

“You know, I’ve spent all my time maintaining my farm lately. I haven’t really done any genocide for a little whi— Oh. Actually, there *was* that time in the abandoned mine, wasn’t there...?”

“Wait— ‘*Destroyer*’?! Don’t tell me... He’s the Black Destroyer?!” Reinhardt said.

“Hmm?” Zelos turned his head. “And you would be...”

The moment Zelos looked at Reinhardt, his Appraisal skill activated all by itself, and the young man’s name appeared in his field of vision. As soon as Zelos saw it, he couldn’t help but let out a burst of laughter.

It wasn’t an *interesting* name, per se, just an abjectly terrible one.

“H-Hold on... Your name is ‘Eroginis Multielf Ravisha’...?” *Okay, this guy’s definitely a reincarnator. Obviously gave his character a joke name...*

*“DON’T CALL ME THAT!”*

By the looks of it, Reinhardt—or ‘Eroginis,’ apparently—had given his character a joke name, and it had become inconvenient for him when he’d reincarnated. It was so embarrassing that he’d taken to calling himself Reinhardt instead. And so off he’d gone on a mission to make himself a slave harem in this new world, only to promptly get arrested by guards for sexual harassment.

He’d fiercely resisted his arrest too, adding an extra charge against his name. That was how he’d ended up as the lowest of criminal slaves.

He’d fallen to the very bottom of society for an incredibly stupid reason, in other words. And now, having this old name thrown in his face left him with tears in his eyes, bitterly regretting his past actions. It was well and truly his own fault, though—unlike in the case of a certain noble boy.

“You never know what’s going to happen in life, that’s the thing... Sometimes, you can do something as a joke and end up regretting it for life.”

“Eromura’s a stupidhead.”

“Don’t turn it into a nickname! *WAAAH!*”

Eromura was really bawling his eyes out. But it was entirely his own fault, and he knew it, so he couldn’t even try to pin the blame on anyone else.

As a side note, his *real* name was Itsuki Enomura. Anzu’s nickname wasn’t too far off the mark.

“What a crappy name... I’m amazed his parents agreed to something like that. So you weren’t actually called Reinhardt, huh...?”

“*WAAAAAAH!* Reinhardt’s what I *want* to be called, okay?! Just leave me alone already!”

“So it sounds like you really like elves, eh? Thick, sexy elves with nice bodies? Can’t say it’s what *I’m* into, but...”

“I *love* them...” Reinhardt responded through tears. “I... I love them so much! My soul, my *essence* as a man...” Another sob. “I-It’s crying out for elves! Super sexy, super thick elves! They’re the meaning of life! I want to shout it out to the

world! What's so bad about a guy having dreams?!"

"Oh. So it *is* a fitting name, then... Well, live your best life. I hope you meet an elf someday, comrade..."

"WAAAAAAH! Don't look at me with pity in your eyes! Argh, why was old me so stupid?!"

Zweit didn't entirely understand what was happening, but he definitely sympathized with Eromura. His pity only made the young man feel even more miserable, though.

Eromura had named his character himself back when he made it, so ultimately it was all his fault.

And because of that, Zweit's sympathy—the assumption that he was just a victim in all this—just hit him for more emotional damage.

It was all well and good to give a character a joke name for the fun of it...and, of course, a player would never expect to be reincarnated in another world with that same name. On the day he'd reincarnated and learned he would have to live with that name from now on, he bawled his eyes out.

He asked the gods for a do-over, but nothing happened. And as a result, he now harbored a real grudge toward the gods—the same four goddesses that Zelos hated. Not that Zelos had any intention of treating Eromura as a kindred spirit.

This wasn't the same situation that Zelos had dealt with a few days ago with a certain noble boy.

"*God*, that hurt... I would've been dead if I didn't have that substitution doll. Hey! You! You hit me with that thing, so I expect you to pay me some damages, okay?!"

"Oh. She's back up."

"Say, Zweit... She *is* an enemy, yes? If she is, I don't need to have any mercy on her, but..."

"Yeah, she's an enemy. Well, the other two here were on her side too, but they've betrayed her now."

“I see... *Calamity Gale*.”

“*Aaahhh!*”

Out of nowhere, Sharanla was hit by Zelos’s area-of-effect air spell and thrown high up into the sky by a whirlwind—which also had a corrosion effect tacked onto it to boot. Thousands of tiny cuts pierced her skin as the wind assailed her from every direction; there was no avoiding this one. The shattered remains of substitution dolls and sacrificial offerings flew through the air.

“What’s her name, by the way? I figure the least I could do for her is mark it down on her gravestone.”

“Mmm... Her name’s Sharanla. She’s really selfish...”

“If she’s an enemy, then I’m fine to kill her, right? You know, somehow I feel like killing her would feel incredibly refreshing. I really should do it, shouldn’t I? Aha ha ha...”

Zweit and Eromura exchanged glances. “Why is he...*smiling* so much? It’s kinda terrifying...”

Zweit didn’t think Zelos was the kind of man to indiscriminately fire off magic like this. Eromura, for his part, knew of the Destroyers’ merciless reputation.

Zweit somehow sensed that there was some *history* between Zelos and Sharanla, while Eromura passed it off as another case of the Destroyers being unforgiving against gankers. They aligned on one thought, though: *Okay, yeah, she’s gonna die...*

They’d both reached the same conclusion, even if they’d had different ways of getting there. Perhaps their minds worked in similar ways. Even if one was brilliant, and the other a moron...

“Hey! What was that for?! What a horrible thing to do to someone you just met! What would you have done if I’d died?!”

“So you’re still alive, eh? *Tch*. Well, not for long. This is a really good world, you know... Aha ha ha.”

“Didn’t your parents teach you to be kind to women?! Why would you just *attack* me out of the blue?!”

“Unfortunately for you, I’m happy to kill scumbags regardless of gender. Equality’s nice like that, isn’t it?”

“Don’t think you’ll get away with— Wait. No way... *Satoshi?!'*”



“So it *is* my sister... It’s been three years. Anyway, you’re an eyesore, so could you hurry up and die for me? Make me happy for once~ ♪”

“They’re brother and sister?!”

Zelos was speaking with a pleasant tone, but he had an incredibly evil-looking smile on his face. These two siblings should never have met again, that much was clear.

“Y-You’re my little brother! You should be helping me! It’s your duty!”

“No, I don’t think so. If anything, wouldn’t you say I have a duty to deliver last rites to a family member who’s fallen to the dark side? Luckily for us, we won’t have to worry about getting rid of your corpse out here. You’ll just be monster food.”

“L-Last rites? And what do you mean by getting rid of my corpse?! Do you have no misgivings about killing people?!”

The bystanders all had the same reaction, from the bottom of their hearts: *Like you’re one to talk...* As for Zelos, meanwhile:

“There used to be all of these annoying little obstacles—laws, for one—and then there was always the question of what to do with your corpse. So I gave up on my plans. But I’ve gotten lucky now, haven’t I? Life comes cheap here; it’s a world where the strong prey on the weak. I’m going to turn you into dust. Destroy every last piece of you, until I’m completely satisfied. Oh—you don’t need to thank me, okay? Just consider this a final act of mercy between siblings... Aha ha ha ha...”

He wasn’t hesitating in the slightest to kill his sister. If anything, he was ready and raring to dispose of her for good.

And this world was an incredibly convenient place to make that happen.

“So, my dearest sister... How would you like to be cooked? Medium? Well-done? Or burned at the stake—that *is* how witches are usually prepared, no? Don’t worry, I’ll put every last ounce of my hatred into this dish~ ♪”

“What’d she even *do* to get Teach this mad...?”

“Not sure... But I feel like we can guess based on the other stuff she’s done,



right? She was probably leeching off him and taking his money. I can't imagine her ever working a proper job..."

"You lot! Stop talking and help me! Or are you just going to watch as an adorable lady gets murdered by some heartless brute? How about this—if you save me, I'll show you a good time! I'll keep it a secret from Darling!"

Zweit and Eromura responded together: "What? No, this is a family affair, right? Outsiders like us shouldn't get involved. Besides, I'm not really interested in whores..."

"Don't call me a whore, you fucking brats!"

It seemed like neither Zweit nor Eromura intended to step in.

Both of them were more scared of Zelos than they were of Sharanla. If they stayed out of this, they'd be safe—and besides, neither of them felt any desire to save Sharanla in the first place. Plus, as they'd said, this was a fight between siblings, and neither boy was inclined to butt in to another family's matters.

Zelos's Appraisal once again activated itself, revealing some information about his sister. Her job was Swindler. And her name, he noticed, was a good fit for her personality.

"Hmm... 'Sharanla,' eh? Like in that one old magical girl anime? What was the line again—'Even without makeup, I'll have you head over heels for me'? Is that what you're trying to get across? Bit old to be a 'magical girl' nowadays, aren't you? Kind of making me cringe here... Anyway, you're just as embarrassing as always, so I think I *will* get going with burning you to a crisp now, okay?"

"*That's* where 'Sharanla' came from?! And...hang on, she's your big sister, right, old guy? How old is she, actually?" Eromura asked.

"Forty-six, as of this year. That said, she certainly looks a lot younger now..." Zelos turned to his sister. "Did you use a youth restoration potion? You used to have all those wrinkles and pimples you hid with thick makeup, but I don't see them anymore."

"Hey, Nobo—I mean, Anzu! Looks like you were right—she *is* an old hag! Nice job guessing that despite how she looks. You've got some amazing perception, huh?"

“Heh *heh*~ ♪”

Nobody—or rather, Anzu, as she was apparently called—looked incredibly proud of herself.

“Who’s an ‘old hag’?! Listen up, you rude little brats—women don’t age!”

“Oh, come on—the only people who say that in the first place are all old ladies. Anyway, we’re getting sidetracked... Let’s get back to your *judgment*, shall we? Now, how about you admit to all of your sins?”

“No! I just got to be young again; I’m going to live a life of luxury! Besides, I don’t have any ‘sins’ to admit to! It’s everyone else who’s at fault—for being stupid enough to be deceived and then blaming it on me!”

“You really haven’t changed, have you? Still, you certainly *do* look younger now... I think you’ll be a decrepit old granny about five years from now, but you’re the one who made that choice, I suppose. You might be dead in about ten years. As for your funeral... Hmm. Should we feed your body to wild animals, perhaps?”

“Why are you so bent on turning me into animal feed? And... Hey! What do you mean?! What makes you say I’m going to turn into an old granny?! Just look at how young and spunky I am now!”

Zweit and Eromura looked at her, each with the same cold eyes and the same thought going through their minds: *Who even says “spunky” nowadays? Yeah, she’s definitely old...*

Leaving that aside, though: Sure, a youth restoration potion had the effect of making the user look young again. But it had a significant side effect.

The cells in a living creature’s body can only divide so many times over the course of its life. A youth restoration potion worked by forcibly stimulating those cells to make your body look young again, but at the same time, it placed a massive burden on your body. And in just a few years’ time, your body tissue would weaken from the burden.

As a result, you’d rapidly age—by twice as many years as you’d gone back. Sharanla looked like she was in her twenties right now, but she was actually forty-six. That meant she’d gone back by about twenty years...so the side effect

of the youth restoration potion would cause her to age about forty years, at least. That would be a very sudden forty years' worth of aging—and that was on top of her *original* age.

For context, youth restoration potions weren't openly available for sale, so there weren't many going around. That was mostly because it was difficult to procure the ingredients you needed to make them. One of them was an especially rare ingredient known as a dragon gem.

That wasn't the only thing you needed, mind you, but the point was, it was incredibly hard to get all the ingredients.

"Ha ha! You'll suddenly be an old lady in her eighties~ ♪ But it was *your* choice, after all. Nothing to do with me. Perfect! I love it! Serves you right~ ♪"

"So greedy that she shortened her life," Anzu said. "You reap what you sow."

"No saving her, huh? Hoist by her own petard because she insisted on taking the easy route..." Zweit mused. "Yeah, this is why you should always do things the proper way."

"I'd better be careful too. Still, is there some potion that can *safely* make you younger again?" Eromura wondered.

"A temporal rewind potion would be safe, I suppose," Zelos said. "But—well, it wouldn't do anything for you if you'd already had a youth restoration potion. If you did use *both* of them, you'd just die..."

Sharanla's face was growing paler by the second as she contended with the realization that she'd made a terrible, terrible mistake, and the fear of death was creeping into her.

Zelos, on the other hand, seemed to be loving every moment. His face was twisted into an evil grin. Having learned that this nuisance would soon be gone, he was ecstatic from the bottom of his heart.

"D-Do something about it! You're my brother, aren't you? Are you really okay with your sister just dying?! Don't you feel sorry for me?!"

"Not in the slightest! Besides, you were already done for the moment you took the youth restoration potion. Even if you took a temporal rewind potion

now, you'd just die, guaranteed. There's nothing I *can* do for you. Not that I would even if I could."

"You're lying! I'm sure you know some way of saving me! You know it, and you're just not telling me!"

"Really, I don't. I specialize in making magic tools and modifying spells. Potions are out of my wheelhouse. I mean, I can make *some*, but...that's about it, you know? Really, what *is* this stupid sister of mine going on about? Accusing me of things without a lick of proof..."

Zelos was lying through his teeth. He was actually quite good at making potions; he didn't *just* specialize in making weapons and magic tools. But one thing *was* true: he didn't know any way of nullifying the effects of a youth restoration potion.

"Why do you know so much about youth restoration potions, then? It's strange, isn't it?!"

"Because one of my old party members made some. I remember Kanon saying, 'Sheesh—can't use that! Sure, it makes you young again, but the side effects are...ew. Nope. Just nope! Okay, that's going into the reject bin. Tee-hee~ ≡.' Later, I did help her make some temporal rewind potions based on the youth restoration potions, but I don't know whether she did any research into reversing their effects. Though I feel like I *did* hear something about her selling off all her youth restoration potions to get rid of them."

Another player had indeed bought those potions in bulk—and Sharanla had then killed that player, and stolen the potions. She'd spent all these years stealing from other people, and she was finally getting her retribution...from one of the very things she'd stolen. If you kept doing bad things, it'd come back around to you eventually.

"I don't care—just tell me how to fix it already! Are you *trying* to kill me here?!"

"Are you *still* going on about that? I've told you plenty of times now. I don't know any way of undoing the effects, and even if I *did* know, I'm under no obligation to tell you. And besides—it shouldn't matter. I'm about to end your life now anyway, remember?"

“Is that really how you talk to a family member?! Shouldn’t you be doing everything in your power to help your lovely sister?!”

“‘Lovely sister?’ You mean ‘rotten whore.’ Anyway, have you finished saying your prayers? Don’t worry, I’ll deal with you properly. I won’t even leave your bones behind. Otherwise, I can see you finding some way to revive yourself even if I kill you.”

Having abandoned all notions of compassion and familial duty, Zelos was determined to kill his sister, and wasted no further time manifesting a magic formula from his subconscious. Fireballs appeared all around him. He was completely battle ready.

*“Flame Phalanx.”*

“H-Hey... Surely you’re not actually going to—”

But before Sharanla could finish her sentence, Zelos unleashed a torrent of fireballs at her. Flame Phalanx was a more advanced version of the Flare Lance spell. It fired off more than twice as many projectiles, allowing it to carpet bomb an area.

It was a completely merciless attack, intended to incinerate even her bones—just as Zelos had promised. And it was relentless too, every fireball packed full of Zelos’s hatred for his sister. Partway through the attack, though, he realized: *At this rate, I’m going to burn the whole forest down.* So he changed to a water spell—Frost Phalanx—to extinguish the fire and continue the assault on his sister.

The forest around them, which had just moments ago been ablaze, suddenly transformed into a world of ice.

Zelos still had some presence of mind left, for what it was worth.

*“Tch!”*

Sensing approaching bloodlust, Zelos casually took out his magic staff and got into a fighting stance. Then light flashed as a blade came slashing toward him. It was an attack from Sharanla—though Zelos had no trouble deflecting it.

He counterattacked by stabbing at her with a blade fitted to the end of his

staff. As you might have expected, he didn't feel the impact for long before it disappeared. Without missing a beat, Zelos cast a Divine Silver Barricade on his staff to form a massive blade of magic at the end, which he then swung to follow up his previous attack.

The invisible blade of magic lopped down trees in an arc as it flew toward Sharanla. He felt a moment of resistance as she was cut cleanly in half...and then, again, a sacrificial offering appeared in her place to take the damage, leaving her unscathed.

"You... You taught that spell to that boy over there, didn't you?! So it's *your* fault I'm not able to use that disposable pawn of mine anymore! How many times do you have to get in my way before you're satisfied?!"

"I'm glad to hear it. I'm here on this trip as his bodyguard, after all. It just means this was a fight to the death, right from the beginning. Either way, you don't have long to live now, so you won't mind if I hurry things up a little more and kill you here and now, hmm?"

"You really don't have any respect for your sister, do you?!"

"How many times are you going to say the same thing? Ask yourself: Do you really *think* I have any respect for you? Because I don't, not in the slightest—not even a tiny little speck in the corner of my heart. My heart and actions are utterly unclouded!"

Eromura, for his part, was left with confirmation: *So she really did see me as disposable...*

Zelos and Sharanla continued to hurl insults and slashes at each other in a particularly petty battle to the death.

Each clash of steel against steel sent sparks flying; it was the sort of fight during which the slightest error in judgment could prove fatal. It was clear, though, that the upper hand belonged to Zelos, who was constantly on the attack.

"How many more defensive items do you have on you? Can't you run out and just die already?"

"As if I'd tell you that! How about *you* just give up?!"

“Well, I suppose I’ll just have to keep attacking until you’re dead... You’ll run out sooner or later, and I’m not interested in letting you off with an easy death. I need to really make you suffer, or I won’t be satisfied.”

“Just how much of a grudge do you have against me?! What a petty man! You’ll never be popular with women if you’re like that!”

“I wouldn’t want to be popular with whores anyway. Especially ones like you. Anyway, that’s how it is, so...just get this over with and let me kill you!”

Each and every one of Zelos’s strikes was powerful enough to be an instakill. The sheer force with which he was coming at Sharanla was quickly depleting her reserves of defensive items. More and more were falling to the ground, destroyed, with each passing moment, and she’d be out of them soon.

There was, of course, a massive gap between the siblings’ levels. Regardless of how advantageous Sharanla’s items were, magic tools would easily hit their limits if they came under enough strain. Just look at how easily her defensive barrier had been destroyed.

She had magic tools to strengthen her physical capabilities, but she’d already pushed them beyond their limits. With every last drop of mana wrung out of them, their effects began to wear off as they became nothing but powerless, cumbersome pieces of jewelry.

“Voltaic Shine.”

It was still only midday, yet the whole area was suddenly lit up by a dazzlingly bright light. A huge ball of plasma, bright enough to force your eyes closed, materialized in the sky and started to descend toward Sharanla.

*That’s not good. Fine, then. I’ll have to use that.*

Sharanla grabbed onto a necklace that she’d recently obtained.

“Die to your own damned magic!”

She tore off the necklace—her final trump card—from around her neck and held it up to the sky.

As it took effect, a mirror shield formed in midair and took the hit from Zelos’s Voltaic Shine. Then the shield reflected it—the ball of plasma was flying down

toward *his* head now.

“A Spirit King’s Necklace? So that’s the last trick up her sleeve, eh...?”

Before he could finish speaking, Zelos was enveloped by the plasma ball and resulting explosion.

The Spirit King’s Necklace didn’t emerge unscathed either; the two large, inlaid jewels cracked. It was completely useless as a magic tool now.

Sharanla was fine with that, though. She’d just eliminated the biggest nuisance in her life. She could come back from this.

“Ha-*hah*! However strong you are, you’re not immune to your own attack, are you?!”

“Teach?! Y-You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

“Now... You brats are next. You’ve made a real fool of me, and I intend to fully pay you back for it...”

“Her level’s not that high,” Eromura said. “She must’ve used up a lot of her items in that fight. Even we should be able to win against her now—I’m sure of it, comrade!”

“Eat dirt, bra— Huh?! ”

The moment Sharanla sprang into action to kill Zweit and the others, she was stopped dead in her tracks, a blade suddenly thrust clean through her chest. Behind her stood a mage in a jet-black robe, casually holding on to the bladed staff that had impaled her.

“Wha—? You’re kidding me...”

“Did you really think I’d use my full strength against an enemy as weak as *you*? Besides, I’d hardly be able to settle my grudge against you if I finished you off with a single attack, now would I? I was really holding back with that spell just now, I’ll have you know. Oh, and by the way—you’re not the only one who can use Shadow Dive. Don’t underestimate a Destroyer, okay?”

“Th-That was you *holding back*? B-Besides... Did you say ‘Destroyer’? And what sort of ungrateful wretch would try to kill his own siste—”



“I’m sure I’ve told you this before: Although we may be related by blood, I consider us complete strangers. Did you really not expect me to kill you the moment you waltzed in here? Well, you probably *won’t* die, I suppose... You’re using a manadoll, aren’t you?”

“Hmph... These are expensive, I’ll have you know. Pay me back for it! It was a lot of work getting one of these!”

“I don’t think I will. You just stole it from someone else, I bet. Well, you’re not going to be so lucky next time. If I see you again, I’m going to *delete* you, I promise. It’s set in stone... Don’t expect me to have any mercy.”

Zelos swung his staff, and Sharanla was cleaved in twain. But a moment later, both halves of her body transformed into a broken wooden mannequin: a manadoll. It was a magic tool into which you could transfer your consciousness, skills, and essence. The moment you used it, your real body was effectively cryopreserved.

It was essentially an effigy in the form of a wooden marionette. Any damage the doll took was inflicted equally to your real body, but if the doll was destroyed by an attack, your spirit would be forcibly returned to your real body.

The fact that it was a magic tool meant that it had its limitations—and this particular tool cost a hefty sum to boot. It’d probably be near impossible to come by another one. That was why Sharanla had been protecting it, reinforcing it, with so many other magic tools.

With this item, even if one of her assassination targets managed to turn the tables on her, she wouldn’t die as long as her real body was safe somewhere else. And her substitution dolls and sacrificial offerings were able to reduce the damage to her real body, in turn preventing the manadoll from breaking.

What was more, it could be used again and again, just about making her functionally immortal.

You could use it to forge the perfect alibi too, so there was really no better tool in an assassin’s arsenal. It only worked for three days at a time, though. Still, after that it could replenish its mana over time; it really was an incredible piece of work.

“So she got away. Well, I suppose she was never here in the first place, technically... Hmm?”

Zelos picked up an extravagant-looking necklace from beside the manadoll, and noticed the two large jewels embedded within.

They were just what Zelos had been wanting—and they weren’t easy to come by.

The necklace had reflected Zelos’s magic, but the spell had been so powerful that the item’s core—these two spirit crystals—had cracked. The necklace would never be useful as a magic tool again.

As crafting materials, though? These were more than enough.

“Spirit crystals... And they’re natural ones too. This should let me create a homuncu— Huh?!”

All of a sudden, a red jewel appeared in front of his eyes. It glowed, resonating with the spirit crystals, almost as if it were breathing...or as if it were trying to *tell* him something. In fact, Zelos remembered seeing this jewel before.

*This is the Dark God Soul... Oh, yes, that’s right. This thing is a mystery, isn’t it? It wasn’t one of the items that dropped when we defeated the Dark God in Swords & Sorceries. But when did I obtain it, then? I don’t remember ever picking it up, so...does that mean it was just suddenly put into my inventory at some point? Who would’ve done that? Was it maybe the four go— No. No, I can’t imagine it being them...*

Just going by its name, Zelos had to assume that the Dark God Soul was something like the core, or the spirit, of the Dark God.

He remembered it reacting to a Dark God Stone once before, and this time, it was doing the same thing with a spirit crystal. In other words, the Dark God Soul was seemingly telling Zelos that he could affix it within the body of a homunculus. But that wasn’t what most caught his mind.

What *really* worried him was *this* thought: *Who gave me this item in the first place?*

Supposing that the beings known as the Four Gods of this world were the

same who'd reincarnated him and the other people from Earth, it wouldn't make any sense for them to have given one of those reincarnators the soul of their greatest enemy.

So it was probably reasonable to assume that someone *other* than the Four Gods—someone with a will of their own, and a great deal of power—had intervened in the matter.

*From what I can remember, the message I got from that god called Flaress said something like, "It's the gods from your world that had to deal with that." So if I'm going to believe what she told me, it'd be the gods from Earth that reincarnated us, because that was more convenient or something. But then, in that case...why reincarnate us in a whole other world, not just back on Earth? I feel like there has to be something more to this.*

If it was true that Zelos and the other reincarnators had been reincarnated by the gods of Earth rather than the Four Gods of this world, the gods of Earth must have been rather powerful—powerful enough to not only reincarnate however many people, but also send them to another world in the process.

And it was only natural, then, to wonder: If the gods *were* powerful enough to bring the dead back to life, as well as make them capable of all the same things as their *Swords & Sorceries* characters, then why not just revive everyone back on Earth?

Still, Zelos knew that just standing here thinking in the middle of the forest wouldn't help him reach any answers. He had no choice but to put the matter aside for now.

*Anyway—this Dark God Soul. Why give it to me...?*

What was important for now was the Dark God Soul.

The Dark God was the natural enemy of this world's Four Gods, so the very fact that Zelos had this item at all backed up the hypothesis that the Four Gods hadn't been the ones to reincarnate him.

Further, the Dark God Soul had reacted to the spirit crystals needed to make a homunculus. And that, Zelos thought, hinted at some sort of plan by Earth's gods.

Either they were simply trying to harass the Four Gods of *this* world, or they had some sort of scheme to revive the Dark God. At least, that was the message that Zelos was getting.

Zelos assumed the latter was more likely, but that was only speculation. And it wasn't like he had any means of communicating with Earth's gods in the first place, so it would remain nothing more than a hypothesis. It was far from conclusive evidence.

When it came down to it, he still wasn't able to make a proper decision right now, regardless of how many theories he piled on top of each other.

He just had to make the best decision he could with what little information he had. It was a frustrating situation.

Either way, he could sense that *some* kind of mysterious machination had started to move.

*Hmm... I don't know who or what they may be, but does all this mean they want me to revive the Dark God? Aha ha ha... Well, let's give it a try, eh? I've got a few things I'd quite like to ask the Dark God, after all. And I can always get rid of it if things start looking too dicey.*

Zelos's instinct as a top player of *Swords & Sorceries* was telling him that this Dark God Soul had some kind of important meaning to it.

Although, a different perspective might say he had simply started a crazy experiment on a whim.

"Well, then—let's head back to camp, shall we? I'd say we're all safe now."

At the drop of a hat, Zelos returned to reality. It was like all the things that had been rushing through his mind just moments ago had disappeared into thin air.

"Sure, I guess. But, uh...Teach? What do we do about all...*this*?"

Sharanla was gone, but the battle with her had left behind a tremendous disaster zone of a forest.

Oh—and two former assassins who'd changed sides.

Zweit had survived the attack, but it had left them with quite the mess to

clean up.

## Chapter 4: The Old Guy Gives Things Some Thought

Hydra had a number of different bases, most of them deep underground.

When cities in this world wanted to build a new district, they often did so by building completely over an old district. But those buried districts then became the perfect places for criminals to hide.

Specifically, criminal groups used slaves they'd acquired through illegal means to dig tunnels into the buried districts, opening them up so they could then be used as bases. They hid the entrances they made, of course, and over time they dug so many of these underground tunnels that they established a network. Eventually, there got to be so many of these underground bases that they merged together to form entire underground *cities*.

The criminal groups that had started this enterprise were on the smaller side, so they'd worked together to expand their network of tunnels. Over the years, their cooperation led to consolidation, and they ultimately formed the massive criminal organization known as Hydra.

That very same Hydra, though, would end up receiving a devastating blow at the hands of a single man.

A single man acting for the sake of a single girl.

For generations, everyone in the girl's family had inherited the bloodline magic known as Precognition. It let its users predict the future—and Hydra tried to get its hands on it through brute force.

But the family resisted. It banded together to protect the girl, who was still very young at the time.

Records said it was a gruesome battle. Ultimately, every last member of the family was killed apart from the girl herself, whose whereabouts were unknown.

But Hydra didn't give up. With Precognition, their success would be as good as guaranteed. They went crazy searching for the girl—thoroughly, stubbornly,

relentlessly. While they eventually *did* discover her location, the Solistia ducal house stood squarely in their way.

The girl was working as a maid at the ducal house. In fact, she was the personal maid of the then-heir of dukedom: Delthasis.

Delthasis was a student at the time, but he was already so impressive that his name was known both aboveground and below. He was traveling about crushing one shady group after another, bringing each to heel under his banner. He was too dangerous a man to make an enemy of.

But Hydra refused to give up. Everything would be fine, they *knew* it, if they could just get their hands on the girl—and so they tried to kidnap her. At first, it seemed like they'd succeeded too. But its 'success' led to the discovery of Hydra's headquarters. Only a month later, the entire organization, ruler of the underworld, was brutally wiped out.

Their downfall was a single dagger that, eventually, revealed the location of Hydra's base.

Delthasis found the dagger, which one of the kidnappers had been using, after defeating them. After looking into it, he found an identical blade displayed in a museum; apparently, it had been used by a certain tribe long ago, and it had been excavated from the underground ruins of a certain city.

That made it clear these criminals were hiding underground.

It made sense, after all. The underground ruins were practically a labyrinth, and nobody was known to have gone down there after the museum's exploration. On further investigation, emergency exits were found all over the place, secret escape routes out of the ruins; it was clearly the perfect spot to run a criminal organization out of.

Delthasis and several allies made their way underground, joined by guards and the Order of Knights. And from there, it was only a matter of time until Hydra was thoroughly crushed.

\*

Garlance was running through the forest, a girl in tow.

This girl's bloodline magic, Precognition, was a powerful thing. If he could use her to detect the dangers awaiting him in the future, he could make different choices. He could ensure his safety—and stage his comeback to the underworld.

Those plans in mind, he and several underlings were making their way to the bank of the Aurus River, where they would get on a boat and flee to another country.

If they could just get out of this country, all they'd need to do was make use of this girl's power and they could climb the ranks again. To achieve that, Garlance had stolen the girl for himself, killing the leader who'd raised him in the process.

But their prospects of escape did not look good. They were being followed, and they couldn't seem to shake their pursuers.

Frustrated, Garlance grabbed the girl's hand with a powerful grip.

"Run faster, dammit! Don't let 'em catch up!"

"I can't. Besides, I think you're going to die here. There's nothing you can do about it."

"Stop running your mouth. As long as I have you, I can make a comeback! I just need your power!"

"No, I don't think you will. I'm the one who made all this happen, after all."

"Wh-What're you—"

Garlance had no idea what the girl was getting at.

No...it was perhaps more accurate to say that he couldn't hope to understand it. He hadn't considered all the risks that Precognition would entail.

The girl, though? She was different. She was staring straight at Garlance, her eyes shining with an unshakable resolve.

"No one in my family lives long. It's unnatural for humans to know the future. Our foreknowledge comes at the cost of diminished lifespans."

"Wh-What are you getting at?! Even if you're telling the truth, none of that



stops me from wanting you!”

“I don’t think you understand. Since time immemorial, my family has been laying the groundwork to erase this magic of ours from the world. Even you and your henchmen killing my parents was just another part of our plan.”

“Wha—?!”

“You still don’t get it? While you were all vying to get your hands on my family’s power, we were arranging the dominoes to ensure this would happen.”

It all sounded absurd. But to this family, cursed by their Precognition magic, it was critically important. They couldn’t control their own magic; they saw the future in their dreams, whether they wanted to or not.

And every time they did, they lost a little of their lifespan. They didn’t have the luxury of living to ripe old ages. Over years, generations, they had searched—chipping away at their lifespans all the while—for the path that would lead their family to peace. And eventually, they had found their answer.

Their plan was this: they would manipulate the future in a way that let them leave progeny who would not inherit Precognition. That was their one and only hope, reached after so many years. They put their lives on the line to make it a reality.

The girl’s family had been pulling strings behind the scenes of history to make sure that their bloodline magic would never appear again.

So many members of the family had been sacrificed to make it happen. Some had even made the torturous decision to sell off their own family members to influential figures and watch their loved ones march to tragic ends.

All for the grand goal—shared by the entire family—of preserving their bloodline while ridding the world of this unnatural magic.

After Garlance learned the truth, he froze in place.

“Y-You’re all damn crazy...”

“You think it’s strange? Ah, but you don’t have the right to criticize us. You desired my family’s power too, did you not? It’s because of evil people like you—because we don’t want our power falling into your hands—that we had no

choice but to sacrifice everything. Myself, my parents...”

The girl kept the same matter-of-fact tone, even as she laid her emotions bare.

“It was you and your kind who cornered us like this. Can you truly complain if we retaliate? Just as you sought to use us for your own benefit, it seems only fair that we use you to secure our own happiness. You wanted to know the future, did you not? Well, this is the future. This is what you were so desperate to see. And you can’t change it anymore.”

For the first time in his life, Garlance knew what it was like to fear another person.

Hydra had a long history. It had lurked in the shadows of society for more than a century, and at times, it had managed to make use of the Precognition bloodline magic.

But if all of that had merely been part of this grand plan, it would mean that Hydra had unknowingly been dancing in the palm of a single family this whole time. That the manipulator had become the manipulated.

And if even their being here right now was all due to the schemes that the girl and her family had laid out, then... Well, what then? He just couldn’t accept it.

“That’s a load of bullshit! You’re making it all up, aren’t you?! Just trying to buy time to— *Gakh?!*”

All of a sudden, an arrow pierced Garlance’s left shoulder. He keeled over in pain on the spot.

It seemed like the arrow had been coated with a fast-acting paralyzing poison too; his body was gradually growing numb.

Then ice magic was fired at his underlings from the distance, turning them into grotesque frozen statues.

“Are you okay, Milena?”

“You took your time, Miska~! Jeez... My prediction was this close to falling apart, you know?”

A second girl—bespectacled, with purple-tinged black hair, holding a bow—

walked cautiously over to the first girl, who was apparently known as Milena. Upon reaching the girl, she...gave her a headbutt.

“Ow! What was that for, Miska~?!”

“That’s your punishment for keeping secrets from me. So cold of you, really...”

“B-But... Come on! If I told anyone about the future, all our efforts would’ve been in vain! I *had* to keep it a secret! By the way—where’s Del?”

“Passionate as always, aren’t you? But Del isn’t here just yet—”

That was when a young man wearing a crimson robe emerged from among the shadows of the trees.

“Who are you saying isn’t here? Really, Milena... You’ve given me a real workout. I’ll have to scold you later.”

“Aww... Take it easy on me, okay?”

Though the man was only in his teens, his face gave off an awfully mature impression; it was about the opposite of “youthful.” Still, the moment he saw Milena, his expression softened a bit.

“That’ll depend on you, Milena. If you like, I could give you your scolding in bed—how about that?”

Milena blushed. “Oh, you~! Think about where we are! I-I *am* kind of happy to hear it, though...”

“You’re clearly more than a *little* happy!” Miska sighed. “Anyway, Del, when did you even... Weren’t you fighting against the rest of them just moments ago? You said, ‘Leave them to me!’ and we went on ahead...”

“They were weaker than I thought. Go to the Far-Flung Green Depths and you’ll find monsters ten times stronger than that. It wasn’t even a real fight.”

“Don’t expect humans to be the same as the monsters from that accursed place! Besides, when are you going to stop being such a thrill seeker? I swear, you always get so carried away when—”

“I don’t intend to stop. I enjoy it, after all. So—is this man the last of them?”

As Delthasis turned his gaze toward Garlance, he created a fireball in the palm of his hand.

“You put your hands on my woman; I hope you’re ready to pay the price. Sorry, but you won’t be leaving here alive.”

Garlance surveyed his surroundings.

Every exit was blocked—and even if they *did* take him alive, he’d be headed straight for the death penalty. He knew the severity of his crimes. His only hope of survival was to jump off the cliff nearby and plunge into the river below.

But with the paralysis preventing his body from moving how he wanted it to, it was highly likely he’d drown. It wasn’t a good option.

Still...it was his *only* option. He had to take the gamble.

“You’re not killing me that easy!”

So he ran as best he could toward the cliff, his body resisting even more than he’d thought it would. But he was committed at this point, and he squeezed out every last bit of strength his body had.

Delthasis released his fireball, causing an explosion that sent Garlance flying—past the edge of the cliff. Then came the fall.

He didn’t remember what happened after he fell into the Aurus River, but eventually he washed up on a riverbank downstream, somehow alive.

Then he went into hiding—and began planning his next comeback.

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“Just a dream, huh? Nasty one. Urgh.”

Garlance had been having a bit of a nap while he waited for Sharanla’s report.

He’d put a lot of effort into being the leader of Hydra. He’d slowly built up capital by trafficking slaves and selling drugs, and he’d destroyed several crime syndicates to bring them under his own control. And so, in the span of just half a year, the organization had begun seeing rapid growth.

By all rights, he should’ve been middle-aged, approaching elderly, by now; somewhere in his mid-sixties. But Sharanla had given him a youth restoration

potion about three months ago that had brought him back to his thirties.

He knew nothing about the potion's side effects, of course.

"Well, whatever. I can't imagine her screwing this up. And when it's done, I'll finally have my revenge against that bastard. Should help teach the whole damn country to be scared of me too... Gah ha ha."

From an outsider's perspective, he was merely an unhinged old man monologuing to himself in his room. But if he managed to assassinate the heir to a ducal house, the name Hydra would echo throughout the underworld once more.

Although he hadn't succeeded yet, he was already drunk off his dreams of restoring the organization. It was so close now, he could taste it. It went to show just how much he trusted Sharanla's skills as an assassin.

Garlance picked up the wine bottle from the table, poured some into a nearby glass, and gulped it down with vigor.

A satisfied expression on his face, he went for another refill.

Then came the interruption.

"Boss! Bad news!"

"What is it? I was in a good mood just now. If this is something stupid, you're dead."

"I-I-It's the Order of Knights! They're attacking us!"

"*What?!* This is ridiculous... How did they find where we...?"

"Think about it later—right now we need to run! They've blocked off all our exits!"

"*Tch...* Is it *him*? Just how many times does that fucking *asshole* have to get in my way?!"

The Hydra of old had seen timed magic tools used against them to close off most of the escape routes underground, with the attackers intentionally leaving just a few open. Then, when Hydra's members funneled into those remaining escape routes, they'd been hit with a powerful barrage of magic, leading to

their brutal annihilation. It had been a cold, calculated plan, like exterminating rats. The intruders had even been thorough enough to scatter poison about the place, causing most of the group's lackeys to die painful deaths.

In large part because of that experience, Garlance no longer kept just a sole Hydra base in the middle of the city. Any place with a lot of thugs going in and out was bound to be noticed, triangulated, regardless of how you tried to hide it. At the same time, he could hardly set up a base outside of the city, where monster attacks were a frequent occurrence.

And so, he'd arranged several taverns with underground hiding spots. By moving his base between them every few days, he was able to confuse any pursuers and keep himself safe.

"So the duke used his own son as bait, huh?! Damn, he's good..."

Garlance cursed himself for being so naive.

It was all well and good that youngsters from the academy had made an assassination request. As powerful as the Solistia ducal house was, he hadn't been able to imagine it being able to interfere too much in an annual academy event; at best, he'd thought, they'd manage to send a handful of guards.

And even *if* the family managed to hire some guards, Garlance had thought, it wouldn't have any way of ensuring those guards got assigned to Zweit and his group. After all, he'd gotten information in advance saying that mercenaries would be assigned to groups of students at random.

Garlance had been convinced of the assassination's success—and he certainly hadn't expected the duke to use his own son as a decoy to mount a direct attack on Hydra's current base. It was clear as day now: This time, Delthasis intended to fully wipe out the organization.

"That *fucker*! How coldhearted can you get?! *Tch...* We're changing bases!"

"What are you going to do about your men?! If we go by ourselves, then—"

"There are plenty more where they came from! For now, we need to get out of this damn place! Or what, are you a moron?!"

Spitting out his reply, Garlance moved a shelf behind him, deciding to escape

through the passageway hidden behind it.

He bolted through the tunnel, paying no heed to how he looked as he scrambled through the complex network of underground paths. He could hear the distant din of clashing swords, telling him that there was no time to waste.

After running what felt like forever through the long tunnels, he finally reached an exit door. He opened it, and emerged in the middle of a forest outside of town. From the outside, the spot they were standing in now looked like just your average cave, its entrance camouflaged by a thicket of trees and shrubs they'd planted.

"Now that we've made it here, we should be— *Agh!*"

All of a sudden, a crossbow bolt struck Garlance's left shoulder. It was almost like a reenactment of that time all those years ago.

His face twisting into a grimace from the pain, he looked in the direction the bolt had come from and saw a woman with purple-tinged black hair and glasses holding a crossbow.

Garlance remembered seeing her somewhere before. What amazed him was that she still looked largely the same as she had back then; about the only difference now was that she was wearing the clothes of a maid, not a student.

And beside her was that man Garlance hated so much, standing with his arms crossed.

"Now that's a face I haven't seen in a while. Never thought you would've survived back then."

"*Urgh...* So it *was* you, eh, Duke? Must've taken ya some effort to come all the way out here..."

"You're telling me. And I wouldn't have needed to go to all that effort if you and your ilk hadn't tried to pull something stupid. I suppose all of this only happened because I let you get away that one time. But I always make sure to repay my debts; it's a rule of mine. So prepare yourself. Fortunately, there's no river here to save you this time. You're not getting off so easily."

"*Tch.* So you used that woman's power, huh? No way you could've found this

place otherwise.”

“Oh, you think so little of me... All of this is the fruit of a long investigation. This sort of thing is child’s play to me; I don’t need to rely on some measly little power. Only incompetent fools cling to easy solutions.”

Garlance thought he’d known how terrifying Delthasis could be—but he was now learning that the duke’s prowess was beyond what he’d imagined.

Seeing as the man already knew Garlance’s escape routes, he probably had spies lurking among Garlance’s own underlings. It was a card often played by Garlance himself, but at the end of the day, his opponent this time around had been even more cunning than he.

Still, Garlance was convinced he would be able to escape once again.

Normally, someone in his situation would already be accepting their defeat, knowing they were checkmated. But Garlance refused to give up on his ambitions; he had one last, all-or-nothing gamble up his sleeve. He drew a knife from his belt and rushed toward Delthasis.

“Drop dead!”

“Disappointing.”

Garlance’s knife was deflected by a dagger that Delthasis drew himself in a backhand grip. And then, while Garlance was staggering, Delthasis wasted no time driving a knee into his stomach. The man was clearly no amateur in a fight.

As Garlance looked up at Delthasis—who was now holding daggers in both hands, and watching his every move with the eyes of a carnivore tracking down its prey—he cursed his own carelessness. He should never have made an enemy of the duke, and he was regretting it now. But it was far too late.

Delthasis’s arms were moving unpredictably, leaving Garlance no way of knowing where the next attack would come from.

Garlance stabbed with his knife again and again, with the occasional slash mixed in too, but every one of his attacks was deflected—and whenever it was, he took a mighty knee to his face or his gut.

The blows were harder than he could’ve expected, every one of them



seeming capable of knocking him unconscious. He barely held on, time and time again, desperately struggling to somehow get out of this situation.

“So you used your son as bait to come after us... Might make you the perfect leader, but you’re a heap of shit as a father, huh?”

“Coddling the boy won’t turn him into a proper man. You need to make your children take the difficult path once in a while—it’s just another part of parenting. Besides, did you really expect me to simply sit around doing nothing? You played your trump cards too soon. That’s all this comes down to.”

“Oh, I dunno about that. My lady’s pretty skilled, y’know? I betcha your boy’s lying dead somewhere in the forest by now.”

“And *I* don’t know about *that*. You’re hardly the only man capable of bringing together talented fighters. I’ve given my son a guard far stronger than myself, I’ll have you know. *He* is the one you ought to fear.”

Garlance was silent for a moment. He felt like clicking his tongue in frustration.

Delthasis was certainly strong. Garlance wasn’t even sure he had a chance of winning against the man.

And in turn, Garlance struggled to imagine Sharanla winning against a guard who was even stronger than Delthasis. From Garlance’s perspective, Delthasis was already plenty terrifying.

Just look at how things were going now—Garlance was attacking Delthasis again and again with a knife, but he still hadn’t managed to so much as scratch the man, his every attack deflected with ease. What else would you call that, if not terrifying? Moreover, every attack on the duke was followed by a swift counterattack; it was Garlance, and Garlance alone, who was getting more and more hurt as the fight went on. He couldn’t imagine himself winning.

“Fuck... I am *not* gonna die here!”

“Somehow, I doubt that. Give up.”

As Delthasis thrust forward with a dagger held in his right hand, Garlance willed his left arm—which could barely move now—to somehow shift and take

the blow, and thrust his own knife toward Delthasis's throat. But Delthasis dodged the reprisal by a hair's breadth, the attack just barely nicking his cheek instead. A moment later, the dagger in Delthasis's left hand stabbed at Garlance's heart.

The blade, held horizontally, slipped right between Garlance's ribs, delivering what would undoubtedly be a fatal blow.

"*Glrrkh!*"

"When you survived all those years ago, you could've decided to live a quiet, honest life. But you decided to chase after your foolish ambitions—and this is where they led you. You have nobody to blame but yourself."

"Y-You... I'm... You *fucker!*"

Squeezing out the last of his strength, Garlance launched a suicide attack, hoping to take Delthasis down with him.

But his efforts weren't rewarded. Miska fired a crossbow bolt that lodged itself firmly between his eyebrows.

So ended the life of the leader of Hydra.

Having breathed its last, Garlance's body rapidly aged, turning into that of an emaciated, decrepit old man. In seconds, he did not look like even a shadow of the man he'd been moments before.

"What's...? Some kind of secret potion? I *did* think it was odd that he still looked so young..."

"Shall we ask Sir Zelos about it later? He *is* a Great Sage, despite it all, so he may know something about it. Anyway—Del! C'mon, you're playing around too much! You should've just finished him off as soon as you could!"

"Del, eh? That brings me back. *Pfft*. I feel like *I've* grown younger too..."

"You still act plenty young. Too young. In more ways than one... Jeez, why did Milena have to fall for such a dangerous guy? Seriously, I'll never get it..."

"I never understood it either. Still, though...you really look completely the same as you did back then, don't you? Hearing you talk like this brings back so many memories of the past. Ah, those were the good old days..."

Delthasis's eyes glazed over with an air of nostalgia as he looked at Miska.

Her looks hadn't really changed much from back then; looking at her now made him feel like he'd gone back in time. It filled him with equal parts nostalgia and melancholy.

"Are you saying these days *aren't* as good? Milena would be sulking if she heard you yearning for the past like that, you know? I can just imagine her saying, 'Aww, no fair! I wanted to play with you too...'"

"You know, I'd quite like to hear her say that. Besides, I'd say it's your fault I got nostalgic just now, hmm? What with that tone you're speaking in."

"Can you really blame me? I may not look it, but I *am* a half-elf... In fact, there are times I get sad about not being a full-blooded human."

"I see... Well, make sure you keep to your usual tone in front of Celestina, all right? She'd be shocked, I'm sure."

"Of course. It's just for now. I don't need to be all respectful in front of you, that's all... Anyway, did you really have to call me out here with you? I'm only barely going to make it to the academy before she gets back there, you know?"

"I wanted to make sure I got this done, so it helped to have a skilled ally with me. It *did* take longer than I'd expected, though. I'll need to hurry back if I don't want my work piling up."

"Jeez... Okay, let's hurry up and get back. I'll be under suspicion if I'm not back right away myself. I just hope we can still make the ship..."

Delthasis incinerated Garlance's corpse with magic and left with Miska for the harbor to catch a ship that would take them back to their own territory. They'd arranged things beforehand, so there was no need to meet with the Order of Knights.

Delthasis had a mountain of work to get to, and it'd only keep growing with every moment.

A capable man didn't waste his time. After all, that was the final promise he'd made to his late wife, who he'd loved so dearly.

He treasured every minute, every second, making sure to enjoy them all.

\*

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You can now toggle automatic skill acquisition. Would you like to enable this feature? (On/Off)

\*

Having rescued Zweit and returned to camp, Zelos now stared, speechless, at a strange notification that had just popped up in his field of view.

He'd recently obtained the Educator and Ascended One job skills—as well as the Super Engineer job skill, which he hadn't even noticed getting. None of the three had existed in *Swords & Sorceries*.

The Educator job was an obvious progression from his Teaching skill, but Super Engineer was harder to explain.

The Teaching skill, which Zelos had obtained before Educator, was something he'd naturally acquired over the course of tutoring Celestina and Zweit. He didn't know what the requirements were for Ascended One, though. He assumed it had something to do with his assorted production and combat job skills—Divine Assassin, Divine Mage, Divine Apothecary, Divine Magic Tool Crafter, Divine Blacksmith, and so on.

Super Engineer, meanwhile, seemed to span various techniques essential to civil engineering, including Wood Processing, Stone Processing, and Basic Engineering. But it also encompassed unrelated skills like Rap, Dance, and Beatboxing.

That last bit left him convinced that the cause behind this particular job skill was his time with Hamber Construction.

Regardless, it was about time, Zelos thought, that he got a setting for his automatic skill acquisitions. *If there was a basic on/off switch this whole time, I would've loved to have it earlier.* He hadn't even known a feature like that was an option until now.

"Hmm... For now, I'll turn it off. But what *is* this feature? It just popped up out

of nowhere! I don't get it. Why *now*?"

Regardless, Zelos was thankful to have the option available to him now.

Toggling it off meant he wouldn't continue acquiring skills without realizing it. It was a shame he couldn't stop the skills he'd *already* acquired from leveling up, though.

Skills supplemented what you were capable of, but as they leveled up, they started to impact physical capabilities too. And by the point Zelos was at, they could boost physical capabilities astronomically.

For example, consider a move like chopping someone at the back of the neck to knock them out. If Zelos did it, he'd cut his target's head clean off. So he always kept the Hold Back skill active to automatically limit his output.

*Is this on/off switch part of this world's laws of nature? Or is it some kind of special ability available to me specifically? Well, setting that aside, the problem is that she's in this world... And I'd hate to have her constantly following me wherever I go. The next time I see her, I'll make sure to finish her off for good...*

Zelos's encounter with the last person he'd wanted to meet had sent his mind down a dangerous train of thought.

His horrible experiences with her throughout his life had him boiling with such bloodlust that he wouldn't even hesitate to leave her rotting underground.

He decided that if he saw her again, he would go all out to kill her, no holding back. With the superhuman strength he had now, he could easily kill someone if he wanted to.

If not for his Hold Back skill—which automatically activated depending on his will to fight and his emotions—his endless bloodlust would've left him unable to restrain himself, giving him a body so inhumanly muscular that he wouldn't even be able to go about his daily life.

Regardless, if he obtained even more skills, then there was a significant chance that even Hold Back wouldn't be enough to control all the power coursing through his body. So this would be a useful little feature. Still, it had reminded him of the existence of his troublesome sister. He could do nothing but expel a depressed sigh as he cast his gaze in the direction of the food tent.

As he focused, he spotted Anzu and Eromura eating.

“Mnom... Yum. ♪”

“Whoa! This is *good*! It’s been ages since I’ve had a proper meal... H-Huh? Why am I crying...?”

They must’ve been living quite the tough life. Both of them were demolishing their meals with gusto.

“Hey, Mister...”

“What is it, Iris?”

“Those two... They’re like us, right? Killed by the Dark God...?”

“I don’t think it’s the Dark God’s fault, actually. In fact, it may be more accurate to blame the Four Gods.”

“But by ‘the Four Gods,’ you mean this world’s goddesses, yeah? How were they even able to seal the Dark God inside of a game, anyway? I mean, thinking about it, one’s a digital world, and the other’s 3D, right?”

“Mmm. I can think of plenty of motivations they might have had and methods they might have used, but I don’t have concrete proof for any of it, so...”

“You have a general idea, though, don’t you? I just wanna hear what your thoughts are.”

Zelos did indeed have a general idea, but without proof, it was little more than a wild conspiracy.

“Don’t you think we could find out if we revived the Dark God? It seemed to have a real grudge against the Four Gods, and we just got caught up in that in a really unlucky way. Or, no... Maybe it was all just destined to happen, like some development out of a light novel...”

“Did you just say the Dark God ‘seemed to have a real grudge’? Does that mean you and the other Destroyers were the ones who beat it?”

“That we were. Looking back, though, everything about that fight was strange... The Dark God’s moveset was different that time we beat it. I feel like we really should’ve noticed that, and yet...”

“Really? Sure, monsters in *most* games have predictable movesets, but the ones in *Swords & Sorceries* were pretty inconsistent. Almost like they were real living things, y’know?”

“Perhaps so, but they still had patterns to them. That last time we fought the Dark God was different, though. We’d fought it plenty of times before, so we knew its attack patterns, but that time was completely different...”

The only possibility Zelos could think of was that an additional moveset had been added before their last fight against the Dark God.

Logically, though, it seemed crazy that the developers would have *buffed* the Dark God when, at that point, not a single player had managed to defeat it. Even the Destroyers hadn’t been able to.

What was more, Zelos still didn’t know the name of the company that had made *Swords & Sorceries*, as he’d said several times before. It wasn’t there in his memory, and it was like it had never even been there to begin with.

If the Dark God from that last time had been the real thing, then...what on earth had been going on with the world of the game they’d all been playing? That was the question he had. If the Dark God had existed there for real, it would mean that the world of *Swords & Sorceries* was also, in turn, reality.

“Wait—was the world from *Swords & Sorceries* an isekai too? I mean, it had to be, or things don’t add up, right?”

“It’d be a cliché twist straight out of a light novel if it was. But if that’s *not* the case, then there are so many things I just can’t explain. I imagine it was bound by stricter systems, or laws of nature, than this world we’re in now, at least.”

“But it’s got a lot of overlap with this world. So that means...”

“Yes—it’s natural to think that this world was probably used as the basis for that one. Even if the way things here work feels a little arbitrary at times...”

While monsters in *Swords & Sorceries* had different levels—and were stronger or weaker—depending on their habitat, the amount of experience points you received for defeating them was always the same. Their attacks rotated between a number of different patterns, so even if it didn’t look it, their movements were mechanical.

In contrast, the monsters in this world gave less consistent experience points, and there were differences between individual creatures living in the same habitat. They could each move much more realistically too.

This world was incredibly similar to the game's, but there were absolutely things here that were natural.

At the same time, the world of *Swords & Sorceries* had felt so real to the senses that it had been practically impossible to believe it was all just data and code. Sure, it had had its gamelike elements, but it had still all felt somehow too realistic.

Even if the game had been based on some sort of unbelievably advanced technology, it was odd that nobody had realized just how unusual that level of technology was.

Something felt off, almost as if the world itself had been concealing the existence of *Swords & Sorceries*. It was all just too unnatural.

And the existence of the Dark God was the cherry on top.

"Just what have we gotten ourselves caught up in here, I wonder? Though saying that, I feel like it's all going to be for some incredibly silly reason..."

"When the Four Gods say they resealed the Dark God, they mean they just dumped it in the world of *Swords & Sorceries* when it looked like it was gonna revive, right? But that sounds pretty irresponsible. It'd mean they were meddling in a whole other world, wouldn't it?"

"They can call it 'sealing' all they want, but the Dark God was well and truly revived. Didn't seem to have any problem moving around the place... Anyway, I'm curious as to whether the Four Gods actually have the power to meddle in a completely different world like that. When I got a message from one of them, it was about our reincarnation, and it said that 'it's the gods from your world that had to deal with that.' So I'm assuming it was the gods from Earth who actually reincarnated us. In which case, all the Four Gods here would've done is just illegal dumping in the name of 'sealing away' the Dark God. And the question then, I suppose, becomes: *Why seal it?*"

"What do you mean?"



“If something scary’s going to revive, you can just defeat it. *We* defeated it. Sure, it might be a bit of a hassle, but it shouldn’t be impossible. So if the Four Gods *didn’t* do that, then it might mean they’re weaker than the Dark God, even all together. Having fought the Dark God myself, I’ve got a general idea of how strong it is, and the version of the Dark God that was the last boss in the game was actually about twice as strong as that last version we fought. It was more of a hassle...”

“H-Huh? Uh, Mister... You just said something awfully weird, didn’t you?”

Having heard something that she couldn’t just let slide, Iris stiffened for a moment.

If she was to take Zelos’s words at face value, it would mean that the Dark God in *Swords & Sorceries* was stronger than the real thing.

In addition, if the Destroyers had defeated the real Dark God, and the Dark God was stronger than the Four Gods, then transitively, the Destroyers were stronger than the Four Gods too.

“Whoa... You’re too OP. And even you couldn’t win against the old final boss version of the Dark God? Just how strong *was* the Dark God in *Swords & Sorceries*?”

“Well, we were able to get to its third phase, but it just overwhelmed us after that... We couldn’t handle it, that much is for sure. It was enough to make a behemoth or a demon dragon king seem like cute little things. But...”

“But you were able to beat it on your *last* attempt, when it was real... Was the real one seriously that weak?”

“No, no, it was still strong! It was unpredictable, which was a real pain. Thinking back on it now, I guess I’d say it was like a real, living thing. How do I put it... The way it moved didn’t seem programmed. It was incredibly fluid. But despite that, we managed to win in the end. Anyway, leaving that aside... Aha ha ha. What to do now, eh...?”

Reflecting on it, there was just too much that didn’t add up. The more they thought about it, the more there was that seemed suspicious.

And yet despite it all, the corners of Zelos’s mouth had twisted into a very

nasty-looking grin.

“Uh, Mister? Please tell me you’re not planning to do something really dangerous just because you think it sounds fun... You’ve got a *really* excited look on your face, and it’s kinda scaring me.”

Rather than answer, Zelos put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it, like he was trying to avoid the question.

“Don’t do it, okay?! I wanna use my time here to finally go out on adventures! Not get caught up in Ragnarok!”

“I won’t be doing anything *that* crazy. Probably...”

“*Probably?! So there’s a chance it will turn into something crazy?! You’re kidding me, right? I don’t know what you’re planning, but just...seriously, cut it out! I’m begging you here!*”

But Zelos still didn’t answer.

In place of a reply, he took a puff of his cigarette, the smoke floating away through the Ramaf Woods.

## Chapter 5: The Old Guy Leaves the Ramaf Woods Behind

Sharanla woke up inside a room of a run-down inn.

With her manadoll broken, she'd become unable to keep her consciousness inside it any longer.

She'd found the manadoll by chance after killing another player, but it had proven so convenient that she came to treasure it.

She'd never considered the possibility that it could get *destroyed*.

Not to mention the one who'd destroyed it was her blood-related younger brother, Satoshi Osako. And he had quite the grudge against her—Remi Osako, now Sharanla—to the extent that he'd been genuinely attempting to kill her.

Of course, Remi herself was at fault. She'd only ever seen her brother as a handy source of income, never considering herself to be at fault in the slightest. If she *had* ever reflected on her actions at any point, then perhaps their relationship could have changed.

Unfortunately, the word “reflection” was missing from her lexicon.

“You’ve really done it now, Satoshi...!”

And of course, it was in her nature to hold an unreasonable grudge against *him*.

“It took a lot of hard work to get that magic doll! And he made me use up every last one of my substitution dolls and sacrificial offerings too... Does he even *know* how much this has set me back?!”

Substitution dolls and sacrificial offerings were relics from the ancient times of this world. As you'd expect, practically nobody knew how to make them now, so replenishing her depleted stocks would be very difficult.

Now, Remi would have to carry out her assassination jobs in person, making it

harder for her to guarantee her safety. In addition, if the youth restoration potion she'd taken really *did* mean that she didn't have much lifespan left, she didn't want to be taking any careless risks.

She had an idea that her brother, Satoshi, was the only one who could undo the effect of the potion. Unfortunately, the horrible relationship she'd cultivated with him over all those years was finally catching up to her.

He'd gone as far as flat out telling his sister to die, and that was entirely the result of everything that she had done up until then. He was so possessed by his hatred that he'd come at her, eager to kill her, with a *smile* on his face. Just seeing her in the forest had been enough for him to attempt a merciless hit-and-run on her with his motorbike.

Of course, he'd never tried to take her life back on Earth. But in this world, life wasn't worth much, and the likes of spells and magic tools could be used to carry out the perfect crime.

Further, he'd forced Remi into playing all her trump cards, and told her, "You're not going to be so lucky next time." If she showed herself in front of him again, there was no doubt that she'd be erased from existence.

That Remi was able to remain convinced she'd done nothing wrong, despite her brother holding such a grudge, was frankly impressive in a sense.

"Really... Not only was he willing to abandon his own sister, he even tried to *kill* me. What a heartless man!"

If Satoshi heard her—*her*, the very person who had taken away his *raison d'être* and forced him to move to the countryside—saying that, he'd probably respond with a *you've got to be fucking kidding me!* But unfortunately, Remi was the pinnacle of narcissism.

She didn't care one iota if she ruined her brother's life, or wasted all of another person's money, and she never reflected on her own actions.

For now, though, she had quite the problem to contend with.

"Anyway... I suppose that youth restoration potion was defective, hmm? What a joke! Or...maybe Satoshi was just bluffing. He can be nasty like that. I wouldn't put it past him."

If what Satoshi had said was true, she would grow old and decrepit in a few years' time, and her life would be over just like that.

It'd be fair to say she deserved it, but she was egocentric as always. She lived the dirtiest of dirty lives, and she refused to let it end.

"Well, whatever. If it's something that one of Satoshi's friends made, then he's responsible for it too. That much goes without saying. So I'll get him to take responsibility. The problem is that he was one of the Destroyers... If I get close to him without a plan, I'm dead meat. Ugh, what a pain..."

As she spoke to herself, she remembered the retribution she'd received when she'd targeted the Destroyers. Sure, she'd reaped what she'd sown, but the level of their retaliation had been beyond imagination.

The moment she'd realized she'd been forcibly equipped with some unknown piece of equipment, she'd been abruptly thrown into a den that was home to several dragons, and forced to fight with no way out. It had gone on forever too.

There had been such a big level gap that she hadn't been able to beat them, and she'd been forced to go through an endless number of consumables.

The Destroyers had shown her neither mercy nor sympathy, just a steadfast determination to grind down and destroy their enemy.

The more time passed, the more other monsters had started to swarm around her—and every time more had appeared, she'd fallen further into despair. She'd gotten a thorough taste of hell until, finally, she'd died and come back at the respawn point.

Even then, the effect of the cursed item had remained, and so she'd continued to be assailed by monsters until it faded.

Thoroughly tormenting their enemies right through to the end was exactly the Destroyers's MO... Most of them were as spiteful as vengeful spirits.

To gankers like Remi, the Destroyers were nothing but a source of fear. And she never would've expected that one of them would be her own brother.

It might have been a coincidence, but it really did seem like these sinful

siblings were tied together by fate.

“At worst, I’ll die if I can’t negate the potion... There’s still the chance he was bluffing, but the way he was making fun of me for it bugs me. And if he knows so much about it, he has to have some kind of antidote, I’m sure of it. The only problem is how to steal it...”

She was being impractical again, as she always was when it came to herself. She’d just arbitrarily decided that Zelos would know of an item that could negate the effect of a youth restoration potion. Having lived her whole life interpreting things in whatever way was most convenient for her, she wouldn’t have even believed anyone who told her “No, there’s no such thing as an antidote to a wonder drug like that!”

She was also the type to be cautious to a fault.

For now, she’d decided on a plan of action, but there was still a big problem remaining. If this were back on Earth, Satoshi would be just another human; but in this world, he was a Great Sage, and a real Destroyer.

He was a terrifying man, who’d attained an overwhelming level and had the power to match. Someone of a lower level, who was merely using items to boost what they were capable of, wouldn’t hold a candle to him. *That* was the problem.

And given that he had assassination skills of his own, she knew she had next to no chance of winning against him in a fight.

“To start with, I’ll have to find out where he lives, make my way there, and then gradually... Yes. I’m sure he’s still just a shut-in, so if I use the same approach as always, then...”

Desperate not to die, Remi—or rather, Sharanla—was putting together a crafty plan.

But she had forgotten. Forgotten that her brother understood her better than anyone else...

She had well and truly erased from her mind the fact that Zelos wasn’t the kind of man who would fall for the same trick time and time again.

And Zelos, as he was now, would *not* be holding back.

If they were still on Earth, it would be one thing; but in this world, he was an incredibly dangerous person to make an enemy of.

Sharanla, though, was getting started on the detailed plan she'd just put together.

It was this proactiveness of hers that made her a nuisance.

To her, Zelos was nothing more than someone who could be manipulated as she wished—her little brother.

Or, rather, perhaps it was *because* she recognized him as her little brother that she'd determined she'd be able to manipulate him.

And she did not, even for a moment, consider the slightest possibility that her plan could fail.

“Just you wait. I'll make you talk, whatever it takes... Aha ha ha!”

Selfish as always, she decided to start by finding out where Zelos lived.

She never learned her lesson. It was almost admirable, the way she remained true to herself.

\*

Two days had passed since the mission to rescue Zweit.

The combat training was over, and the students were on their way back to the Istol Academy of Magic.

Those who were physically exhausted from leveling up were riding in the carriages, while the others were making their way back on foot.

Zelos and his allies were in a carriage for the mercenaries. Iris and Jeanne, surrounded by all the materials they'd gotten from defeating monsters, looked pleased with their spoils. Lena, meanwhile, looked as gloomy as a funeral-goer, lamenting the fact that she hadn't been able to get her hands on any of the boys she'd been targeting.

Those boys had all gone out training with Zelos and returned with a newfound, warped sense of justice. They were now fondly speaking of Zweit

and his allies as the “Wiesler reformists,” and they were getting passionate about coming up with their own ideas for reform too.

Meanwhile, Zelos was running a pen across a bundle of papers, drawing sketches of a certain woman from various angles.

“Hey, Mister. What are you doing? Are those sketches?”

“Oh, these? I happened to come across a real horrible piece of work out there, so I’m making up some wanted posters for her. Say, what do you think would happen if I handed these over to Duke Delthasis?”

“Okay, you’re kinda scaring me... Anyway, it’s that older sister you mentioned to me before, right? Well, I guess she’d just...end up on a wanted list, right? Y’know, you’re pretty good at drawing, by the way...”

Zelos was making some impressively realistic sketches here, but he’d never scored well in art back in his school days.

The only reason he was able to draw like this was because of his job skills in crafting. Whenever he made equipment, he gave it various decorations and designs, so Zelos—not Satoshi—had gotten good at this kind of work.

“Well, she *did* try to kill the duke’s heir, you know? I imagine she’ll end up being hounded by bounty hunters; she’ll probably have to live every day hiding away from the public eye. And I’m sure she’ll show herself to me before long.”

Zelos already knew what his sister would have planned, so he’d decided to make the first move.

She was going to come to him looking for a way to negate the side effect of the youth restoration potion she’d taken—he was sure of it. By getting bounty hunters to target her, he hoped to prevent her from doing as she wished.

“Why have you got so many different types of wanted poster here, though? I mean, look at this one—she looks like a kid here, right?”

“I can’t rule out the possibility that she has *more* youth restoration potions, the idiot. By making the first move, I’m trying to keep her in check, limit her options. She always tries to seem nice on the outside, but she could end up tricking people and hurting them.”



“What kind of sister even...? I guess you didn’t have the best family, huh, Mister?”

“She always pretends to be the perfect older sister in front of other people. I imagine she’d be able to deceive Jeanne right away, for example. Luceris too, I suppose...”

Both Jeanne and Luceris were too kindhearted for their own goods, making them the perfect targets for Sharanla.

She was so nasty that if you lent her even a little bit of money, she’d return having racked up a huge debt. And in the worst-case scenario, she could end up getting someone enslaved to take the fall for her in some sort of crafty plan.

Zelos explained all that to Iris as he continued to make his sketches.

“Sh-She sounds *horrible*... I never wanna meet her!”

“If Luceris or Jeanne sees someone who looks about their age or younger asking for help, they could easily end up getting tricked. And my sister’s the sort to do anything it takes to achieve her goals. If you accidentally leave a letter or a message or something lying around, she’ll use it to forge documents in your name. That’s how rotten she is.”

“Seriously?! What the hell?!”

“She’s flat out said before that ‘kind people are the perfect marks,’ and she treats other people’s money as if it’s her own. That’s the sort of scumbag she is. She’s so selfish that she doesn’t think a thing about sacrificing other people’s lives if it means she can live in luxury...”

“Must’ve been tough for you, huh...”

“I can see her kidnapping orphans and selling them off to slave traders without a second thought. Her philosophy in life is something like ‘other people only exist for me to use and throw away,’ after all...”

Zelos wanted to protect the people around him, and that meant he had to get a lot of things prepared. If he didn’t, there was a real risk that Jeanne and the others could be tricked into becoming prostitutes before they even realized what was happening.

If Zelos did nothing, his sister would only leave more and more victims in her wake. He resolved once again to take his sister down for sure the next time they met.

“But you don’t actually know any way of reversing the effects of wonder drugs, do you? Is she going to come after you even though you don’t know?”

“The thing is, she’s incapable of perceiving the world in a way that isn’t convenient for her. I can tell her time and time again that I don’t know anything of the sort, but that doesn’t mean anything if she doesn’t believe me—and I can’t imagine that she *would* believe what I have to say. She’s coming, without a doubt.”

“Oh... Yeah, I think I remember you telling me something like that before. So she’s like *that*, huh? You sound pretty confident...”

“You’re calling her selfish,” Jeanne chimed in, “but it sounds like a lot more than just ‘selfish’ to me! She sounds *evil*, however you put it!”

“So, what—you’re thinking she might use another youth restoration potion to turn herself into a child this time and try to get close to us that way?”

“Exactly. And, well, that’s why I’m making all these wanted posters. She never stops believing she’s young, so she overreacts anytime she hears words like ‘old lady’ or ‘middle-aged.’ Not that she’s aware of that herself, mind you.”

It seemed like Jeanne and Iris had come to fully understand just how nasty Sharanla was.

But even as the three of them continued this rather important conversation, Lena continued to sulk beside them, tears streaming down her face. And she wasn’t the only one nearby:

“So, Lavuerin. You think we should try to get rid of the gap between noble and commoner mages?”

“Indeed. But I suspect it will be no simple task. Mages from noble families are brought up with a lot of pride; they’re given a privileged education, and taught the weight of their duty. I cannot imagine them accepting the truth all that easily, desperate as they are to improve their standing in society. Mayhaps we can bring some second or third sons over to our side, though even then I doubt

they will have the backbone to make enemies of their own families.”

“Changing things isn’t easy, huh... But we still have to do it!”

“Of course! It’s the younger generation that will shape the future, and that includes us. We’ll have to convince the old folk who are constrained by their stale conventions to retire.”

“Oh, Sir Lavuerin! What a *wonderful* young man you *are*!”

Nearby, the group of young boys—plus one particularly suspicious individual—were devoting themselves to building a better future. They were trying their best to pool their knowledge and use their new perspective to make plans for the betterment of their country.

There was no telling what these boys would do with themselves in the future, but for now, it didn’t seem like they were on a bad path. Or...you’d hope that was the case, at least.

“Th-They... They were such pure, untainted little boys until the other day. And now, out of nowhere, they’ve turned into such *adults*... It’s so unfair! Guiding them into adulthood was supposed to be *my* job, b-but...”

That one got the rest of Lena’s party retorting all as one: “*No!* That was *not* your job, okay?!”

Having a predator like Lena lurking around a site with all these young boys was a bad idea in so many ways.

Especially since there was the risk she could end up bearing a child with the son of a noble or some wealthy merchant. That could cause trouble to no end.

“Come on, Lena,” Iris asked, “What’s more important to you? A bit of pleasure, or being able to pay our living expenses?”

“The pleasure! If you take that away from me, I’ve got nothing left!”

“Stop!” Jeanne retorted. “You’re making *me* embarrassed! Besides, what would you do if you ended up getting pregnant?! I just...don’t get what makes you do all this!”

“That’s because you’re a pure little maiden, Jeanne. You should hurry up and have Zelos turn you into a woman, okay? Then you’ll understand how I feel!

Besides, say I *did* have a child. If it was a girl, I'd make sure to raise her properly, and if it was a boy, then..." She licked the drool from her lips. "Eh heh heh... ≡"

"Wh-Wh-What the *hell* are you *saying*?!"

Jeanne was a late bloomer—she'd had no opportunities to develop resistance to this kind of talk. Lena knew it too, so she had to have quite the nasty personality herself to have intentionally brought the topic up. On top of that, her morals were...questionable.

It had worked well as a way to escape Jeanne's lecturing, but still, it went to show how far detached Lena's ideas of common sense were from the rest of society's.

"Come on, Zelos, can't you hurry up and sleep with her already? Help us out here. She'll end up missing her chance to get married at this rate, you know? I'm worried for her, as her friend."

"Well, personally, I'd welcome her anytime, but it all comes down to how *Jeanne* feels, doesn't it? I'd rather not force myself on a woman against her will... But yes, I can't deny that the idea gets me going a bit."

"Hywhah?! Wh-What are you—?! And besides, there's Lu, and—"

"Polygamy's legal here, right?" Iris said. "So couldn't he just marry you *and* Luceris? Oh... But what'd happen with the orphanage, then?"

"Zelos's house is right behind the orphanage anyway. It wouldn't be a problem. If anything happened, they could just call for Zelos and it'd be fine. Hmm... But if Jeanne got married, she might not be able to keep living as a mercenary. That could be a bit of a problem, I suppose..."

Iris and Lena were both teasing Jeanne now.

The problem was, whenever this sort of conversation came up, Jeanne only got more stubborn. It'd only be a matter of time until she was saying, "I don't *want* to get married!"

And then, if her mood worsened, she'd refuse to even speak for a while.

"Hmm... Perhaps it'd be good to meet up with Luceris and properly talk it over between us all. Still...I'm getting on in years, you know? Are you sure that's

okay?”

“I think it’d be fine! I mean, Lena goes after people much younger than she is, and in *your* case, Mister, you’d be with other adults who can properly think about their futures. So, like... You’re better than the criminal at least, right? Not that Lena seems to care about that...”

“Now *Iris* is criticizing me?! Well, I can’t say she’s wrong.”

“Do you have no self-respect?! How are you able to just *admit* all this?!”

Zelos, for his part, wasn’t about to decide to get married on a whim. Especially since, in this case, it could mean suddenly finding himself with *two* wives.

Both women were childhood friends who got along well with each other, and both thought positively of Zelos. Sure, Jeanne was denying it, but her attitude made it an open secret.

The one thing that bothered him was the ailment known as love syndrome. But with how it came on out of nowhere, worrying wouldn’t do anything about it.

All he could do was pray that it didn’t send him off the deep end in the worst way possible.

“For now, let’s leave this discussion for later. That’s probably for the best. Otherwise, if Jeanne keeps looking so cute, my instincts might get so strong that I struggle to restrain myself anymore. Oh—just to clarify, I’m being serious here, okay?”

“Th-Th-There’s no way I’m... No way I’m *c-cu*—”

The other three all had the same thought: *No, you’re insanely cute right now.*

The sight of Jeanne blushing deep red, occasionally glancing at Zelos between the fingers she had covering her face, was pure, lethal cuteness.

She was the only one who didn’t know it.

\*

The students were on the road to the Istol Academy of Magic.

It had been a march to get to the training camp, and now it was a march back. The majority of the students still had to walk, of course.

Whether you were noble or commoner was irrelevant here, and that included Zweit and his group.

“*Damn* it! I hope his thing falls off!”

It was a joint scream of frustration from Zweit and Eromura—who’d formed a sort of bond over their struggles with women—as they watched Zelos’s group from afar. Neither of the young men had ever had a girlfriend, and they were envious, plain and simple, of Zelos and the situation he was in.

For starters, he had two beautiful adult women—Jeanne and Lena—there to keep him company. But that wasn’t all; considering Zweit’s and Eromura’s ages, Iris was in their strike zone too. Add that all together, and Zelos just seemed so *infuriatingly* popular to both of the boys.

“How does an old guy like that get all the girls? *HOW?! The world’s so unfair!*”

“I get how you feel. But I guess he must have some kind of appeal that only works on women. Something the two of us just can’t see. Is it his money? His promising future?”

“*Ngh...* I guess being young doesn’t always help, huh? Youth’s not gonna solve everything for us...”

“Anyway, wouldn’t surprise me if Teach was able to look after multiple women at once. He’s got enough money for it, at least...”

“Money and power, huh? I should’ve gone into crafting too...”

The two young men had hit it off, and they were grumbling to each other like a couple of drunkards who’d been at it since noon. They were getting more and more worked up as they went on too.

Long story short, the two of them were incredibly envious of Zelos.

After a while, Diio, who’d been walking alongside the pair, butted in. “Anyway, Zweit, there’s something more *important* I wanna ask you about... When are you going to try and help set me up with Celestina? I’ve been looking forward to it for ages, y’know?”

“Help you? I mean...she’s always there in the library working on her magic research. If you want to talk to her, just go for it. I do see her talking with Croesus pretty often, though... Actually, wait. Diio? Surely you’re not gonna tell me you haven’t even tried to *talk* to her yet?”

“I, uh, haven’t found the right moment... I’m more of a *combat* mage, y’know? I just *use* magic. I don’t know the first thing about *researching* it... I wish I was like Croesus. If only I understood the stuff she was into...”





“Actually, now that I think about it—she’s been talking a lot with Macintosh too, hasn’t she...?”

“You mean *Makarov*, right? You really should hurry up and remember his name already— Actually, hold on a minute! You said she’s been talking with him? *A lot?! Don’t tell me he’s into Celestina too...*”

Jealousy fogged Diio’s mind as he imagined his former classmate chatting up his crush.

Diio himself had never had so much as a single conversation with her. That was bad enough, and now he was hearing about a whole new obstacle. It was enough to leave him panicked.

And that panic began to send his mind down a dangerous track.

“Maybe I should *get rid of him* while I still can. I need to crush any bugs that get too close to her before it’s too late...”

“Wait, wait. He’s just been going up to her to ask her about magic formulas! If you try to assassinate him over something as small as that, do you seriously think it’s just gonna end up as ‘Oh, Celestina likes me a little less now, but it’ll still work out’? What are you, a moron?!”

“B-But I... *I WANNA CHAT ABOUT MAGIC WITH HER TOOOOOO!*”

Diio wasn’t holding anything back.

Unfortunately for him, though, he wasn’t the type of mage who *created* spells, just the type who *used* them. Combat-oriented mages like him practiced magic that already existed; they were put in different positions than researchers, and they saw the world differently. To them, “research” was mostly just something you did to formulate battle tactics and strategies.

That, of course, meant that he couldn’t just butt into a conversation between Celestina and Makarov, who was both a crafter and a researcher. If they were talking about *strategy*, then sure, there’d be countless ways into the discussion. But he couldn’t give the slightest opinion about improving magic formulas, or their efficiency, or anything else along those lines.

And when Croesus, another fellow researcher, was with them as well, Diio

could do nothing but watch from the sidelines, unable to even manufacture the right moment for him to join in the conversation and give his own ideas. His situation was so sad, so desperate, that even the mere thought of exchanging words with Celestina filled him with equal parts longing and joy.

“It sounds like you’re one of us too... So, what—you want Zweit to be your wingman between you and his little sister, yeah? Y’know, Zweit, it’d be cool if you could introduce *me* to her t— Actually, nah, never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“*Good*. Not finishing that sentence was a *very* smart choice. If you’d gone any further... Well, you would’ve had to watch your back from now on. You get me?”

“Diio, you’re the last one who can talk. What the hell are you gonna do about my grandfather?”

“Uh... Kill him before he can kill me, I guess? And in the worst-case scenario—Zweit, can I ask you to collect my bones?”

“You’re gonna risk your *life* for this?! I seriously don’t get why you have to go so far...”

“Is your grandpa really that scary, Zweit? Anyway, uh, I kinda wanna hurry up and get this thrall collar off soon...”

For a little update on Eromura: The plan was to take him to see the guards back in town, where he’d give a statement detailing how he’d been sold off to a criminal organization. As long as he cooperated in the search for those criminals and the guards caught the slave trader working with the underworld, Eromura would probably be given a reduced sentence.

They would also take into consideration the fact that Eromura, as a criminal slave, hadn’t been able to refuse any of the organization’s orders, even if he’d wanted to. The fact that he’d taken the chance to escape from them as soon as it arose would be interpreted as a demonstration of regret for his criminal past.

Plus, he’d just helped prevent an assassination. Put all that together and there was a decent chance he could end up a free man—though for now, he was still waiting on Delthasis’s judgment.

“Y’know, you just reminded me of something by saying ‘one of us’—where’s the other one that was with you? Anzu, was it? What’s she doing? Can’t see her anywhere...”

“Oh, her? I think she’s sleeping in the carriage with your teacher and a few of the others. Seems like she knocked out those cocos, though...”

Zweit and Diio had the same immediate thought: *She took out those things? All by herself?! Wait, is she actually the strongest one here...?*

The girl was sleeping curled up in a corner of the carriage that Zelos and his group were riding.

And surrounding her were the three unconscious cocos, weakly twitching in their sleep.

These birds had practically attained the ultimate strength. Yet Anzu had managed to take them all out as if they were nothing. The mere thought of it left Zweit and Eromura at a loss for words.

Meanwhile, Anzu—the source of their fear—was entirely unconcerned as she dozed away, a look of pure bliss on her face.

\*

“Hmm. It looks like I’ve made... I’m not quite sure *what* this is, actually. How should I use it...?”

“Wait, you were making potions again? Don’t go poisoning everyone with some mysterious gas this time, okay?”

Despite his recent incident, Croesus had gotten right back to potion-making on the journey home to the academy.

Fortunately, he hadn’t let off any weird poisonous gas this time—but he didn’t have any idea what this potion he’d just made would do, and even using Appraisal wasn’t telling him much about it. It was a real puzzle.

“My! Even your Appraisal was unable to determine the potion’s effects, Sir Croesus?”

“Yes... For what it’s worth, it’s coming up as a ‘booster,’ but I can’t get anything apart from that. It’s a mystery.”

“A booster, you say? I suppose it is difficult to assume any more without knowing what it is supposed to boost...”

Carosty specialized in magic tools, but she was also pretty sharp when it came to potions.

There were potions for boosting all kinds of different things, but they weren't that complicated; Appraisal usually had no difficulty discerning their effects. Being unable to get even a basic explanation was ridiculous.

“Is it a new discovery, perhaps? That could explain why your Appraisal isn't working on it.”

“I had that same thought, Celestina. Specifically, it's showing up as 'Unknown Booster,' and I can't get anything more than that out of it. It's something I just happened to make by accident, mind you, so it might not be anything special. But I made a note of the recipe, at least.”

“So you would be able to make it as many times as you desired, I suppose. Why, this could become a whole new page about our faction in the history books! What a splendid turn of events!”

“I'm not sure you can say that before we know what it actually *does*. But please, Brother, do refrain from any human experiments...”

“H-Huma— Of *course* I wouldn't! What do you take me for, Celestina...?”

Created from a mixture of medicinal herbs, mushrooms, and more, there was apparently something about this mysterious new potion that made it difficult to Appraise.

If they asked Zelos about it, he'd probably be able to give them a detailed description...but their pride as mages wouldn't allow them to do that. And Croesus in particular was the kind of researcher who wouldn't be satisfied unless he found the answer himself.

“I can say one thing for sure: If *Croesus* made it, it's gotta be bad news!”

“That's...quite the heartless thing to say about me, Makarov. As if I've ever made anything that— Okay, maybe I have. And maybe it was quite a lot of them. But still! Failures are givens in science! And these failures will lead to new

successes!”

“So you *did* know about them?! Besides, I don’t think just ‘failures’ is a strong enough word for what *you’ve* gotten up to. Research shouldn’t leave *victims...*”

It was still a wonder that none of Croesus’s experiments had killed anyone.

But while nobody had *died*, plenty of people had ended up with all sorts of horrible symptoms, or been badly traumatized, or witnessed some kind of mysterious creature.

“By the way, Carosty, what was it that you saw in my brother’s room that one time? Can you tell me what you can remember about it? Um... Carosty?”

But the girl wasn’t responding. And what was more, her face had gone as pale as a corpse.

Croesus—who had been sleeping inside the den of putrescence that he called a room that day—hadn’t noticed at the time, but he had very much had a *roommate* in his room. One that shouldn’t have been there.

One day, Carosty happened to open his door when it was there. And so she had witnessed something unbelievable.

Something that had left her mind indelibly traumatized.

“*Nooooooooooooooooooooo!*”

Whatever it was she’d seen, her scream made it clear that it had been terrifying.

“No! No creature like that should exist in the world! S-Such a...terrible, repulsive, bizarre, horrific, grotesque...a-and *cheerful...*”

When people went through something that pushed their minds to the brink, they would often suppress the memory of it into the deepest depths of their brain and try to forget it had ever happened. But it seemed like the memory of that day still lingered within Carosty’s subconscious.

Celestina’s innocent question had forced her to dredge up the memory she’d sealed away, giving her a very sudden, very vivid flashback.

The other three all had the same response: “*C-Cheerful?! What do you mean,*

cheerful? What did you see?!”

But it was no use. Carosty just began muttering to herself like she was possessed, having left out the one piece of information they all wanted to hear. The others tried asking her for more details, but it was like their words didn’t even register with her. Eventually, they figured it was probably pointless to try getting anything out of her in this state.

It seemed there were some things in this world that you were better off *not* knowing.

“Seriously, though... What’d she see in there?”

“Beats me. All I can remember is seeing Carosty passed out in the hallway, and everyone trying to look after her. As much as I would love for her to tell us what she saw, I’m not sure it’s...”

“Given the state she’s in, it’s probably not a good idea to try and force it out of her. Really, though, what could possibly have been in your room, Brother? It’s a mystery...”

“Oh—that reminds me. About a year ago, I heard a voice from Croesus’s room —‘Stop! *Stop!* Or I’ll make you regret it!’ Thing is, though, Croesus was sleeping in the lab at the time... Who could it have been?”

“Don’t ask me. That’s what I want to know.”

It was sounding like Croesus’s room—the infamous hazard zone of the Istol Academy of Magic’s student dorms—had turned into a mysterious habitat for unknown creatures.

Its reputation was already bad enough. Everyone bar Croesus was afraid of even approaching its door, let alone stepping foot inside.

Well...*almost* everyone. For some reason, Yi Ling alone was able to go inside just fine and clean up.

And Yi Ling hadn’t said anything about spotting a mysterious creature living inside his room.

“Yi Ling’s the only one who seems fine to go in there... Are we *sure* she hasn’t seen anything? Maybe she did, and she just tried to delete it from her memory

like Caro did?”

“I can’t deny the possibility, but I still haven’t seen anything like that myself, remember? How do you explain that?” Croesus replied.

“No idea. I mean, you’re the one who lives there. If you don’t know what’s going on, how do you expect *us* to?”

“I suppose that’s a fair point. Well, for now, I’ll just focus on figuring out what this booster is all about... Really, what *is* it?”

Croesus was full of curiosity for the unknown, but he wasn’t so stubborn as to stick to the same topic forever when he wasn’t getting anywhere with it.

He took a look at the unknown ‘booster’ he’d made, and began browsing through various recipes for magic potions.

And so, the students and mercenaries returning from the training camp continued along the road without any major troubles, eventually arriving safely in the academy town of Stihla.

The training camp had evened out the level gap between most of the students, so it was fair to say it had succeeded in its main objective of training them.

Some of the students had jumped from being the lowest-level among them all to suddenly being quite advanced, their capabilities now outstripping even most of the teachers’ by a long shot. The teachers were hardly thrilled by that, though. It just meant they had more problems to deal with now.

Before long, the academy would have to rethink its entire curriculum—not that the camp’s participants cared about that in the slightest.

One way or another, though, they were back, and the curtain was closed on the combat training camp to the Ramaf Woods.

## Chapter 6: The Old Guy Visits the Library

With the Istol Academy of Magic's training camp over and done with, calm returned to the mercenaries' guild.

The camp was scheduled annually, but it was a troublesome event. It was nice to have it out of the way and be able to go back to a regular routine.

In the midst of this calm, a particular mercenary visited the guild master's room.

It was Larsus, the shy man of few words who'd accompanied Zelos during the training camp.

"Hello."

"Oh! Welcome back, darling. So? How'd it all go, my cute widdle Larsus?" said Seyfon, the guild master who headed up the Stihla branch of the mercenaries' guild.

"Please don't refer to me like...like *that*. Anyway, yes. We protected the students without issue."

"So, what'd you think? About Zelos and his talents, I mean."

"It's like...staring down a bottomless pit. He's so good in a fight that it's hard to believe he's a mage. And when I watch him fight monsters, it feels like I'm still only seeing a tiny fraction of what he can really do. It's scary how strong he is."

"It really is, isn't it~? He even managed to make *me* into his plaything. I'd *love* to know just who the man is..."

"He had an easy time against *you*? From memory, you're Level 312... Don't tell me he's even higher than that!"

"Here's one thing I was able to tell when I fought him: He's got so much power, he doesn't know what to do with it. Don't get me wrong—he'd obviously mastered everything he was doing, but... Hmm, I wonder. Has he ever



actually fought with his full strength?”

Larsus had taken part in this guarding mission as a sort of observer for the mercenaries’ guild.

As a mercenary with plenty of combat experience, who’d worked his way up the ranks, he was often selected to take part in important missions like this as an observer. He would keep his eye on any promising young mages who could become mercenaries in the future, and sometimes he’d scout them.

His nickname, by the way, was Larsus the Formidable. He was an S-rank mercenary who’d once been part of a party with Seyfon. He was a highly capable man, with plenty of successful missions under his belt.

All of that meant that he knew perfectly well what Seyfon was capable of. And that only made it all the harder for him to believe that Seyfon had been so easily outclassed in a fight.

“*That* good, huh...? He’s one thing most of the time, but when he gets into a fight, he’s a dangerous man. Especially if it’s a life-and-death situation. He just changes into a different person. He was...aggressive. Crazy.”

“Oh? I wonder if he has a split personality? Can’t say I noticed *that*~!”

“No... If anything, I think it’s a sort of coldheartedness that comes from knowing exactly how dangerous monsters can be. Any monster he *did* fight didn’t last more than an instant.”

“Hmm... But I get the feeling that’s not the end of it, though, is it?”

“Yeah. The vibe I got from him was like something...savage was just lurking inside him. He gave me the chills a few times.”

“And if *you’re* the one saying it, Larsus, you’re probably right. Gosh, how scary... ♪”

The life Larsus had led had given him a very good intuition.

And that intuition had told him that Zelos was a danger.

“Why do you seem so...*happy* about this?”

“Good question! I guess it’s...because now I know there’s the chance for me

to get even stronger? I mean, look at how strong he is, and he's a *mage*! So it makes sense to think that *we'd* be able to get even stronger than that, right?"

"Maybe. But when someone gets that strong, are they even still human? He's no different from a monster."

"Oh, we'll be fine as long as we don't get on his bad side. He can communicate, so everything beyond that just comes down to acting in good faith, right? If we get ahead of ourselves and refuse to deal with him, *that's* when we'll end up antagonizing him."

If they shut Zelos out just because he was strong, he could become hostile to them. And if that happened, the risks were immense.

Sure, Zelos was strong. Just casting the basic beginner spell Fire had been enough for him to burn goblins to a crisp. If he got serious with his magic, there was no telling *what* could happen.

But if nothing else, he'd formed his own little social circle. It went to show that he wasn't some loner who cared for nothing but strength; he had it in him to open up his heart to others.

If he really *had* been obsessed with power and nothing else, he would've closed himself off to everyone else as a matter of fact, his only occasional interaction with others being to look down on them.

Sure, if you looked at what he was capable of in a fight, he was dangerous. But if you looked at him as a *person*, he seemed like the kind of man you could trust.

Still...there *was* that dangerous aspect to him, and nothing would change that.

"Anyway, I think we'll be fine! The duke should be able to keep him under control, and he didn't seem to actually be interested in being a mercenary."

"Mmm... I hope you're right. Still, there's no telling *what'd* happen if he actually got serious about something..."

"You're right. But, hey—Isn't there at least a teensy-weensy part of you that *wants* to see that happen~?"

“No. There’s not. I know it’d be a hassle—a hassle I don’t want to deal with.”

Larsus was tasked with training new recruits at the guild. It was a position he’d taken up after getting married.

He wanted to stay with his wife and earn a stable income, after all, which meant that going out and working as a mercenary wasn’t a good fit.

Despite his gruff looks, he was a earnest man, wholeheartedly devoted to his wife.

“Well, then—that’s work done for today. How about a drink at my place? I’m sure my wives would be happy to see you too!”

“No, thanks. I’ll just go home. I’ve been missing my own wife. Besides, I can never relax at your house. What with those wives of yours...”

“Oh? Better than being into little girls, I think! If anything, I struggle to relax at *your* house, Larsus.”

Larsus didn’t respond.

Seyfon was into tough women—tomboys, muscular ladies, or whatever else you wanted to call them.

Larsus, on the other hand, was into petite, girlish women. He was naturally drawn to what some might describe as the loli archetype.

To clarify, Larsus’s wife just looked very young for her age; she was a so-called “legal loli.” She was a particularly cute dwarf.

It wasn’t like Larsus was a lolicon. He was just, for whatever reason, attracted to women with fancy, feminine tastes; he couldn’t stop himself yearning for the adorable, petite type. But for most of his life, his tough appearance and brusque attitude had seen him rejected by every woman who’d caught his eye.

It was only a few months ago that he’d finally gotten married.

“Oh, well,” Seyfon said. “I probably shouldn’t force the newlywed to come for a visit when he wants to get home. All right, then—go on and get back to your wife nice and early for the day.”

“I will. I’ve been meaning to ask for a while, though, Seyfon—how does having

so many wives even work? Wouldn't there be fights all the time?"

"Oh, there certainly are! But it just makes you realize how much they all love you~ ≡ It's so *exciting*..."

"You know, I... I think I'll pass. I'm quite happy as I am."

Larsus preferred a happy, peaceful family over a bloodbath. His old fellow party member was in much deeper than he was, and Larsus wasn't envious in the slightest. He still didn't quite get how Seyfon's mind worked sometimes.

But he understood, if nothing else, that relationships between men and women could be complicated.

With their conversation over, Larsus left the guild master's room and headed straight home, excited to see his wife's face again. He was a devoted husband, and that was one thing, at least, that he had in common with his old friend.

His one and only worry was that his marriage to a dwarven woman, who looked no different from a young human girl, had caused rumors to crop up about him being into little girls.

Larsus had a lot on his plate.

\*

Now that Zelos was back in Stihla, he headed straight to an inn to rest and recover from the fatigue of his trip.

Iris and Jeanne had agreed to do the same. Lena, though, was the exception, setting out to wander the evening streets.

Having known her for as long as he had, Zelos had a decent idea where she'd be heading, so he decided not to pry too far. He simply sent his thoughts and prayers to whatever boys would be her victims tonight, and then forgot he'd seen anything.

There was no need, he decided, to take the initiative and stick his neck into that particular quagmire. And so, with a rather negligent attitude, he buried himself under his bedsheets for the night.

The next morning, Zelos—dressed in his usual gray robe—met up with Iris and the others to head to the diner in the mercenaries' guild.

And as he did...

“Nyeh heh heh... ≡ Oh, young boys really are just the *best*... ♪”

...he was greeted by Lena, looking mightily refreshed, a beaming smile on her face.

It seemed like Lena, having finished her guard work, had gone out to do a little something else before returning to the inn. You could say she'd pulled an all-nighter.

And it had left her in an incredibly good mood.

There were some obvious issues with her behavior, but nobody wanted to pry into her activities too much.

They were all aware that whatever they said would fall on deaf ears.

“Took a while to sell off the materials we got, but we can finally get back to Santor now. So, geezer, what're you gonna do from here? We'll be heading back now if there's nothing else we need to do.”

“Oh, I'll be staying in Stihla for one more night. There's a little something I'd like to look up in that big library at the academy. Still, if you're leaving for Santor, I'll give you a ride to the town where the harbor is. What do you say?”

“Uh... I'll pass. I never wanna ride on that damn thing again.”

“I'm with her. I felt dead when we got off it last time...”

Jeanne and Lena had had quite enough of Zelos's Harley-Sanders Model 13.

Well...specifically, they'd ridden in a trailer attached to the motorbike's rear.

Zelos had only gone at what would have been an average speed back on Earth, but it was enough for Jeanne and Lena—residents of *this* world, who certainly weren't used to that sort of speed—to feel like they were on the brink of death before long.

It was hard for anyone from a civilization like this, where horse-drawn carriages were the norm, to suddenly ride a vehicle that was like something from hundreds of years in the future. It'd be like forcing someone from an uncontacted Amazonian tribe to suddenly ride a roller coaster.

Getting used to that sort of thing took time.

“I’m still amazed *that* was enough to make you both sick... But yeah, you should probably hurry up and get back to Santor.”

“What about you, Iris? Are you going to stay here with Zelos?”

“Yeah. I’ll be safe with him, and I’m kinda curious what sort of classes they have at that magic school here.”

As you know, both Iris and Zelos were reincarnators.

They were both, of course, out of touch with what was common sense in this world, so they needed to gather information about it from all sorts of different places. Iris’s experience getting captured by bandits a while back had left her feeling like she was lacking common knowledge about this world.

And so she was looking to find out about the world alongside Zelos, who was a strong, reliable companion. Having more information was always helpful—that was as true in real life as it had been in the game—and so this was probably her trying, in her own way, to expand her horizons.

“Only students from the academy are allowed to take out books from the library, but anyone can come and read them inside, so it’s the perfect place to do some research. Anyway, are you sure the two of you don’t want me to give you that lift? Even if you’re taking a ship back, it’ll still cost you, you know? Aren’t you worried about losing out on a lot of your reward money from the job?”

“We’ve got the money we made from selling materials—and we’ve already got the money for the ship back set aside, y’know? So yeah, I’ll just take my time and head back with Lena.”

“Are you sure that’ll be okay? This is *Lena* we’re talking about...”

Zelos, Jeanne, and Iris all directed their gazes toward Lena.

She was, after all, prone to vanishing without warning if she spotted a boy who suited her tastes. It was hard to imagine the pair of them managing to head straight back without a hitch.

It was practically guaranteed that Lena would disappear somewhere along the

way, delaying them enough that they missed the ship.

“Th-That’s a bit rude, isn’t it?! However you see me, I do at least think about time and place. Don’t lump me together with your sister, Zelos!”

The other three all had the same exasperated thought: *You don’t get to say that! The instant you find yourself some prey, you go into your own little world and stop caring about anyone else...*

“Even I wouldn’t use the money for our boat trip back to get passionate with some lovely boys! Besides, if Zelos doesn’t vouch for me, I won’t be able to get my reward for the duke’s guard request, will I? I’ll be good.”

*You’re absolutely lying!*

Zelos, Iris, and Jeanne’s minds were perfectly in sync.

“Uh... You were saying recently you didn’t have any money, but then I saw you coming out of an inn, you know? With a group of boys too...”

“Must have been your imagination, Zelos. Or maybe an illusion. I don’t even remember going to a place like that.”

*By “recently,” does he mean...that day she didn’t come back to the church? If she really has forgotten about it, I feel sorry for those boys she was with...*

Either way, the takeaway was that Lena couldn’t be trusted when it came to her love affairs with boys. After all, she’d suddenly disappeared mid-job, only for Zelos to witness her shortly thereafter coming out of an inn. It didn’t seem wise to trust her with any money.

“Okay— Jeanne, here’s the money for the ship. I’ll send my three coccos to guard you too. So if you can just do whatever it takes to make sure Lena gets back to Santor...”

Jeanne sighed. “All right. I’ll take the responsibility for dragging her back. We *do* have to try and stop her from making so many victims... And I know your birds are strong, so I’ll try and use them to help.”

“Also, just in case things happen to go south, I’ll give you this jewel. You can use it to pay for lodging if you need. Just make sure Lena doesn’t steal it from you. I wouldn’t want to end up hearing that she used it to pay for a room to

sleep with whatever group of boys she finds.”

“That’s a pretty big task,” Jeanne said, feeling the weight of her heavy burden. “Hope I’ll be able to pull it off...”

“Hey!” Lena interjected indignantly. “The two of you are being rude again!”

Of course, she reaped what she sowed. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.

And when they were dealing with Lena—whose *habit* of playing with fire could end with her being dragged away by the guards at any time—they had to play it safe. If they could, the others would’ve loved to wrap her up in a mat, throw the Lena-mat in a crate, nail the crate shut, and fasten it with chains for good measure. She was just that much of a liability.

“By the way, what’re you gonna look up at the library, Mister? Magic? Potion ingredients? Oh! Or it could be materials for weapons or armor, I guess...”

“History, for the most part. Bits and pieces about the Faith of the Four Gods, and stuff related to the Dark God. I want to find out how much of my hypothesis is correct—especially seeing as we could get caught up in some sort of weird situation at some point. If there’s information out there to find, I want to get as much of it as I can.”

“Oh... Right. Yeah, I guess there’s that stuff too. Especially for you. You *are* a Great Sage, after all.”

The air went still. All of a sudden, Jeanne and Lena swiveled their heads in shock. “A *Great Sage*?! No way!”

Great Sages were the pinnacle of magic, a job so advanced that its existence was merely a *theory*, with none known to have reached its lofty heights. All you had were legends of a few individuals, and those few had apparently all died out during the Dark God War. Nowadays, a Great Sage was practically a fantasy, a role that only appeared in stories or plays.

They were the very pinnacle of their field, showing true mastery over magic, as well as the ability to create potions and equipment. If it ever came to light that one *did* exist, they’d probably be aggressively scouted by any number of countries.



Jeanne and Lena had never known what Zelos's job was, hence their surprise.

Never in their wildest dreams had they thought that the ultimate mage had been with them this whole time.

Zelos shot Iris a spiteful glare.

"Iris... Have you ever heard the term 'violation of privacy'? You see, I'd really prefer *not* having everyone know what my job is..."

"O-Oh. My bad..."

Iris shriveled under Zelos's glare. Lena and Jeanne, meanwhile, were working themselves into a frenzy.

The existence of Great Sages hadn't even been proven before, after all.

It was merely something that had been passed down through legend and folklore, and the Great Sages in those were inevitably amazing individuals that stood head and shoulders above all other sages. There was plenty of doubt as to whether they'd even been real—and in fact, Zelos's own view was that the legends about old Great Sages were probably just fantasies. It was impossible to master attack magic, recovery magic, alchemy, medicine, engineering, and all sorts of other disciplines in the span of a single life. Most likely, he thought, there weren't any Great Sages out there—or even plain old regular sages—apart from himself.

Legends existed to give people ideals to look up to, and even plenty of people who *weren't* mages idealized the notion of sages and Great Sages. It was almost like a faith of sorts. Those legends inspired many a mage to chase the lofty goal of becoming a sage themselves—though to Zelos, all of this was just a nuisance. He didn't want people having huge expectations of him.

*By the way, it seems like only priests use healing magic in this world, but I wonder if mages can use it too? Well, seeing as I'm able to use it, I don't think it should be impossible for other mages to use it too. I'd love to try and confirm it, but it seems like some other country has a monopoly on healing magic... Well, I suppose now's a convenient time to be curious. I can just look it up while I'm at the library.*

In *Swords & Sorceries*, mages had been able to learn healing magic too—

though with game balance being a factor, they'd never been able to get quite as good at it as priests could. And with Great Sages being essentially a type of mage, it stood to reason that healing magic wouldn't be a forte of Great Sages either.

Zelos didn't know how things worked in *this* world, but if he wanted to learn each job's aptitude for different types of magic, he'd probably just have to test things out himself.

For now, judging by Jeanne and Lena's shocked reactions, he decided it'd be a bad idea to drag out the topic of Great Sages any longer.

If they kept talking about it, and someone else happened to overhear, it'd be more than just a minor nuisance. In fact, it could potentially lead to all-out war. A legendary Great Sage had appeared, after all. There would doubtless be country after country desperate to get him all to themselves.

*I suppose I'll have to make sure Jeanne and Lena stay quiet about my job for now... Hmm?*

As Zelos looked over at the two of them, intending to request that they stay silent about it, he saw them completely agog, just flapping their mouths open and shut like fish struggling to breathe. It seemed like they were still in shock at the news.

Iris waved her hand in front of their faces to try and snap them out of it.

"Gre-Gre-Grea—"

The two of them stuttered in sync, struggling to get their words out. And you could hardly blame them. A legend had appeared right before their eyes.

"Hmm? What are you trying to say? *Great Teacher Onizuka*? Oh, wait—*Great Mazinger*, maybe?"

"Iris? I...doubt that's what they're talking about. Besides—you know Great Mazinger? How old are you again?"

"Wh-What?! What are the two of you even talking about?! A-Anyway! Iris! Is the geezer seriously—"

"Uh, yeah... My bad. I guess that was meant to be a secret, huh?"

“Oh—do you not want to be famous, Zelos? If you’re a Great Sage, I’m sure you could get all the wealth and fame you’d ever want, but...”

“Of course I don’t. I don’t want to have to deal with a stream of state-sponsored cronies trying to scout me. It sounds like a pain—and in the worst case, Luceris and Iris could get caught up in it too, you know? Do you really want to spread the word, even knowing that? Just letting you know, if it *does* get out, I’m running away in a flash, okay?”

“Ah, I get it... So you’re staying quiet because you’re worried the people close to you might get taken as hostages. That makes sense. You’ve got it tough, huh...”

Any country that could keep Zelos, a Great Sage, in its exclusive employ would be able to take on another nation’s entire army with the power of just a single man. He was grossly overpowered. It made perfect sense that he’d want to keep his job a secret.

And yet here was Iris, accidentally spilling that secret. Among the *Swords & Sorceries* player base, it had been common knowledge that all five Destroyers were Great Sages, so she’d just blurted it out without thinking.

“Now, this may be a bit of a basic question, but tell me: Is there really that much difference between a sage and a Great Sage?”

“Huh? I mean... Zelos, if you’re a Great Sage, then you’re incredibly wise, and better at magic than anyone else, right? You’ve made it to a point that nobody else has managed to reach. That’s something pretty amazing, isn’t it?”

“They’re like the ultimate mages. They guide champions from the shadows, and sometimes even save their lives. It’s a legendary job; something everyone looks up to. Right?”

“Hmm... That’s one way of looking at it. But you could also say that they sit around, say wise-sounding words to trick gullible youngsters into fighting, and only lend a hand when they’ve got the perfect opportunity to steal the show. Then at the end, their role is to say something like, ‘Leave me; go on ahead! I’ll hold them off myself, whatever it takes!’ But, er, is that really a proper *job*? That’s just...some poor guy who says some stuff and then gets sacrificed. I know / don’t want to sacrifice my life just to save some bunch of strangers I don’t

know anything about...”

Zelos had a somewhat biased view of sages, but that *was* just about the role that sages filled in the majority of the legends.

Sure, it sounded all well and good to say that they’d “reached the pinnacle of wisdom” or whatever, but when it came down to it, they were scholarly nerds who spent their lives holed up inside. They were more like mad scientists than anything else. There was no way you could expect people like that to fight for the sake of others.

Even if they *did* fight, it was just an excuse for them to test some new invention or theory. They didn’t aspire to some lofty dream of “sacrificing themselves for mankind.”

And as it happened, Zelos wasn’t exactly the self-sacrificing sort.

The others all gave the same sort of response: “Y-You’re right. I guess someone shouldn’t have to devote their lives to other people just because they’re a Great Sage. Still, though...”

But it just didn’t sit right with the three of them. Iris in particular looked crestfallen to have Zelos shatter her fantasies like that. Perhaps this was just what happened when people got carried away with stories and legends.

In reality, nobody could know what any given sage fought for.

“Well, anyway—please just keep this all a secret, okay? It’d be a real pain for me if it got out. And if I get a bunch of people from the state after me, then...”

“Then? Then what?”

“Then this country could very well end up disappearing from the maps, I daresay. I’ll die before I let myself get turned into a tool for the rich and powerful, so if things go south, a war could break out.”

“You say that, but you worked as a private tutor for Celestina, right? What happened to hating the rich and powerful?”

“I just hate people who are slaves to their own greed, to be specific. They make me think of that rotten sister of mine...”

There were probably plenty of people who’d beg to get taught by a Great

Sage. But given how the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, as it stood, was full of magic nobles trying to throw their weight around, their *main* goal would probably be to get close to Zelos and use him to further their own greed.

And if that happened, there would be no avoiding conflict. War would be a real possibility.

Of course, there would probably be some with the pure ambition of reaching the zenith of magical power. Even then, though, just having a few disciples was plenty enough for Zelos already.

He would see anyone who tried to foist authority onto him—citing fame or glory or whatever—only as a complete and utter nuisance.

“Anyway, we’ve gotten off topic. Jeanne, Lena, what time do you two intend on heading back?”

“Oh... The notice board at the inn had a poster that said the regular service for Cezan is gonna leave this evening. We have to get going right away or we’ll miss it. If we *do* miss it, the next one isn’t ’til tomorrow, and we don’t have the money to stay at an inn tonight.”

“She’s right. Even if we get going now, it’ll be half a day on a carriage. Factor in time for the horses to rest, and we won’t be getting there until the evening... Oh. It’s going to be rather close, isn’t it? Still, it’s not like we don’t have enough money for an inn. You just mean we shouldn’t be using money when we don’t need to, right?”

“So you’re being frugal, eh? I swear, what’s Lena been up to for the two of you to need to be pinching pennies when you’re cutting things so close? It looks like she’s got a very healthy complexion to her too...”

“Don’t ask something so private. You should know there’s only one thing that can happen between a boy and a woman: pure, animalistic *lust*...”

“NO!” The others responded together. “That only applies to *you*!”

Even in a hurry, Lena was faithful to her desires. It was like there was a strict mathematical formula inside her mind: *boy + woman = pure debauchery*. And she was convinced that young boys were better than any adult men.

One could only imagine the hardship Jeanne would face trying to watch over her on the way back.

“If she’s refusing to listen to you, and she seems like she’s about to disappear...”

“Then I’ll get the coccos to help me. I don’t think I’d be able to keep her under control by myself...”

“Hey! You’re being a bit mean, aren’t you?”

But it was hardly “mean.” If anything, Lena could be as much of a pain as Sharanla. It was just that she was harmless if you didn’t have to deal with her; as people, they were both massive nuisances.

“Please make sure you’re careful on the ship back. Doubly so if there are any minors onboard.”

“I know. I don’t think that even Lena would be that indiscriminate, but either way, I’m glad I’ll have backup to help me suppress her if I need.”

“*Suppress* me? Just what kind of person do you all think I am?”

Character reference number one, Iris: “A shotacon who can’t hold herself back.”

Number two, Zelos: “A loose cannon who lusts after children.”

And finally, number three, Jeanne: “Some idiot who likes perving on kids more than getting three square meals a day.”

There were both ups and downs to having your comrades understand you.

And this was more than enough for Lena to get an idea of just how she was seen by the people around her.

While it didn’t seem like she was about to self-reflect, it at least succeeded in making her withdraw. *What’s so bad about loving little boys? Even old men out at war start lusting after pretty little boys’ asses, right? It’s not fair...*

Though...did this really count as withdrawing? It was a little hard to tell.

“Um, Jeanne... Are you sure you’ll be okay? This seems...terminal.”

“If she wasn’t like *this*, she’d be a pretty reliable person. Somehow, it feels

like I only get more and more worried about her as time goes on...”

“Well, it *is* Lena we’re talking about. At this point, even if we warn her, I can’t imagine her seriously reflecting on it. I mean... It’s *Lena*.”

The others nodded in agreement with Iris’s judgment.

The only one excluded was Lena, who was just quietly sulking now. She *did* deserve it, though.

An hour later, Jeanne and Lena took the cocos with them and left Stihla behind.

It should go without saying that Lena got distracted by a boy on her way to the harbor.

And it should also go without saying that Ukei and the others responded by giving her a good thwack with tightly clenched fists before dragging her away.

There really was no getting around Lena’s bad habit.

\*

“Over here, Master.”

“Whoa...!”

“This is a pretty impressive place, isn’t it?” *It’s almost like Notre-Dame...*

After separating from Jeanne and Lena, Zelos and Iris made their way to the great library of the Istol Academy of Magic, guided by Celestina.

It looked less like a library and more like a church or a cathedral. Its architectural discrepancies made it clear the building had been remodeled into a library at some point after its initial construction.

The light shining through the building’s stained glass windows illuminated the interior with a majestic glow, creating such a holy atmosphere that it was hard to believe this was a public place.

There was a fairly large space set aside for the students to study in, but even more impressive than that—and the highlight of the building—were the rows of bookshelves. It was hard to even guess just how many books the library must have had in its collection.

“Well, I guess it lives up to what I’d expect from a national library. It’s an impressive collection... Though I don’t know how much of what’s written in the books will actually be true.”

“You sure you can just write them all off like that, Mister? Books are expensive here, right? Wouldn’t their accuracy depend on the country and place they were written in?”

“Yes, but that’s also exactly why they could be biased. Who knows how many books here include different sides of the same story, and whether I’ll be able to figure out the *truth* from all those different narratives.”

Even from a layperson’s perspective, a lot of the books in this world fit the old adage that “history is written by the victors,” so it could be difficult to try and extract an unbiased record of events out of them. Most of them just said whatever sounded most convenient for the winning country, omitting any little details that didn’t fit the narrative.

In other words, if you wanted to unveil hidden information, you needed to know the history of the *losers*—and if you started down that road, you’d probably be searching forever.

With that in mind, Zelos had come here with a narrow focus. He was restricting his search, mostly, to religion.

And before he knew it, two hours had passed.

“So it was after the Dark God War that the Faith of the Four Gods came to prominence. And the Church of Creation, which was the common religion beforehand, has declined. The question then becomes, where did the Four Gods come from?”

“Is it because the God of Creation stopped existing? Or was there a religious war?”

“I tried looking into it, but I couldn’t find any record of a war like that having happened. It’s like the believers of the Church of Creation just all converted to the Faith of the Four Gods. That’s just the feeling I get, mind you...”

“So the Church of Creation was replaced by the Faith of the Four Gods? Without any conflict? Is that even possible?”



Previously, when he'd looked things up in the library at the Solistia ducal mansion, Zelos had failed to find any accounts of a clash between two religious sects.

And yet, according to the books he was reading through now, it sounded like—in the wake of the Dark God War—the Church of Creation had declined and been completely replaced by the Faith of the Four Gods over the course of just 250 years. What was more, the temples that until that point had been devoted to the God of Creation had gradually transformed into temples for the Faith of the Four Gods.

Apparently, this relatively sudden transition hadn't led to any friction at all between the two religions. It just didn't add up.

The Faith of the Four Gods dated back about 2,537 years, when the world had been suddenly overrun by an enormous creature. There had been an advanced magic civilization at the time, which this creature completely and utterly destroyed. The history books even described the civilization having weapons that sounded like modern-day technologies such as tanks and fighter jets, yet the war had been one-sided against them. Eventually, this creature had been given a name: the Dark God.

It was said that when approximately seventy percent of the world's civilization had been destroyed, four goddesses had descended to a temple of the Church of Creation. They were Flaress, the Goddess of Fire; Windia, the Goddess of Air; Aquilata, the Goddess of Water; and Gailaneth, the Goddess of Earth. And when they descended, the legend said, they granted the people seven sacred treasures and the sigil for summoning heroes.

Eventually, by both summoning hero after hero and using human wave attack tactics, the Dark God was sealed away. The Faith of the Four Gods then grew in influence, branching out from the temple where the Four Gods had descended, to spawn a country that had survived to the current day: the Holy Land of Metis.

"The doctrine of the Faith of the Four Gods says that the Four Gods created the world, but I wonder whether that *really* happened..."

"We can't be sure about the Dark God either, right? Was it here in this world

the whole time, or did it suddenly come here from some other world? No one knows, huh?”

“What really gets me, I think, is the question of why they *sealed* the Dark God. I imagine you’d usually rather just destroy something like that. But maybe the Four Gods weren’t actually strong enough to destroy it? Also, from what I’ve been able to find in other texts, it’s around that time that the concept of ‘levels’ first appeared. There are some records that say that only the summoned heroes had levels but nowadays everyone’s got them. So was there a change to the way this whole world works? About two thousand five hundred years ago? Is that even possible?”

“Heroes, huh? I think the message I got from one of the gods mentioned them a bit too, but it really does make this place feel like a game...”

“I wonder what ended up happening to everyone who got summoned? The heroes who survived, I mean. There are no more mentions of them in history after that. Were they sent back home? Or did people decide they were too risky and get rid of them?”

Some of this was speculation, but this was about the best understanding they could glean from the information they’d gathered so far.

Even when you had records in old books, there was a limit to how much you could figure out—especially when some of the books had been altered at certain points in history.

What interested Zelos most of all, though, was that one of the books he’d browsed had a diagram of some ruins drawn in it.

Specifically, it depicted the remains of a kingdom that had been destroyed in a war against the Holy Land of Metis. The ruins looked like an enormous sigil that had been drawn around a single central pillar, like they would’ve been used in some kind of massive ritual.

Zelos had scrutinized the magic letters etched into that central pillar—and he’d been able to understand them.

*If this is true, then the Dark God is... Well, I can look further into that at some later point. And I can ask the individual themselves if it comes to that.*

He had no intention to posit something he had no proof of. It had just struck him as curious, that was all, and so he decided to investigate it.

“Why are you looking through old history books, Master? It seems like you may have some thoughts about the Faith of the Four Gods, but is that just my imagination?”

Upon hearing Celestina—who had just been sitting there quietly and listening up until now—ask her question, Zelos huffed, flashed a nihilistic smile, and turned to her. “I don’t like it. No, no—I don’t like anything about them...”

Celestina probably wasn’t aware, but Zelos held such a grudge against the Four Gods for the situation they’d left him in that it was almost like a mental illness. But it wasn’t as if he hated their devout believers.

All Zelos wanted to know was whether the “Four Gods” were even really gods in the first place. Their true identity would be a deciding factor in Zelos’s future decisions.

For now, if he revived the Dark God without even knowing what it was, he was liable to cause the apocalypse. He couldn’t stand the thought of the world falling into ruin just because he wanted to *ask the Dark God some questions*, so he was being very careful here.

Not that he was telling any of this to his students, of course.

*I’m still a little curious about the Four Gods, but for now, let’s take a look at some books on healing magic for a bit of a breather...*

Casually dismissing the issue, Zelos headed over to a different bookshelf with very light, unconcerned footsteps...

\*

“Setting sail!”

The sailor’s call echoed throughout the harbor dyed red by the evening sun. Dockhands who had yet to finish their tasks began hurriedly loading the last of the cargo.

A port of call for merchant ships, Cezan had many vessels coming and going even at dusk.

Jeanne and Lena scanned the boats, ranging from large to small, before breaking into a run toward a medium-sized merchant ship.

“Lena! Run faster! The ship’s gonna leave!”

“So you say, Jeanne, but...do you even know which ship we’re meant to be getting on?”

“I think it was called the Most Muscular, right? Shouldn’t it be that really dark red one?”

The ship Jeanne and Lena were trying to board was a reddish-brown vessel with a hull that had been treated for rot. Its stern was decorated with a clenched golden fist, which gave the ship a real presence as it shone in the twilight.

Ships were usually supposed to be decorated with a statue of a goddess or some other such thing, while the *names* of the ships were meant to come from saints or women as a charm against bad luck on the waters.

This particular ship, in other words, stood out like a sore thumb. And what was even more unbelievable was its half naked crew. But Jeanne and Lena didn’t have the luxury of being choosy.

“I... I don’t want to get on that ship. It looks so...vulgar.”

“If we miss this one, the next one’s not until tomorrow. It’s the regular service for the day, even if it looks kinda weird!”

“But all the sailors are so...macho. And they’re making weird poses, and giving the passengers these big smiles... Are they bodybuilders, I wonder?”

“Uh, no, they’re sailors, right? And look, all the *other* passengers got on just fine.”

“They seem like they hate it, though. Of course they do. Just *looking* at that crew is giving me a headache. Okay, well, I guess there are a few middle-aged women who seem happy about the whole thing, but they’re after something *else*.”

It was like there was an optical illusion that made the whole ship appear like a writhing mass of biceps.

It was a very *burly* ship.

“Whatever—we’ve gotta get on board!”

“No. It feels like just stepping onto that thing would get me pregnant. Let’s choose another ship.”

“Do you really think we have the money for that?! Sure, Zelos gave me that jewel, but depending on the wind, there’s no telling *how* many days it could take for the ship to reach Santor, okay? We’ve gotta save as much money as we can.”

“But... It’s just not what I’m *into*, you get me? It’s a bunch of big dirty men, and they’re all half naked...”

“Don’t be so selfish. Look, if we were in any other situation, I wouldn’t want to board it either! Besides, most of the sailors are going to be men on pretty much *whatever* ship we take. Not sure groaning about it’s really going to help us here, is it?”

The sailors were all striking a beautiful side chest pose.

Their bodies were as sturdy as the ship they manned.

“Bok.” (“Splendid muscle tone.”)

“Bo-kawk.” (“Indeed. They must have trained quite a lot. We mustn’t let ourselves be beaten.”)

“Caw, ke-keh.” (“I’ve never seen muscles like that before. They’re beautiful.”)

It looked like the coccos approved, at least. They were the physical sort themselves, after all, so it was only naturally they voiced their generous praise for the bodies the sailors had trained so hard to achieve.

And while it...probably wasn’t in response to their praise, one of the sailors looked over, flashed them a brilliant smile and lifted his arms into a ‘v’ to recreate Sergio Oliva’s victory pose.

“Stop complaining,” Jeanne urged. “C’mon, just get on board already! We can’t waste the money!”

“If I’d known this was going to happen, I would’ve held off on whispering

sweet nothings to my little darlings last night. Oh, the hardships of poverty...”

“No, you don’t get to blame poverty for this! You just need to have some self-restraint, dammit!”

Lena was as true to her desires as ever.

“Besides, that kind of muscly—”

Before Lena could finish her sentence, a sensation like lightning shot down her spine.

“Hey, Grandpa, is that the ship we’re going on?”

“Sure is, my little lad! All the sailors on it may be a little bit weird—okay, maybe *more* than a little bit—but that ship’s our only option if we want to get to Mekkahama.”

“Oh. I wanna hurry up and see Mom.”

“Don’t you worry! Just hold on for two or three days and you’ll be able to see her. And you picked her out some lovely souvenirs too, didn’t you?”

“Yeah!”

Walking past Lena were an old man and a young boy who seemed to be his grandson.

When Lena saw the boy, her eyes narrowed predatorily, like a hunter’s, for just a fraction of a second. And Jeanne missed it.

It was an understandable mistake.

Age-wise, the boy should’ve been outside of Lena’s usual range, but some sort of impulsive *something* took control of her instincts.

“Okay. We’re getting on that ship.”

“Uh... What? Lena? You were complaining so much up until a moment ago... What happened?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s like you said; we have to be sensible about money, right? I’ll try to be more careful in the future too. Anyway, it’s fine. Come on, let’s hurry up and get on board.”

*“Sure...” What happened to her all of a sudden? It’s not like her to listen to me like this...*

Jeanne walked up the ramp to the ship, her expression still puzzled.

Something about Lena’s sudden change of attitude didn’t sit quite right with her.

As the two of them boarded, they were welcomed onto the deck by a smiling macho-man making an abdominal and thigh pose. “Welcome. We’re glad to have you on board.”

He might have looked like a wild animal, but apparently he was quite the gentleman.

Speaking of animals: Jeanne had yet to realize Lena’s transformation into a carnivore, eyes on her prey...

\*

Before long, the ship set sail for the city of Cezan.

The sun set to the west, and the curtain of night fell.

With the world veiled in the dark of night, the ship became a hunting ground from which there was no escape.

A hunting ground for the fearsome beast known as Lena.

\*

“Grandpa! There’s a demon! I can see a demon!”

“Hmm? There’s nothing there, boy. Are you sure you aren’t still half asleep?”

*“No! There’s... There’s a woman with a scary face! She’s gotta be a demon!”*

“You must be tired. Ah, well. Come here.”

“O-Okay...”

That night, the boy slept with his grandfather’s arms around him.

He was sure he still felt someone peering at them through the veil of night.

And in a corner of the dark room where the two of them slept, he could just barely make out a manic smile like a crescent moon, floating in the darkness.

The curtain had risen on a night straight out of a horror film.



## Chapter 7: The Old Guy Does Some Research

In the beginning, there was nothing.

An infinity passed, and a god appeared in the empty universe.

The god thrust its staff into the dark abyss, creating light.

Within the light, fire was created. Then the god thrust its sword into the fire, creating earth.

The earth was enveloped by fire. But the god cast writings into the fire, and water was created.

The water wet the earth, and the god held a shield against the water, creating air. And so did the world come to be.

The god placed the world onto a set of scales, and from there arose the laws of nature.

With time, the world became home to a great many life-forms, and they lived in paradise.

Eventually, some of the life-forms in that paradise gained intelligence. Those intelligent creatures moved throughout the land, spreading the seeds of life.

With time, the creatures changed, and formed settlements. As those settlements united with each other, they formed countries that blanketed the world.

Then came greed, and war, and hatred, all spreading throughout the land.

The hatred formed a cycle, and the cycle would never end.

With the cycle came a disaster that took hold of the entire world.

The disaster was a great war, and it marked the end times. None were victorious.

Blood dyed the land red, and bodies piled up into mountains, leaving nothing but silent ruins.

Eventually, all life had vanished, earning the disgust of the great ones above...

\*

And so on and so forth.

Zelos sighed at the stereotypical religious tale as he closed the book on the mythology of the world's different peoples.

All of the books on the shelves here were copies, and if you included every different version that had been rewritten for religious reasons, there was an immense number to get through.

However fast Zelos was at reading, there was no way he could finish researching all of that in just one day.

And so, for today—the second day of his research at the great library—he'd asked a librarian to recommend some texts that met his criteria, picked out a number of them, and gotten lost in flipping through their pages.

In other words, he'd already blown past his initial plans by a day, and now he was regretting not having set aside a few more days to stay at the library.

"Hmm... A lot of these creation myths kind of sound the same as each other, don't they? They all eventually lead to war between the different species—and in the end, the entire world is destroyed by one final conflict. Can't one of these stories have a twist for once? Or does everyone writing this sort of thing just naturally think of the same developments?"

"Uh... What are you even expecting, though?" Iris asked. "It's the end of the world!"

"Oh, no; it's not like I have any particular requests for the end of the world. I'll be dead by then anyway, so thinking about it won't really do me any good. I'm more worried about how I'll pay for my next meal. Or... Hmm. World peace does weigh on my mind a little bit, I suppose..."

"You liar! What do you mean, how you'll pay for your next meal? You're loaded, aren't you?! And even if you weren't, I'm sure you could get by with your survival stuff."

"You've got the wrong idea about me. I'm not some premodern native living

out in the wilderness.”

“People in modern civilization don’t eat bugs!”

Zelos had gotten his hands on some books about creation myths, but most of them were legends from the Faith of the Four Gods, and everything in them had just sounded like your staple fantasy tropes. Finding them kind of fishy, he’d decided instead to look through some older legends that had been passed down about different species.

That had led him to books saying that “the God of Creation created the world, but nothing else; from that point on, they were merely a spectator.” Other books tried to frame the same idea a little differently, saying that “the God of Creation had continued to keep watch over the world,” but there wasn’t a single thing saying that the God of Creation had ever sent divine messages or so on, like the Four Gods had done.

Regardless, the doctrine of the Church of Creation contained nothing whatsoever about the Four Gods or the Dark God, leaving Zelos with no way of knowing how they had appeared.

“Well, setting aside the fact that every religious tale seems to end in the apocalypse, it *does* strike me as odd that none of them touch on the Dark God in the slightest. It was supposed to have caused huge numbers of casualties in a historic war, after all. Yet it’s still a mystery where it even came from...”

“The Four Gods start showing up around the time of the Dark God War too, don’t they? But it’d be weird if the Dark God and the Four Gods hadn’t been in this world all along. Maybe there was something like ‘the Dark God came from another world’ or whatever, but...would it really have been able to slip through space and time to go to some whole other world where the laws of nature are different?”

“There’s mention of heroes being summoned too, but those are also records from the Dark God War onward; I’m not seeing anything about heroes being summoned from *before* then. And the other thing is, the names of those heroes that *are* in the records are all—”

“Looks like there were thirty-six heroes in total, and only five of their names have just barely been recorded. Daisuke Kinjou, Yuki Minasawa, Hiroshi

Yamamoto... They're all Japanese, right?"

"They have to be. Which would mean they were summoned from Earth. But just thinking about it, that'd have to mean a ton of people all went missing at once and I don't remember hearing about anything like that. Were they summoned from some parallel version of Earth, perhaps?"

"I guess that's what it'd mean, right? Seems like it'd be inefficient to summon just a few people from one world, a few people from another, and so on, so yeah, it'd probably be faster to just summon them all from one world. And from one place, all at once..."

Not every hero's name had survived in the records, but those that *had* been recorded were obviously Japanese, and if thirty-six had all been summoned at the same time, it was natural to assume that they'd been summoned from the same world.

If you were the one creating the summoning magic, you'd be aware that summoning a few people from a number of different worlds would require casting the summoning magic over and over again. That would require more energy, making the process inefficient. Plus, you were opening a rift between dimensions, so it was probably difficult to control the summoning spell in the first place.

"Every book says that this summoning magic was granted by the Four Gods. And when I looked through a handful of literature from ancient times, there was nothing in there about magic that can open a rift between dimensions. So does that mean that the summoning magic really was granted by the Four Gods, I wonder? And was it something that *people* were able to use?"

"I don't think we can really know without seeing its formula, right? Not that I'd be able to tell from that anyway... Anyway, I guess the real problem here is the Dark God. I mean, what even is it?"

According to legends and records from the time of the Dark God War, the Dark God appeared one day without warning, wreaked havoc on civilization, and indiscriminately sated its gluttony by devouring species after species to extinction. And it wasn't exactly an easy foe to defeat; with just a single attack, the Dark God could annihilate mountains, boil oceans, and cleave through space

itself.

“It sounds like the Dark God was invincible, doesn’t it?” Zelos mused. “I’m amazed they managed to seal away something like that. You’d assume something along those lines would be unbeatable... This isn’t some anime.”

“Maybe they did the whole ‘winning through hard work and the power of friendship’ thing! Or they came up with some smart plan to finally defeat the big bad!”

“If all these legends are true, it’s not the sort of enemy you’d be able to deal with using just intelligence or bravery. I’ve fought the Dark God myself, and let me tell you, it was a real pain. It completely nullified any attacks with status effects, and certain elemental magic just got absorbed without doing anything. There was no windup before its attacks either, so it’d just suddenly fire off a massive laser out of nowhere. It was launching these crazy attacks at us one after another—one moment it was Dark Judgment, an ultrawide-area destruction spell, and the next it was A Bouquet for Thy Demise, a scattered attack that fired off annihilation magic in every direction. You’re not beating something like that in a proper fight.”

“Sounds like you’d need to be over, like, Level 1,000 to even have a chance, right? Were the heroes really that strong?”

“It’s said that they used the sacred treasures to seal it, but apparently the things broke during the sealing! Wouldn’t have thought things called ‘sacred treasures’ would be so fragile. Also, there’s no record of the Four Gods actually doing any fighting themselves...”

At this point, it was becoming apparent that there was a gap between the power of the Four Gods and that of the Dark God. And if you assumed from there that the Four Gods weren’t strong enough to fight the Dark God themselves, then did that mean that the Dark God was some sort of higher being than they?

“Maybe it was that trope where they used up their power to maintain the stability of the world or something? I mean, there are other religious texts that say similar stuff, right?”

“I don’t think that’s the case here. They just left behind the sigil for

summoning heroes, after all. If they were wise enough to care about the stability of the world, then don't you think they'd be a little more careful about leaving people things that go against the laws of nature—like, you know, a sigil that summons people from another world? If they never took the sigil back, it's hard to imagine that they really care about the world's stability."

Indeed, the sigil for summoning heroes had been left behind in the world—and it was still being used now.

"I looked at one of the newspapers the library has out for people to browse through, and I saw the headline: *Hero Sumeragi from the Holy Land of Metis's Special Order of Knights—How Far Has He Gone with the Saint?! So it certainly sounds like they're still summoning heroes from another world, even now.*"

"Is that even safe, though? If it's anything like in your usual light novel, summoning heroes usually has some kind of risk to it, right?"

"That's certainly possible, but I don't think making a fuss about it here would do any good. It's only a possibility, after all; it's not like we have any evidence. And there might be some sort of mysterious energy we don't know anything about."

It seemed like heroes were still being summoned, and Zelos and Iris didn't know what sort of impact that was having on the world. Since they didn't have any evidence, it wasn't likely they could encourage any sort of investigation into the matter.

"You know, it kind of bugs me that there have been more monsters since the end of the Dark God War. Even if civilization regressed compared to before the war, it's difficult to imagine that affecting the entire ecosystem like that, so I have to assume there's some other cause behind it. I hope I'm just overthinking things..."

The number of monsters in the world had exploded since the Dark God War, and they'd been evolving into all sorts of different species.

Usually, evolution happened over a longer span of time as species adapted to their environments. The way it had occurred here, however, was just too rapid to make sense.

After all, it was so prominent that by the modern day, monster habitats had proliferated to cover the world, and it would be fair to say that it was monsters, not people, that ruled the land. Zelos considered brushing it all off with a casual *well, it is a fantasy world*, but something about it left him with a nasty sense of unease he just couldn't shake.

"I just can't imagine the sort of goddess who'd send me a message like *that* making sure to responsibly manage the world..."

"Yeah, these goddesses do seem kinda... I mean, they're pretty lazy based on what they said in those messages to us, right?"

"Yes. That much is clear... Their personalities are almost more like they're faeries. Hedonistic, curious, and irresponsible. Nuisances that only inconvenience people and get in their way. And they just *really piss me off*. They're like selfish little demons, living their lives on sudden whims... It makes me remember *her*."

"Oh... Yeah, faeries were kinda like that, weren't they? I remember them stealing my items and leaving me in tough spots all the time..."

"Whenever I saw them, I destroyed them, no questions asked. Sure, they looked cute, but those little bodies of theirs were filled to the brim with malice and wickedness. I always just treated them like monsters, really."

"You're so mean..."

"You know, faerie gems—the magic stones from faeries—are worth a lot as alchemy materials. So it earned me a good profit! I burned a whole settlement down, faeries and all, with a Gamma Ray... They'd stolen some really valuable elixirs from me, so I was pretty pissed at the time, to tell you the truth. I'd been saving them up for a fight against a raid boss. A behemoth, specifically. I've got to say, I'm amazed we managed to take down that thing..."

"A behemoth?! You're crazy, Mister! Seriously, how'd you beat it?!"

Gamma Ray was a more advanced version of the Plasma Ray lightning spell.

Like a real-life gamma ray, it could penetrate matter, allowing it to directly damage an enemy's insides. So even faeries, which were semi-corporeal, could be annihilated in a flash.

Faeries' bodies were made up of a combination of mana and substances like dust, so usually, even if you tried to capture them, they'd immediately just disappear and go right back to stealing your items. It made them incredibly annoying to deal with. Plus, they were able to remove the physical matter from their bodies to turn transparent, or do the reverse to take on a physical form, so they could pop up and disappear at unexpected times.

Gamma Ray, however, was able to deal serious damage even to faeries by barraging their magical forms with more than the maximum amount of energy they could handle. It was a brutal weapon against them, that much was for sure. And even if they tried to turn transparent and escape, gamma rays were pure energy. They'd take a direct hit even if they were fully incorporeal. There was no escape.

If you hit a human with it, their blood would boil in an instant, and they'd be carbonized. Any living being would be dead before they even realized what was happening. And while the user would usually have to be scared of radiation exposure, the fact that Gamma Ray was a spell meant that you could nullify that radiation exposure by tweaking the magic formula.

Faeries had a lot of mana, so magical attacks against them didn't really do anything for the most part. But this particular spell could bypass that characteristic to utterly destroy them. It could penetrate through everything, after all, and that included mana barriers.

Zelos had actually made this spell himself; he'd been so annoyed by having his items stolen over and over again that he'd created it specifically to annihilate the little demons. And leaving aside the story of how he'd put it together, the end result was such a brutal thing that you had to imagine he'd packed every last little bit of his hatred into the spell. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say it was nothing *but* hatred. It was practically forbidden magic too; there was no telling what sort of crazy effects there'd be if he actually used it in this world he was in now.

As a side note, faeries were recognized as a proper *species* in this world, so you couldn't just kill them like it was nothing.

The faeries used that as a tool to keep up their mean-spirited mischief, too, so



they were a right nuisance to people just living out their lives in the world. Some people had even had their children, families or friends killed by faeries, leaving a considerable number of people with a grudge against the Holy Land of Metis, which protected the faeries.

As Zelos turned the page of a book by a scholar who'd studied the Holy Land of Metis, he raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Hmm... So they protect the faeries, eh? I wonder what the deal is with that? Why would they want to protect monsters that harm people?"

"Maybe the Four Gods used to be faerie lords, and then they evolved into goddesses?"

"Ah—that old cliché? It's not impossible, but in that case I wouldn't think they'd have enough power to interfere with another world. I feel like we're missing something... I just can't imagine faerie lords having enough power to control the world to the extent that they're called *goddesses*. I'd understand it if we were talking about spiritkin lords, mind you, but..."

"Maybe that's why there are four of them? So they can split up the workload of managing stuff between them and leave each one with less to do?"

"Hmm... If we think of it that way, then things could add up. And it'd make sense then that they'd want to protect faeries, since they'd be their kin."

They were putting together a hypothesis here. They still had no proof, though. It was just tenuous piles of circumstantial evidence, leaving the truth in the dark. And even if the Four Gods really were faerie lords, that still left the mystery of who had given them the authority to manage the world.

As well as, of course, the mystery of who the Dark God was.

"Now that I think about it, that message I got from one of the goddesses said, 'Hard to believe something so ugly used to be a goddess!' So let's say the Dark God really *was* a goddess; why is it that people talk about 'the Four Gods,' not 'the Five Gods'? And, well, why would it?—she?—want to destroy the world?"

"Could it be that the God of Creation failed? They were trying to make goddesses to their liking, but then they screwed up and, like, made an ugly one? So she felt bitter and tried to destroy the world? That'd be funny!"

“Surely not. It probably went down a little differently. But yes, it’d be quite the funny story if that was how it went... Aha ha ha.”

Zelos couldn’t outright deny her idea, but it was hard to believe such a pathetic story would be true.

Regardless, without knowing what the truth actually *was*, there was no point in sitting around putting together theories like this.

Leaving aside the matter of whether each of their guesses was right or wrong, this research session in the library was done for now. It was time for the next item on their agenda.

“Anyway, how about we put the books back on the shelves and get going? I’m feeling kind of hungry now, so let’s go and find somewhere to eat.”

“Sounds good to me~! I am so tired... Collecting information takes a while when you actually get to it, huh? Nothing like in the game!”

“That’s just how reality goes. I suppose the world of *Swords & Sorceries* was the weird one for having random townspeople know secrets about things like relics. There were so many times I wondered, *Wait, where’d you even learn such an important piece of information?*”

“Yeah... It *is* weird, isn’t it? Especially if that world wasn’t actually a game, it’s kind of strange that it was so convenient. I mean, the settings of other games are just as weird too, now that I think about it.”

“Game worlds are always going to have a lot of strange things about them when you compare them to the real world. It’s pretty unnatural for the ‘hero’ to go rummaging through strangers’ houses to take their items, for example.”

“Oh! Yeah! That! When it’s a game, you kind of just accept it, but if you think about it realistically, it’s just crazy. Like, logically, the hero would just be a burglar, and they’d get arrested if they were found out.”

Now that Zelos and Iris had finished what they’d come here to do, they were chatting about common tropes in RPGs.

Indeed, there were all these instances of game protagonists strolling right into someone else’s home and taking their items, or even stealing valuables from a

castle—and when you thought about that in terms of reality, it just sounded like someone abusing the title of ‘hero’ to nab whatever items they wanted.

Sure, these were fantasy worlds the two of them were talking about, but...well, they were *in* one such fantasy world right now. And if they acted the same way as they would have in one of those games, they’d get arrested as criminals for sure.

In fact, one of their fellow reincarnators had tried to build himself a harem of slaves, only to get turned into a slave himself as a result. Reality was a harsh mistress.

“Going into someone else’s home without permission is...” Zelos paused for a moment to find the words. “Well, in regular terms, it’s just a home invasion, isn’t it? It’s amazing you never get reported to the guards for that.”

“Yeah! And even when some suspicious guy bursts into their room and starts rummaging through their drawers, the person who lives there just kindly tells them whatever they want to know; like, how good-natured *are* you, seriously?! Sometimes they even give you a weapon that’s an old family heirloom or something.”

“That does happen, doesn’t it? And then you just sell that heirloom to a merchant in the next town.”

“Either that, or you’ve already got another weapon that’s the same. So right after you put in the effort and save up the money to buy it, you get another one for free. What’s up with that? Makes me want to say, ‘I put in so much effort saving up to buy that,’ y’know? It happened to me once, and I was *so* disappointed. I didn’t even have any other characters who could equip it.”

“Apart from that, you can get things like, the sword you were given breaks in an event protecting the protagonist’s life, and then later you get it repaired and it’s stronger, but you still don’t use it much, and it just sits there in your storage. Logically, making a new weapon from scratch would be more reliable than trying to fix a broken one, right? Why reuse the old scrap iron? And since it’s a story item, you can’t even sell it.”

“And then, like, there’s a weapon vendor that’s just selling a weapon with higher attack power anyway!”

The two of them continued their silly little chat as they returned their books to the shelves.

Some of the books had to be taken up to a vault on the third floor, but they kept yammering on as they made their way up the stairs, not even considering the bother they'd be causing to people around them. A librarian who came across them sent an incredibly nasty glare their way, but neither Zelos nor Iris noticed.

"You two! This is a public place—can you please watch your volume? There may not be too many other people here today, but we still ask that anyone in our library shows a minimum level of etiquette. Do you understand?"

"Sorry..."

As you'd expect, the librarian told them off.

It served as a reminder for the two of them to watch their behavior in public.

\*

A short distance away from Zelos and Iris, Celestina was constructing a magic formula by herself.

When Celestina had returned to the academy from the training camp, Miska was nowhere to be seen. All Celestina had found was a single letter saying, "I have been summoned by His Grace. Please do not look for me." It had left her confused.

Fortunately, she was able to look after herself. But being in her dorm room all alone was lonely, and so she was spending another day passing time in the library.

She'd thought she was used to solitude, but the loneliness still got to her sometimes. Honestly, she was a little jealous of Iris, who seemed to be having fun chatting with Zelos as the two of them did research.

It was with that jealousy swirling through her mind that she went at her daily practice creating magic formulas. She was testing the creation of a layered sigil, but it was no easy task—if the sizes of the top and bottom sigil layers were even a little different, there would be problems with the formula processing sigil, or

the sigils sandwiched between them.

What was most difficult about layered sigils was that they were made by dividing your instructions for the spell into multiple different formula components that then all had to be linked together. Even the slightest misalignment would place a burden on the overall formula, damaging the mana efficiency of the spell.

Plus, if you divided up your magic formula, etched it across multiple sigils, then optimized each one, each formula component would end up with a different density, making it hard to get the sigils to a uniform size.

“I’ve heard that if you set your mind to it, you can form it into a cylindrical shape, but it’s rather difficult to divide a magic formula between multiple sigils... And you have to consider how you want to arrange the divided formulas too. It’s so much harder than just working with a flat sigil.”

The sigil Celestina was trying to make at the moment was for an improved version of the intermediate spell known as Lightning Shot.

It was an area spell that fired several balls of plasma, and it could only attack in front of the caster, so if you tried to bring it to a close-quarter fight, you’d get surrounded and hit before you could spread out your fire enough. But before the little plasma balls began shooting out, the spell first formed a big *orb* of plasma that they came from, so Celestina was wondering whether it might be possible to instead make several of those orbs that floated in the air around her so that they could double as defense.

There was, after all, a difference between the firepower of the plasma balls that were shot out across an area and that of the plasma orb they were created from.

The plasma orb was much more powerful, but there was only one of them. So if you wanted to use it as area magic, you first broke it up into countless smaller shots, each of which would have considerably less firepower than the orb. The properties of the attack changed too; the singular plasma orb would explode, while the smaller balls would penetrate foes, allowing the caster to adapt to whichever the situation called for.

But if Celestina tweaked the formula for her improved Lightning Shot spell to

give it a component that let it use mana from nature, she was going to end up with a rather warped, cylindrical sigil.

Taking the size of the control formula into account, she had to make sure the overall sigil had a stable form, or it could conversely *increase* the burden on the caster. In the worst-case scenario, it could even double the amount of mana required to cast the spell.

Celestina was having a tough time trying to strike the right balance.

“If I don’t make the formula more compact somewhere, the layered sigil’s going to end up warped. I have to summarize one part or another, but where...?”

It wasn’t like the teachers at the academy could decipher magic formulas, so there wouldn’t be any point in asking them for advice.

There was Zweit, but he was only as skilled at it as she was, so the two of them racking their brains over it together still wouldn’t be enough. And Zweit was at a meeting for the Wiesler faction right now anyway, so he wouldn’t have the time.

Croesus was another option, and he was actually in the library right now. But he was in the laboratory part of the library, investigating the “??? Booster” that he’d discovered on his way back from the training camp.

As for *why* there was a laboratory in the library, the reason went something like this: When all sorts of documents were kept in the library anyway, it’d be inefficient to have to carry them all the way to a separate laboratory whenever you needed them, and then carry them all the way back when you were done.

If you wanted to look things up as you researched, this library lab was a convenient spot. But since there were a lot of students who used it, there was, for convenience’s sake, a limit on how long you could spend in there at a time, and you had to fill out a form in advance if you wanted to use it for longer than that.

Fortunately for Croesus, some acquaintances from his Saint-Germain faction had borrowed it for the day, so he was able to take advantage of their reservation to hang around the laboratory for as long as he wanted. It seemed

like he could have quite the cunning side to him.

In his *own* laboratory, he had all sorts of different substances lying around, and he'd realized there was a risk of them reacting with each other if they got the slightest chance. So he'd quite abruptly come up with the idea of using the library's laboratory instead.

Though, well, it hadn't *all* come down to his own realization. Makarov and the others had played a pretty big role in getting him to stop using his own laboratory too...

Anyway, the point was, Celestina couldn't rely on either of her siblings to help her decipher magic formulas right now. And she felt a little awkward about asking Zelos for help at the moment, so she was just stuck alone with her whirlpool of worries.

"This is tough... I didn't have any problem making a layered version of Torch. I know magic formulas are going to be different depending on what rank a spell is, but I didn't think the sigil was going to be *this* hard to decipher..."

"Ah—you see, you've divided up the other command formula too much. You should be good if you combine everything from the first formula through the third into a single sigil. Then just work on getting them all uniform, and I think you'll end up with a nice, neat final product, okay?"

"Oh, I see! But in that case, the size of the processing component would be..."

"The processing component's there to process the formula as a whole and tie it together, so couldn't you just change the size of the sigil? You shouldn't really need to bother tinkering with the formula inside."

"Ah! I thought that if I made that sigil bigger, I'd have to also change the density of the sigil that processes the magic formula, but...it sounds like I don't actually have to do that, right~?"

"You don't have to think about it too hard. If a sigil's just there for processing the formula, then it's fine as long as it fulfills that function. Then you just change the size of each other sigil to match, and—well, there you have it, you've suddenly got yourself a nice little layered sigil ready to go!"

"I think I get it n— Wait. Master?!"

When she turned around, she finally realized Zelos was standing behind her.

He must have started watching her work at some point. He was holding an unlit cigarette between his fingers, and a female librarian was glaring daggers at his back.

Most likely, it had gone something like this: Zelos had tried to have a smoke after finishing his task, only to have a librarian spot him and get mad. Then, when he'd diverted his eyes, he'd just so happen to spot Celestina sitting nearby.

This was, by the way, a different librarian from the one who'd warned Zelos and Iris earlier.

"Um... Master, you do know you're not allowed to smoke in here, don't you? You should probably put that cigarette away..."

"Aha ha ha... Yes, I'm really getting glared at, aren't I? I just took one out of my pocket out of habit, and she happened to spot me. I could've started a fire if she wasn't here... Ahh, daily habits can be a scary thing."

"Tobacco smoke can damage books, so I think it's obvious the librarians would get angry at you... And even without the librarian, I feel like you should remember your manners."

"It was something I did subconsciously for the most part, really. I just didn't think. By the way, there's something I wondered when I was looking things up: Where does that hallway over there lead to? I saw some students heading down it earlier."

"It goes to a laboratory. Students who don't have their own proper research facilities use it to make potions and so on. I saw Croesus going that way with some other students earlier, though."

"Croesus, eh? I must admit, I'm a little curious to see what sort of research he spends most of his time on. I'm sure he's having a jolly good time in there right now."

"I...can't say you're wrong. He was disturbing people with his experiments even when we were in the Ramaf Woods, after all..."



“Oh—yeah, there was a guy making all this suspicious-looking smoke one time, right? So that was your brother, Celestina?”

“I-Iris?! How long have you been...?”

Having just finished putting away books herself, Iris had spotted Celestina and suddenly called out to her from a blind spot.

It seemed like both Zelos and Iris had a tendency to surprise people like this.

“Anyway—stuff the academy’s researching, huh? I’m kinda interested. It’s...not gonna explode or anything, though, right? Like,” Iris continued after a pause, “it explodes, and then your hair turns into an afro, and you start foaming at the mouth?”

“It’s not some old comedy skit we’re talking about here, Iris, so I don’t think that’d happen. Besides, I don’t think there’d be any teachers who’d get their students to do such dangerous experiments anyway.”

“Oh—that does happen, actually. The explosions, that is... You can’t really predict how one potion will react with another, so students always set up a barrier first before they start an experiment. Research is always going to have some danger to it.”

“So this is a more dangerous place than I thought, huh? What sort of crazy things are they making their students do here? And what would they do if someone died?”

The academic world could be a treacherous place here. Sure, you had your regular old lectures, but you could also get explosions, or poisonous gases wafting about the place. It was almost like if the army was openly carrying out R&D for weapons right in the middle of a public space.

What was more, the state’s special forces were on constant watch for the worst-case scenario, prepared to come in and rescue the students in the case of an emergency. Following from which, it was only natural to assume that such emergencies had already occurred multiple times in the past to prompt the formation of those special forces. It seemed like crisis management here was a little different to back on Earth.

And what was scary to think was that even if someone did die from a research

accident, it would just be passed off as an accepted risk.

“It sounds like there should be protections in place in case an experiment goes badly. And more thorough safety measures for the experiments themselves, I suppose... Still, at least it seems like they’re doing *something* to mitigate the danger.”

“I’m sure they are, but accidents still happen fairly often, apparently. And I hear most of them are my brother’s fault...”

“Is your brother, like, the mad scientist type, Celestina? The kinda guy who’d just accidentally make something super dangerous?”

“Research is everything to him. So, yes, apparently people don’t even know how many dangerous substances he’s made up to this point. He says the only way to make progress is by experimenting over and over again, but I hear he even made something that could cause a war if it got out... I don’t know what exactly it was that he made, but apparently the older students who were doing the research with him were given a gag order.”

Zelos had memories of doing similar things plenty of times himself back in *Swords & Sorceries*.

He’d collect huge amounts of materials, experiment with them over and over again in whatever way struck his fancy—creating dangerous equipment as he went—and then go out looking for an unlucky ganker to use as his guinea pig.

One of his companions had even perfected a potion that sent you into blissful delirium.

In straightforward terms, they engaged in human experimentation. And that went for *all* of the Destroyers; they were all birds of a feather with Croesus. That included Zelos, of course, so he didn’t have even the slightest right to criticize someone else for it.

“I can’t just shrug this off and forget about it. It’s like seeing my own evil deeds in the mirror; it hurts my conscience. Phew... I suppose *I* was doing something extremely wicked too.”

“*Was* doing? Past tense? You still *are* doing it, Mister. Just look at how strong those cocos have gotten! It’s crazy!”

“All I’ve really done is spar with them in the mornings, though. Besides, don’t you think it’s wonderful how they’re trying so hard to master something? Even if they *are* monsters.”

“I...sort of wonder whether those coccos of yours can even lose to anyone at this point, Master. Apparently they were even defeating what were clearly high-rank monsters with a single attack, and I heard something about them temporarily turning into an evolved form of themselves... I never knew monsters like that even existed!”

“Changing forms is pretty common among dragons, though, isn’t it? Their appearance changes when they get angry, and some of them even transform into an entirely different form altogether. Blade dragons, in particular.”

Blade dragons weren’t that different from any other dragons most of the time, but when they got into a fight, their entire body morphed into a form that was effectively covered with swords.

Their wings turned into terrifyingly sharp blades too—strong enough that regular weapons wouldn’t stand a chance against them. And their scales and other body parts changed form when provided with mana, so they were great materials to use if you wanted to make a transforming weapon.

“Um... Master? Dragons are practically the things of legend. You’ll never find one around here. About the most you’ll find is a gavurre, I think.”

Gavurres were small dragonoids, and even solo mercenaries could stand a chance at taking one down. In *Swords & Sorceries*, they were the first dragonoid monsters you fought, serving as a tutorial of sorts for getting used to fighting dragons.

“Oh... Those. They’re technically dragonoids, I suppose, but they’re the weakest ones you can get. You can take them out with just one shot from a ballista, can’t you?”

“I think you’re about the only person who can say that, Mister... Even I’ve only beat them, like, twice before, with allies. I think it’s just that proper dragons are crazy strong...”

“Well, they *are* the strongest species. They’ve got massive bodies, and the

mana and stamina to match. Add their levels into the equation, and of course they'd be powerful. Not to mention their skills..."

"How strong even *are* dragons? If I remember, Mister, you beat something of dragon king class, right? Fighting a raid boss with just one party...?"

"Ah... Yeah, I wouldn't suggest doing that. Fighting for so long at once is hell. I *strongly* recommend you never copy me. It was a tough enough fight to turn us into nervous wrecks, and it went for a whole day..."

The Destroyers were the only ones who could have pulled something like that off.

They'd kept themselves hidden throughout, going for the enemy's weak points from its blind spots over and over again, and kept it up for hours on end. It was a crazy strategy.

Other parties had gotten caught up in the battle, but Zelos and his companions hadn't minded; they'd been perfectly happy to use those other parties as bait. By the way, staying hidden throughout the whole fight had improved his assassination skills—that was how he'd gotten his Assassin job skill up to the highest rank, Divine.

In other words, they'd never once gone after the thing in a head-on fight. It had been nothing but a *hunt*.

*M-Master... Just from what you're saying, could it be that you were doing something very reckless? I'm interested, but I'd never have the courage to go through something like that myself. Still, I'd love to hear the details...*

Secretly, Celestina was brimming with curiosity about the tales of her tutor's brave exploits.

"Anyway, setting aside the talk of dragonoids, I'm interested to see what Croesus is getting up to."

"The laboratory is open to the public, so you can go there and have a look as long as you don't get in the way! I'd like to ask you not to touch any of the equipment, however..."

"The guy using the lab right now is your brother, right, Celestina? I'd be too

scared to try something like that. I wouldn't want to set off some chain reaction that makes something blow up."

"I don't think even *he* would be causing explosions quite so freque—"

*BOOOOOOOOOOM!*

"...Oh. Perhaps he just did."

"Guess your brother lives up to expectations, huh? I wonder what kind of experiment he was doing?"

"Oh—you had expectations for him, Iris? Anyway, I say we should go and make sure nobody there's been hurt. If anyone is, I can heal them."

"O-Of course. If they're badly injured, that's one thing. I just hope nobody's died already...!"

The three of them walked from the main part of the library to the hallway, and from there, Celestina showed the other two the way to the laboratory.

Along the way, Zelos started noticing a sort of citrusy smell in the air. He was confused.

It was the kind of smell you'd expect from the room of a woman living by herself. But for some reason, neither Celestina nor Iris seemed to have noticed anything at all. Zelos found that to be strange too.

When they arrived at the laboratory, they saw equipment scattered all over the place, and a big yellow stain on the ceiling. In the middle of the room was a big, mysterious cauldron; it was the sort of thing you could imagine a witch brewing potions in.

The cauldron was still about half filled with a yellow liquid the same color as the stain on the ceiling. And from the state of the room, it seemed like some reaction or another had caused this liquid to explode, forcefully erupting up out of the cauldron.

Zelos's Appraisal skill activated all by itself to give him some information.

## Extra-Strong Breast Enlargement Potion

A wonder drug that fulfills the dreams of flat women everywhere.

Drink it, and you too can have the gorgeous body you've always wanted! Say hello to a new you with big, sexy badonkers!

Just one spoonful, and it's goodbye to your A cups, hello to your new Z×10 cups.

Use it while it lasts!

\*

*Croesus... What exactly were you trying to make here? Besides, going from A cups all the way to Z×10 cups... What would that even look like?! Anyone careless enough to drink some of this could end up with their breasts dragging on the ground... Or, wait, would they just be crushed to death by their own fat?! This is quite the dangerous drug, isn't it?*

This time, it seemed, Croesus had created something that could lead to wars for a *different* reason.

What was more, it was far too potent to have any practical use.

Nonetheless, it marked the creation of a prototype that stood to strike a revolution in this world's beauty industry.

## Chapter 8: The Old Guy Joins Croesus for an Experiment

Take one look into the library's rental laboratory, and you'd immediately know something had just exploded there.

Fortunately, while some of the students had gotten caught up in the explosion, they all seemed to be fine.

And while it *was* a bit of a disaster scene, the bright yellow stain stretching out across the ceiling didn't exactly shout "disaster," nor did the citrusy smell wafting through the air.

"Are you okay, Brother? You're not injured, are you...?"

"Oh—Celestina? I'm perfectly fine. It's just the usual. I had a barrier up, so I don't even have a scratch."

"That's good, then. Still, what happened?"

"I was trying to reproduce that mysterious booster in bulk so I could do some tests on it. But then some other ingredients nearby just happened to fall in, and..."

"And then it exploded? What fell in there, anyway? I can't imagine what would've caused something like *this*."

"If I recall correctly, it was...a growth stimulant? One that Makarov had made to use on plants."

Zelos slowly nodded.

If it was a growth stimulant that had fallen into the cauldron, then it made sense that the mixture could turn into this "Extra-Strong Breast Enlargement Potion." That left the question, then, of what the booster itself was—though whatever it was, it probably did something vaguely similar to what was in the cauldron now.

“Why, that was *most* unpleasant! I was *not* expecting to have to deal with an explosion today...”

“Oh!” Iris said. “You’re here too, Caro! Wait—so you’re in the same faction as Celestina’s brother? Good thing the explosion didn’t burn your eyebrows off, huh?”

“Would you stop calling me ‘Caro’? Though, yes—’twas my very own great-grandfather that established the Saint-Germain faction. It is only natural that I, his descendant, would be a member as well.”

“Huh! Sounds like you’re from a pretty fancy family, Caro!”

“N-Not in particular. I am merely careful to avoid bringing shame upon the names of my ancestors, that is all...”

“Sounds like you’re working hard! I should do the same. I wanna get my mercenary rank up nice and quick so I can go into dungeons.”

“I-I am only doing what is obvious. It is nothing deserving of praise.”

Carosty’s cheeks looked a little red as she spoke; it seemed like she wasn’t used to these sorts of compliments. Perhaps she was a bit of a tsundere?

“Anyways,” Zelos chimed in, “Croesus—what were you trying to make here? Whatever it was, you’ve gone overboard...”

“Oh! Mr. Zelos! I didn’t notice you were here; that gray robe of yours can make you hard to spot. Anyway, it seems you’ve come across me in a bit of an embarrassing moment. I certainly wasn’t expecting the mixture here to explo— Wait. Mr. Zelos, are you saying you know what this potion I’ve made is?”

“Yes, and I can see it causing some trouble. It’s called an ‘Extra-Strong Breast Enlargement Potion,’ apparently. It makes your breasts bigger, as you may expect. And it’s *incredibly* potent. Dangerously so.”

A silence fell over the room.

The male students were the first to break it, responding with a synchronized, “What the hell do you mean, a *Breast Enlargement Potion*?!”

The female students, meanwhile, had dangerous gleams appear in their eyes.



“I-If I drink that, then... Then *I’ll* have...”

“That sounds wonderful! It’s a girl’s dream potion. I must have some...”

“My boobs... I can make them *something*! I can say goodbye to the flat girl I’ve been all my life! I can already see the promised land...”

“Finally, just like my mother, I’ll be able to have... Yes! Yes, I have to drink some, whatever it takes...”

“I-If I can just get my hands on this, I’ll be able to take down that guy who called me flat...”

Then, all together: “*Give it to me!*”

The girls all stood and started shuffling like zombies toward the cauldron filled with Extra-Strong Breast Enlargement Potion. There was an unhealthy gleam in their eyes—like they were in critical condition from some kind of dangerous virus—as the urge to fulfill their dreams took hold of them. All of a sudden, any sliver of sanity was gone from their minds.

The potion’s allure had enraptured them all, suddenly turning the room into what felt like a scene out of a zombie apocalypse.

“O-Oh, no! Boys! Hold the girls back! If they drink that potion, they’ll regret it for the rest of their lives!”

“Huh? Wh-What’s even—?!”

“Hurry up! If someone drinks even a sip of that stuff, they’ll be done for! Defend that cauldron like your lives depend on it!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

While the boys were still bewildered, a threatening glare from Zelos got all of them scrambling to hold the girls back.

But the girls—captivated as they were by their desires—were incredibly strong. Strong enough that they were beating the boys in a show of physical strength, when it would usually have been the opposite. The boys formed a barricade with their bodies, but they were slowly driven further and further back as they struggled desperately to hold back the encroaching horde.

It was an impressive feat of strength from the girls, almost as if some sort of physical limiter had been removed from them.

“Why... Why are you getting in our way? Every girl dreams of finally having her own  $\omega$  (*omega*)...”

“I’d do anything for bigger boobs! Even have a passionate kiss with another girl as part of some big, booby fusion... If you’re going to stand in our way, then we’ll have to destroy you...”

“If you’re going to get in our way, we’ll have to defeat you. Breasts... Finally, ample breasts... Aha ha ha ha ha...”

“E-Even Celestina is...? Are you really all that obsessed with making your breasts bigger?! I knew girls cared a lot about beauty, but I never thought it would be this...terrifying.”

“I-It’s no good! We can’t hold them off! How are they even pushing us back like this?! They just aren’t stopping... Is this what they mean by ‘girl power’?”

“We’re getting pushed back! How are they so— *Glhk!*”

“S-So this is  $\omega$  power... Wasn’t that meant to be some secret power hidden away in a labyrinth or something?!”

“I’ve never even heard of something like— *Wargh!*”

The girls let out a synchronized chant of, “Useless, useless, useless, useless, useless, useless, useless, useless!”

The boys couldn’t hold them back.

For the first time in their lives, Croesus and the other boys were trembling in fear at the girls.

An extraordinary obsession over breasts and a longing for their personal ideals of beauty had transformed the girls into monsters.

But Zelos was just in time. He leaped over the human barricade the boys had formed and stood in front of the cauldron, blocking the girls’ path.

“*Phew...* Are you really so desperate to make your breasts bigger?”

“Of course we are!”

“And you’re *sure* you won’t regret it? Even if the potion doesn’t do what you’re hoping it does? You’re *certain*?”

“R-Regret? Why would we regret it?!”

“Most likely, if you drink this stuff, your breasts will end up way too big. Unreasonably big. You won’t even be able to move anymore. Heck—the weight of your own breasts could even crush you to death. But...well, the choice is yours. Do you *want* to be test subjects? It’s up to you.”

The girls stopped in their tracks. There was such an amazing miracle drug right before their eyes, but at the same time, it sounded like taking it would be a big risk.

If their emotions got the better of them for just a moment, they could make a decision they’d regret for the rest of their lives. To drink, or not to drink? That was the question.

Silence ensued.

“Well, it *might* be usable if we can tone down the potency somehow, but I still get the feeling it’d have some kind of weird side effect. What *is* that booster that’s in there, anyway...?”

“Oh—that first one I made? It’s here.”

Croesus showed a substance to Zelos, who immediately used his Appraisal on it.

\*

### Female Hormone Booster

Drink this and you too can be an eternally beautiful, young-looking girl—however old you are!

This booster can also be turned into pill form. And it has good compatibility with nutrients, so you can even use it in supplements!

Please check the directions before taking—especially if you’re a girl who’s still going through puberty.

This stuff is really concentrated, so dilute it before you take it, 'kay? Oh, and if you're a man, make sure not to take it. If you do, even by accident... Well, you might never be able to turn back. Like me~! Ehe ♡

\*

"As if I'd ever drink this! And who even wrote this, anyway?!"

"Wh-What did your Appraisal show you? Does this booster have some sort of effect that'd make it a bad idea to drink it...?"

"Well, it'd be a bad idea for men, at least. Unless you're willing to get in touch with your feminine side to test it out, that is? Sounds like you might end up as a woman forever if you do, mind you..."

"Wh-What do you mean, end up as a woman?!"

Croesus had made something ridiculous. Something dangerous.

If you were a man, especially, it was nothing but bad news; not the sort of thing advisable for a researcher to just create on a whim. After all, it sounded like there was already at least one person for whom it was too late.

And even setting that issue aside, this wasn't something that you'd want to just start selling. Not without being *very* careful. People might even be willing to start *wars* to get their hands on a potion like this.

Ever since the dawn of history, there had been plenty of people who cared a great deal about their beauty. Cleopatra was one example; Yang Guifei would be another.

There had also been plenty of rich and powerful men who wanted their wives to stay forever beautiful. And sometimes, they had been willing to commit acts of terrible violence in pursuit of it. It was with all this in mind that Zelos finally gave the students a proper explanation of what the potion did.

Leading to one response from the girls: "It's every woman's dream potion!"

And another, quite different one from the boys: "That's *terrifying*!"

On rare occasions, students would drink experimental potions like these

themselves to find out what they did. But if a *male* student had drunk this particular potion, they'd have started growing breasts, and who *knows* what else would've happened. The boys could hardly think of anything that scared them more. And there would have been no going back.

"Th-That was close..."

"Yeah... We were talking about having some of us try to drink it to find out what it did, weren't we? If not for this guy, we could've all been *girls* by now..."

"I coulda wound up trapped in a woman's body... Damn, that's scary. Guess we got saved in the nick of time."

"There really *is* a god! And he's a shady-looking guy in a gray robe!"

Having been saved from their potential fates just before it was too late, the male students were deeply thankful to Zelos.

But Zelos and Croesus were reacting a little differently to the information about the potion.

"This is quite the effect, isn't it? Hmm... Would you mind sharing some of it with me? There's something I'd like to try out."

"Oh! So *you're* going to try to do something with it, Mr. Zelos? It really does have some fascinating potential, doesn't it? So, what do you intend to use it for?"

"You see, there's a potion that..." he began, trailing off into a discreet mumble. "So I'm very interested in seeing what happens if we mix this with that..."

"That *does* sound interesting. Intriguing, even. It's certainly worth running some tests on, at least. Aha ha ha..."

An alliance was forming between two individuals you did *not* want to see in cahoots.

Zelos and Croesus seized one another's hands in a mighty handshake. They were really hitting it off now.

That would have been all well and good...except that both of them were mad scientists.

“Well, then, let’s get straight to testing. I suppose we should start by trying to dilute it, eh?”

“Of course. Heh heh heh... I’m very interested to see the results. This is fascinating, really. How long has it been since...”

“Nyeh heh heh heh heh...”

And so, the two of them got started on their own little experiment, ignoring the surrounding students.

As with any dedicated crafters, once they started working on something, they wouldn’t stop until they were finished. Though that could be a worry when they were working with—and, arguably, *were*—dangerous chemicals too risky to mix together...

“You can do it, Mister! Let all of the flat girls out there hope! Let us *dream*!”

Iris was incredibly fired up too. But at this point, Zelos was so absorbed in the task at hand that he didn’t even hear her. Both he and Croesus had some amazing looks on their faces.

\*

It had been an hour since the two mad scientists had sprung into action together, and finally their hands came to a stop, having completed experiment after experiment.

“It’s done! Finally, we finished it! The wonder drug every man’s dreamed of at least once in their lives...”

“I... I didn’t think we’d actually be able to make it. This has been an incredible experience for me, Mr. Zelos.”

“Oh, we’re only just getting started. We won’t even know for sure what it does until we give it a test run, after all. Now, we should’ve weakened the effects with all that, but let’s get a basic idea of what we’ve got here...

*Appraisal.*”

\*

Temporary Sex Change Potion (Lesser Feminization-only

Variety)

A man who drinks this potion will be temporarily transformed into a woman.

The effect lasts for approximately one hour, though this duration can be extended by taking an additional dose while under the potion's effects.

While the imbiber's sex will change, their gender and personality will not. Note: this is a joke item, and the effect is only temporary.

*Sigh.* If only this had been the first version to be made. Maybe then I could've... But it's too late now, isn't it? I already took the other one...

\*

"Seriously, who even *are* you?!"

The Appraisal skill was kind of fishy. There was clearly some third party providing the information. And while usually that information—detailing an item's effects and so on—would just pop up in the user's mind, this time it had been read out in a cheeky voice.

Zelos found it obnoxious to hear his own skill sighing at him with a sense of ennui.

"Anyway, I'm amazed we had to dilute that stuff you made at a twenty-to-one ratio... Just how concentrated *was* it? And *how* was it so concentrated?"

"Hmm... You know, I think I should revise this recipe right from square one. Still, I never thought I'd actually get something like this finished, in any form. I've been curious about it for quite a while, though, to tell you the truth. About how I would've looked if I'd been born a woman, that is."

"I suppose every man thinks about it at least once, eh, Croesus? I'll pass on it, though, mind you."

A chorus of "*Whaaaaaa—?!*" rang out from the bystanders.

“Well, all it does is turn you female for a little while, so it won’t do anything if a girl drinks it. Though if the concentration were any higher, you’d end up stuck like that, so we’ve diluted it quite a bit... The undiluted form is dangerous, so I’ll take that with me for safekeeping. Okay?”

“Yes. If you took it straight, it’d turn you into a woman forever, so we need to make sure there’s no chance of somebody doing that by mistake. I wouldn’t mind handing it over to someone who really needs it, mind you... Is there anyone here who wants to become a full-fledged woman? Makarov?”

“S-Stop looking at me like you’re expecting something!”

Croesus was even willing to use his friends as test subjects if it helped him find out how his potions worked.

He looked like a nice enough guy, but on the inside, he was a proper research fiend.

“I suppose we can go looking later for someone who really wants to become a woman. For now, though, who’s going to take this Temporary Sex Change Potion? Are you going to try it out yourself, Croesus?”

“As if you even need to ask! Why do you think I decided to make this potion in the first place? Now, Mr. Zelos—are you, by any chance, interested in seeing another side of yourself as well?”

“Oh. No, I just thought, *We happen to have something interesting here, so I wonder if we could make use of it?* Now that we’ve actually made it, though, I’m not really interested anymore.”

“Hmm. So you’re not particularly interested in experiencing it firsthand? You were just enjoying the process of making it, for research’s sake? Still, we do have quite a lot of it here, especially now that we’ve diluted it... What should I do with it?”

“Mmm... It’s not like I can make use of it much either, as you may expect. Especially given that it only lasts for an hour. Hmm... Would everyone here like to try a bit of it? Apart from the girls, that is.”

There were easily more than fifty doses of the potion lined up on the tabletop.



Since Zelos and Croesus had diluted the potion to weaken its effect, there was a lot of it now. They'd just been trying to create a joke item that could be used for fun, but they'd ended up with a lot of prototypes.

The original, undiluted substance—a Complete Feminization Potion—was dangerous to just leave out for someone to drink on a whim, so they'd bottled it up separately from the diluted potions, labeled it, and put it on a different table.

Zelos, for his part, had a hobby of collecting weird and interesting items like these, even if he didn't intend to use them, so he'd stored away a number of Temporary Sex Change Potions and Complete Sex Change Potions in his inventory. He'd left some behind for the students to do research on, though.

Yet even with all that accounted for, there was still enough potion left for all the boys in the room to have a try. They'd clearly made too much.

"Who here would like to try some?" Croesus asked. "I'll be taking some myself, so if you're interested, feel free to join me!"

A throng of boys responded: "Leave it to me! I wanna see how I look as a girl! As long as we can turn back, I'm all in!"

"I'd heard the Saint-Germain faction was full of researchers, but I would never have thought they were *this* inquisitive... Practically all of them have agreed to it, haven't they? They're *heroes*."

Researchers had a strong sense of curiosity about the unknown. And every boy in the room was expressing his willingness to take part. That even included the other students who'd been using the laboratory, bringing the total number of participants up to thirty-two.

They were all research nuts. And once they'd each been given a test tube containing a dose of Temporary Sex Change Potion, Croesus led a toast.

"Everyone's got one now, yes? Oh? Makarov, you've decided to join in as well?"

"Well... It'd be weird to say no given all the excitement, wouldn't it? I don't wanna be the only one left out."

“Ah. Well, then, getting back on track—a toast to this new chapter in the history of potions! Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

“Dunno if this is really worth all the hullabaloo... Ah, whatever.”

As researchers, these boys found joy in discovering and perfecting new drugs, and they were willing to put their own bodies on the line for this experiment. Fortunately, Zelos’s high-level Appraisal skill had already confirmed it was safe—though without him here, they might well have ended up doing something that couldn’t be undone.

It wasn’t exactly a smart approach to science, all things considered.

All together, each boy put one hand on his hip and gulped down the potion from the test tube held in his other hand, swallowing the greenish liquid in one go.

But they’d made a major miscalculation. Male and female bodies were built differently, so if a potion really *was* going to change your body to that of the opposite sex, it would mean *reshaping* that body. Painfully.

Or, in other words:

“AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!”

The boys screamed, unable to endure the agony.

Bones cracked and flesh tore as the boys writhed in pain. All of a sudden, the room was like a scene out of the apocalypse, filled with excruciating, torturous cries.

They were getting a taste of hell, unable to endure the sensation of their bodies changing.

“Mmm. I kind of got the feeling something like this would happen... I mean, any transformation like this is going to have to reshape your whole skeletal structure.”

“Is that why you didn’t drink any yourself, Mister? Because you knew this would happen?”

“Oh, I didn’t *know*. It’s just that... It’s not like humans have some ability to reshape their bodies like my coccos do. The human body isn’t made for suddenly changing like this. So I just figured that if a human drank a potion like this, then, well, this is probably about what’d happen. That’s all. I *am* glad I didn’t drink it, mind you.”

“Still sounds like you were expecting it, though. And you didn’t say anything. You’re *terrible*... By the way, I got you some tea. Here.”

“Ah, thank y— Mm?”

Zelos took a sip of the tea that Iris had handed him without much thought. It was only *after* that sip that he noticed he was holding not a teacup, but a beaker filled with a green liquid.

Green liquid that was, of course...

“Iris... You... You *tricked*...m... *GWAAAAAARGH!*”

“Sorry, Mister! I just really want to see how you’d look as a girl~!”

“*Ngh*... *ARGH!* A-A *girl*, you say, but— *GLRKH!* I’ll just be some...middle-aged lady... *GYARGH!*”

“Master? As a woman?” Celestina mused. “I can’t even imagine it. I’m kind of excited to see...!”

“You called the man terrible, Iris,” Carosty said, “but it seems to me like *you* are the crueler one here...”

For the next fifteen minutes, incomprehensible screams echoed throughout the laboratory.

“*NGRAHYUBOURGHAKLEEE!*”

But then, finally, Zelos and the boys were released from their torture, their transformations complete.

“C-Croesus... You’re Croesus, right?!”

“Indeed. And you’re Makarov, yes? You’ve gotten rather cute.”

Croesus had turned into an intellectual-looking beauty with straight blonde hair and a clear, refreshing look in his eyes, while Makarov had turned into a

lively, sporty type, with short hair and a bit of a tan. Both had transformed into charming girls.

“B-Brother... Or, no, should I be calling you Sister? You’re beautiful...”

“*Dammit!* Why’d you have to be born as a guy?! You’re *super* hot! Argh, I don’t wanna fall for *Croesus!*”

“I believe you should look in a mirror before you speak given how you look right now, Makarov. It’s important to have some self-awareness.”

“Urgh... See, you’re even talking like an upper-class lady now! How does being a girl suddenly make you so different?!”

Croesus was, in fact, talking like he always did. But now that he was a girl, his words had an entirely different impression on those around him.

Throughout the room, the boys were borrowing mirrors from the girls to look at their new bodies from various angles.

There was a real range of transformations, from those who looked plain ol’ cute to those whose reaction to seeing their feminine selves was *yeah, okay, no. Just no.*

“Oh! What about Mister!”

“You’re right. Where did Master get to...?”

“Jeez, what a horrible... Wha—?! What the heck is *this*?!”

Two big, ripe watermelons were growing from Zelos’s chest. He’d have loved to see it on someone of the opposite sex, but when it was his *own* body, transformed into a woman’s, it just terrified him. And the rest of his figure, from his messy, grown-out hair to his droopy, narrow eyes, gave him a strangely sexy appearance.

He looked young too—you certainly wouldn’t think he was around forty years old—and most of all, he was a real beauty. Everyone was lost for words.

His slightly dirty gray robe now instead gave off the impression of a seasoned mage, a high-rank sorceress who wandered the land. And he was perfectly giving off the aura of a sexy, adult woman.

It was enough that the (feminized) boys couldn't stop themselves from gulping. Zelos was the perfect beauty, forty-year-old man or not.

"Whoa, Mister... You're *super* pretty! Look, here's a mirror..."

"Master! You're so...beautiful!"

"Why, it is as if he is a different person altogether! This potion could be quite the frightening thing..."

Zelos himself was silent as he looked at his reflection.

His face, however, turned pale, and for some reason he began to tremble.

"*Ngh...* Just kill me!"



The first words that came out of his mouth, spoken in a husky, feminine voice, were a classic trope—the line you might expect to hear from a captured female spy or soldier in a more seedy sort of media.

“*Why*, though?!”

“I never thought the girl version of me would be a spitting image of *her*... How am I meant to endure this?! This is a nightmare! Let it be a nightmare! I want to forget it ever happened! If I can’t, I’d be better off dead!”

“Was your sister really this beautiful?! And just how much do you hate her, seriously?!”

“I want to kill her. Then turn her into mincemeat. Then toss the mincemeat into a nuclear reactor. Then throw the nuclear waste into a black hole. All that comes after giving her a taste of real despair, mind you. *That’s* how much I hate her. Ugh, this really is a nightmare...”

To Zelos, seeing this feminized version of himself was nothing but torture.

In short, he hated Sharanla so much that he wanted to erase her from existence itself, and he simply couldn’t overlook the fact that he’d transformed to look just like her.

“Yeah. Let’s do that. Let’s just die. I’ll get things started, then someone, please, cut my head off to end me. I can’t deal with this.”

“Do you seriously hate this enough that you want to commit *seppuku*?! I know you hate her, but...*really*?!”

“I have not the strength to endure this disgrace. The only path left for me now is to die an honorable death, to cut open my belly in a final display of my sincerity. I ask only for one last show of mercy: take my head and end it all. Let this be my final request!”

He was so disgraced by what he’d become that he was resolving himself to die.

“But, Master, you’re *beautiful*... ≡” A blush appeared on Celestina’s face.

“Wha—?! So it’s *that* bad...”

Zelos suddenly pulled out a folding fan and began to recite an ancient poem in a lilting tone.

“Even the 50 years~... Of a man’s life~... Is short, compared to that of this world~... Life is but a dream~... A vision, an illusion~... Life, once given~... Cannot last forever~”

“*Atsumori*? You hate her enough to start dancing around and singing *Atsumori*?! We’re not at Honnoji, you know?!”

“Cannot last forever~ Now—let it be done!”

“Don’t you ‘let it be done’ me! Stop that! Stop wrapping that knife in paper and getting ready to cut your stomach open!”

“I cannot bear the disgrace of taking the form of a sworn enemy! Allow a samurai this mercy! Allow me to die!”

But nobody here was willing to finish him off with a beheading. Ritual suicide wasn’t exactly a custom in this world.

He was just confusing everyone around him.

“Be it so, then... I shall see it done myself!”

“Wait, why are you drawing your swo— Huh?! Are you really gonna try and cut off your own head?! *Stop!* Someone, help me to stop him! I can’t do it myself!”

“Let go of meeeeeee! Let me dieeeeeee!”

“W-We are in the castle, Sir Zelos! A samurai must not draw his blade in the castle!”

The onlookers finally got the gist of what was happening, and hurried to help.

Shortly thereafter, the students tied Zelos up against his will, and he was left like that until the effect of the potion wore off. His wailing kept up the entire time; it went to show just how deep his hatred of his sister went.

It was on this day that Iris came to really understand how bad the relationship between the two siblings was.

What she had intended as a little prank had turned into a catastrophe that



had left Zelos longing for death.

She took it as a lesson. A lesson that there are some things in this world that are better left undone...

\*

“Fuck. Fuck! *FUCK!* That foul, *wretched* Zweit...”

Nobody had seen Samtrol since the students had returned from the Ramaf Woods.

Even before the trip, the only people who’d been around him had been the bloodline supremacists—who took pride in the ancient magic that had been passed down through their bloodlines, and made no effort to better themselves beyond that—and the students that Bremait had been controlling with brainwashing magic.

And those bloodline supremacists had gotten close to Samtrol in the first place because they’d thought there might be some value in getting access to his family’s authority. They’d never cared about Samtrol as a person.

The brainwashing victims, meanwhile, had started to break free from the spell’s effects without Bremait there to reinforce it, and by now they’d largely regained their sense of self.

What had really snapped them out of it had been the moment they’d witnessed a mage girl—only about the same age as them—show her mastery over the area spell Explode. The girl was a mercenary too, only further reminding them of just how little effort they’d been putting into their own lives. Iris herself hadn’t meant to do any such thing, but her actions had delivered a real shock to the brainwashed students.

Sure, the students had known that some mercenaries were mages, but they’d been convinced that none of those mages were able to use high-rank strategic magic like Explode. So when Iris had shattered their notions of what they’d been sure was reality, the brainwashing magic placed on them had taken a major hit and, before long, worn off.

Brainwashing magic was inherently like that; it could be overcome by mere fluctuations in the target’s mind or emotions. It was delicate, difficult-to-use,

and easily undone by sudden bursts of emotion.

It was hard for such magic to even work unless you cast it over and over again, yet the slightest little thing could render that effort all for nothing. And if that happened, the only option was to start the brainwashing process all over again.

To add insult to injury, Bremait had vanished. Samtrol had viewed Bremait as a trusted confidant, and it had only taken a few days after the latter's disappearance for Samtrol's whole life to come crashing down. Though he deserved it, of course.

Just now, Samtrol had picked a fight with some thugs in an alleyway in Stihla, only to lose, get walloped instead, and end up shoved into a rubbish heap.

"If only... If only I was *stronger*, they would've been..."

"Hey. I've been watching you for a while now. They roughed you up pretty good for a little noble boy, huh? Bet you've just been relying on other people's power this whole time and got screwed now that you don't have it anymore, right? *Pathetic*."

"Wh-Who are you even...? Fuck off!"

"C'mon, don't try to look cool. It only makes you seem even lamer. Besides, I've got a little something here that could make that dream of yours come true. What do you say? Wanna buy it off me?"

This man's getup was clearly as suspicious as the crass smile he flashed while looking over the scene.

"Something that can...make my dream come true?"

"Mm-hmm. Use it, and you'll suddenly have power surging through you. Using it *too much* would be a horrible idea, of course. But, well, that's up to you."

"It's dangerous, then, isn't it? Do you really expect me to use something like that?!"

"It's a compound, of sorts. Of course it's going to be dangerous if you take too much. But, what, do you seriously think you can get stronger without any risk? Are you a coddled little baby?"

When Samtrol had returned alone from the Ramaf Woods, he'd received a letter from the Wiesler marquess house—his family—informing him that they were cutting ties with him. His maids had whisked him out of the dorm, and he'd been left all alone in a spacious room.

The letter had read something like this, in essence: *We'll pay for your expenses at the academy until you graduate, but after that, your life's your own. You aren't allowed to use the authority or wealth of the Wiesler house. Usually, you would be executed in such circumstances, but the ducal family, in its mercy, has decided to let you live. Be grateful.*

It sounded like his family knew about the assassination attempt—based on which Samtrol could only assume that Bremait had ratted him out. Regardless, the letter made it clear: He had lost everything. Yet still, he blamed it all on Zweit. He was beyond help.

A major part of his grudge against Zweit came from the fact that both young men had royal blood flowing through their veins. Samtrol's maternal grandmother was a half sister of the previous king; if you ignored the order of succession, he was in a similar situation to Zweit.

However, his mother was pregnant, and he would have a little brother or sister before long. If it was a brother, that brother would probably be brought up as a backup to inherit the family—and if that brother happened to be a prodigy, then Samtrol, who was already a second son, could fall to an even weaker standing.

The Wiesler house had a meritocratic side to it. That was why Samtrol had been so desperate to show results, even if it meant using his family's authority and his royal blood as a shield.

Samtrol might have had royal blood in him, and been in the order of succession to the throne, but as second son, he wouldn't even inherit the marquess house. And to someone as prideful as him, comparing his own situation to that of Zweit—who similarly had royal blood—left him with a deep, ever-growing hatred toward the boy.

After all, Zweit was the presumed heir of his family, and that family was a *ducal* family. That made Samtrol envious, of course, and his envy had led to

animosity. And in turn, he had decided to use Bremait in a ploy to take over the faction.

It had felt so good, seeing Zweit brainwashed and obeying his every word. But when the summer holidays had finished and Zweit had returned to the academy, he hadn't been brainwashed anymore. And it wasn't just that: Zweit had turned into a force intent on eradicating Samtrol's control over the Wiesler faction.

It had left Samtrol panicked—and, at the same time, jealous of Zweit's talents. So, ultimately, Samtrol had decided to cross the line. Before long, one thing had led to another, and he had ended up where he was now. He no longer had anything left.

"Fine, then. I'll buy this compound of yours."

"Aha ha ha... Pleasure doing business. Oh—try to only use this when you've leveled up a bit, all right? It's a pretty potent thing you've just bought. And *don't* try to use too much of it—got it? This is your warning, kid."

"I've bought it, and I will be the one who decides how I use it!"

"That so? Well, it's nothing to do with me anymore. Later."

As soon as the deal was done, the man wasted no time disappearing.

Left all alone at the scene, Samtrol unwrapped the bottle the man had handed him and poured the powder within into his mouth. Immediately, he was stunned by its effect.

"Heh... *Ah ha ha ha ha ha!* What *is* this? This feels amazing! It's like there's power surging through my whole body! This is the best feeling ever. Hyeheh heh heh... Let's start off by dealing with those bastards from earlier."

Samtrol broke into a run, and before long, he found the thugs who'd beaten him up earlier.

He pulverized them until they were on the verge of death.

\*

Three people were watching Samtrol from afar.

One of them was a male mage, while the other two were women, including one mage and one spellsword.

“So he used it right away, huh...? Didn’t he listen to your warning?”

“Whatever. Doing this lets us get rid of the Dark God Stones. The world’ll have one less idiot in it—but hey, the people of this country should be thankful for that, right? We’re doing something good here. Anyway, that kid who bought it... He’s really going for it there.”

“Lisa... We’re not here for petty little things like this, you know? The people we *really* need to take down are...”

“*Them*. I know. And *this* country’s not our target. We’ll need those guys from the Kingdom of Isalas to dance for us a little bit. Yeah, it hurts my conscience, but we don’t have the luxury of playing nice. And they’re just using us too, anyway.”

“Just thinking about it, there’s no way a little country like that could win against a big country like this, right~? Well, they’re poor, so I get that stealing territory is the only way they can get by. Anyway, you’re so *mean*, Ado...”

The Kingdom of Isalas, which the three here were helping out, was home to the descendants of royals who’d once built a unified nation. At one point, it had succeeded in obtaining huge amounts of land, and had restored it all to build a great empire. But ultimately, that empire had failed to maintain itself, and the country had come crumbling down, until it had been reduced to a minor power once more.

And recently, monsters from the Far-Flung Green Depths had started invading Isalas with increasing frequency, exposing the impoverished citizens to danger as they went about their daily lives.

The country urgently needed a safe place for its people to live; it *had* to wage war against other countries if it was to survive. And so it had been sending spies throughout the land to gather information on foreign terrain and armies.

“I don’t think they’ve got any chance of invading this country. Especially with those big pillars that got built upstream on the Aurus River...”

“Those pillars had those carvings of, like, anime characters and robots, right?”

So whoever made them must have been...”

“A reincarnator. Yeah. I fought a guy who seemed like he might fit the bill, and he was *tough*. Anyway, shouldn’t we try to level up a bit? *They* have a lot of high-level people, and you can’t fight a war with just a few people.”

“No chance. We don’t have the time. And I don’t want to fight fellow reincarnators. We’re all victims of the same thing.”

“Hey, it’s not like *I* want to fight them either... Anyway, first off—the beastfolk. We need to win back their freedom. And win their trust.”

If these three were to achieve their goals, they’d need a fighting force—and they’d need to make progress on some preparations.

Fortunately, their target wasn’t the Magic Kingdom of Solistia. After all, none of them were itching to get into a war with a country that was home to fellow reincarnators.

Ado and the other two continued to tail Samtrol, hoping to get a better idea of what this compound they’d handed over to an underworld organization would do.

Their hope: to adjust it, as best they could, so that it caused minimal harm to the residents of this world.

## Chapter 9: The Old Guy Takes a Detour

“Are you really going back so soon, Master?”

“I am. I don’t want to leave my fields alone for too much longer. Who *knows* what they’re looking like already...”

“You haven’t even been here that long, though, right? C’mon, Teach—surely it wouldn’t hurt you to just stay a *little* longer?”

“No can do. And it’s not just the fields; I need to take care of the cocos as well.”

And so, the next day, Zelos and Iris exchanged their farewells with Celestina outside the academy library, ready to depart for Santor. Zweit and Croesus were there too, as was a girl dressed like a ninja—Anzu, another reincarnator.

As Zelos puffed on a cigarette, he turned his gaze to the ninja girl, who was standing next to Zweit.

“Are you sure you want to stay here, Anzu?”

“Mm. If I’m with Zweit, I won’t go hungry.”

“Brother?”

“Brother...”

“Zweit...”

Zelos, Celestina and Croesus all turned toward Zweit as they spoke. All of them were filled with suspicion—suspicion that Zweit, driven by some kind of perverse motive, had used food to *tame* this girl, who was still very much a child.

Iris didn’t say anything, but she was sending Zweit an incredibly cold look all the same.

“Wh-Why are you all staring at me like that?”

“You should know better than this, Brother. She’s still so *young*... At least give

it a few years.”

“Huh? You’ve got it wrong, Croesus! I’m not into kids!”

“I read in a book once, you know, that sometimes men can start to feel a desire for underage girls...”

“What sort of books are you reading?! Anyway, I’m not into that shit, okay?!”

For some reason, Anzu had ended up living in Zweit’s room. And she was shameless enough to demand food from him without a lick of hesitation. Zweit was equal parts amazed and exasperated by her attitude.

“Are you acting as his bodyguard, by any chance?” Zelos asked.

“Mm. In exchange for room and board...”

“I’m sure he’ll be able to rest easy with you there!” Iris said. “But I admittedly would’ve liked to have talked to you more.”

“Is she really that special?” Zweit said. “She looks like she’s just a kid!”

“Oh, yes.” Zelos said. “She’s *strong*. That’s not something I say about many people, but she’s one of them. By the way—what about Eromura?”

Eromura, the young knight, was also a reincarnator.

At the end of the training camp, he’d been escorted to the local guardroom, where he’d undergone questioning. And since he’d ultimately betrayed the criminal organization he’d been with to side with Zweit, it was going to be Delthesis, Zweit’s father, who decided what to do with him.

Zweit himself, of course, had sent his father a letter vouching for Eromura. It was a beautiful friendship between two young guys who’d both had their woes with women.

“Well, it *does* sound like he really gave the guards a good beating that one time. I suppose he’ll just have to wait in a cell until His Grace has made a decision...”

“I mean, he’s not a bad guy. It sounds like he just...got the wrong idea about how things work, and he messed up as a result. He just should’ve thought some more about what he was doing.”



“So he’s a moron.”

Iris didn’t hold back.

“Well, I’m sure the boy’ll be out soon enjoying the sweet taste of freedom. Now, then—the next time I’ll be seeing you all is when you have your winter vacation, yes? Study hard until then!”

“I wanna go do some more fighting practice...”

“I’ll pass on that. My time is better spent on research.”

“Brother...” Celestina sighed. “It’d still help you to level up, you know? Even alchemists can be sent to the battlefield in emergencies, after all. And you use mana when researching too, so you really *should* try and level up.”

Ever the shut-in, Croesus cared more about researching than leveling up.

But there was no denying that gaining at least a few levels would help him with his research.

It was a quandary for him.

“I’ll see you again when you’re on winter break, then.”

“Later, Celestina~!”



With that, Zelos and Iris started walking toward Stihla's north gate.

The other four stayed and watched until the pair disappeared from sight.

\*

"Hey, Mister... Are you planning to go back by bike?"

Zelos and Iris had just exited through Stihla's north gate and gotten a short distance away from the city. Zelos had just been about to take his Harley-Sanders Model 13 out from his inventory, but he paused after hearing Iris's question.

"Yes, that's what I was thinking. Nice and quick. But... Why do you ask?"

"Aww... Do we really have to get back in such a hurry? That's boring! We're in an *isekai*, you know? C'mon!"

"Well, I suppose we'll get back to Santor quickly enough anyway as long as we ride along the highway. Even if we take our time, there are only about two villages along the way. Looking at the map, they're both...little farming villages, I think? I suppose the fact that it's faster to send cargo by ship here means that the villages along the highway never really developed that much. I wonder if they have any inns?"

"By the looks of it, taking this way back is kinda a detour anyway. While if you go by boat, you have to rely on the current, and it's kinda slow. So it's not really about which way is *shorter*... Anyway, Mister, that doesn't matter! Let's do some *adventuring*! It's an *isekai*!"

"Adventuring, eh...? I suppose. As long as there's something interesting in these two villages, that is..."

Zelos went back to taking out his Harley-Sanders Model 13. He swapped out the rear for a second seat and then straddled the motorbike's black frame.

Just following the highways would get you to Santor, but this highway took a detour around the mountains to merge with the Far-Flung Highway. And even from there, it was hardly a straight line to Santor.

This was because the highway zigzagged a lot in order to stay away from the forest—the Far-Flung Green Depths, specifically—and keep travelers safe. The

result was that taking this route by carriage would be slower than just going by ship.

“Well, for starters, how about we get to a village? If I floor it, we’ll reach Santor in a day, but if we take it nice and easy and stick to the speed limit, we’ll probably get there around midday tomorrow.”

“The *speed limit*? This thing doesn’t even have a speedometer.”

“Eh, we’ll be fine as long as I don’t go *too* fast. Let’s just take it nice and easy heading back.”

“I still can’t bring myself to be all, like, *yay~* ♪, and get happy about this... I think it’s the motorbike’s fault. I mean, we’re in an isekai and the motorbike doesn’t exactly fit the fantasy vibes...”

Despite Iris’s grumbling, the Harley-Sanders Model 13 quietly roared to life and set off toward Santor.

\*

“Hey, Boss... Ya sure it wasn’t a mistake to go after merchants here?”

“Maybe it was. About the only ones taking this road are government carriages on the way to the fort. And if we go after *them*, it ain’t gonna end well for us.”

“Don’t them merchants just use ships anyway? They barely even take this road, right? We’re gonna *starve* to death if we keep waitin’ ‘ere!”

“Mmm... But the highways that merchants *do* take a lot are in other bandits’ territory. They’d kill us if we stepped on their turf. Some of ‘em even ‘ave mage dropouts and stuff helpin’ ‘em out...”

“Yeah. We’re just small fry, huh...?”

In this world, there were a fair few people who could just never get things to go their way, no matter what they tried.

And that included these bandits, who were lying in wait for targets along the highway to Stihla. Now, these bandits weren’t moral paragons, but they weren’t exactly terrible villains either. Most of them had been born farmers, but their rough, brutish attitudes had alienated them from their fellow villagers. Eventually, they’d been driven out from their villages and, with no place to call

home, formed a group with like-minded individuals.

But however much of a big, strong brute you were in your little rural village, you'd come across no end of people far stronger than yourself once you got out into the wide open world.

These guys had thought they were real hotshots, but once they'd left their villages behind, they'd come to learn how tough the world could be. And yet they clung to their former glory, unable to actually move forward in their lives. They were failures.

Even the "former glory" they clung to was nothing but baseless dreams. Back in the day, they'd used their reputation as tough guys to try to act like big men in their little villages. They talked about making it big one day, but it never amounted to anything.

They were a pitiful lot that aimlessly followed wherever their lives took them, never really giving it much thought.

"Eyy, boss! Somethin's been heading our way for a while! It looks like...some kinda magic tool, I think? And it's *huge*! What *is* it?!"

"*Huh?! Gimme a look at that!*"

The boss of the bandit gang snatched the telescope—which the group had bought with what little money they'd managed to scrounge up—from the lookout, and peered through it at the highway in the distance.

There was, indeed, a black *something*, like nothing they'd ever seen before, flying down the highway at an impressive speed.

"Looks like our luck's startin' to turn around, eh?! We sell that, and we'll be rich!"

"Hyeh heh... No more poverty for us! *YEAH!* Let's get 'em! And then I'll... I'll get some dentures made for me granny! She's got no teeth, so she ain't been able to eat anything hard..."

"I'll get a whole lotta money and make a name for meself! Then I'll show me little brother just how cool his big bro really is! And I'll let me sick ol' Pops take it easy!"

“Yeah! Once I’ve got me some money, I’ll buy a wedding dress for me little sister... Just you wait! You can count on your big bro, I’ll show ya!”

“I’ll... I’ll finally be able to pay ya back, Ma! I’ll give it my best shot, Ma!”

These weren’t actually bad people at heart. But at the same time, they *were* getting ready to commit a crime, so you couldn’t exactly praise them for it.

Not that they were going to succeed, of course. They didn’t know it, but they’d chosen the worst possible target to try to steal from...

“Split up! Left an’ right! Get yer bows ready!”

“B-But, Boss... I’m almost outta arrows. We’re broke, so I ain’t been able ta buy any for a while now...”

“Just...use what ya got. It’ll be better than nothin’.”

“Ugh. My sword’s all rusted out... Guess I shouldn’t be surprised. It was a real cheapie anyway...”

“You could at least take better care of it... Argh, fine. I’ll lend ya my knife.”

“I’ll finally be able ta send somethin’ back ta my family. It’s been so long...”

“Yer little girl’s gonna be turnin’ ten this year, right? C’mon. Let’s get this done, and ya can buy ’er a nice pretty dress.”

In fact, not only were these ‘not bad people’—but it seemed like they were actually pretty nice guys.

Setting that aside, though, it was time to focus on their target: the mysterious black object. Which was heading at them faster than any carriage ever could...

Panicking, the bandits got into position on either side of the highway, preparing themselves to strike as soon as it was time.

And then...

VRRRRRRRRR...

“I-It’s comin’!”

The mysterious black object was letting out a high-pitched sound that the bandits could hear as it got closer and closer.

There were two people riding on top of it, so it was a vehicle, apparently.

The bandits had a problem, though: They didn't know how to *stop* this vehicle.

"Get those ropes tight! Don't let 'em get away!"

"Roger!"

The bandits had set up three ropes blocking the highway. They'd probably be enough to stop your regular old carriage. But this black vehicle was a different story entirely.

Somehow, it managed to use a slope alongside the highway to accelerate and launch itself into the air, clearing all three ropes.

*NYOOOOOOOOOM!*

"*Wha—?!'*"

At the same time, a mighty *whoosh* echoed throughout the area, and the bandits suddenly felt...weightless. Before they realized it, they'd been tossed into the sky.

The black object, meanwhile, had cleared the ropes and landed, and passed right under the bandits without incident.

*"GWEEERGH!"*

And of course, the bandits fell to the ground.

Fortunately for them, they all fell into the forest, the soft mulch of the ground cushioning their falls. None of them were badly hurt, but they also had no idea what had happened.

*"Ouch... What was that?"*

*"Booosss! It's all..."*

*"What's— GAH?!"*

As the bandit boss stood up, he saw that apart from the very thickest trees, which they'd used to secure the ropes across the highway, the forest on both sides of the road had been wrenched out of the ground, exposing bare earth. In other words, it was clear that the bandits—who'd been hiding in wait on either

side of the highway—had been hit with some sort of massive attack spell.

They all seemed to be fine, so that was all well and good, but that was surely just because their attacker had held back.

If the person firing off that magic had been serious, they'd all be dead by now; that much was clear.

"I... I think I'll get me a proper job. No way I can make a livin' like this if people like *that* are using the road."

"I'll go back ta the sticks and apologize to me ma and pa. I've been so stupid all these years. B-But... I'll have ta get me some money to send back to 'em first. And how do I get it...?"

"Wonder if the missus'll forgive me? 'Aven't been back in three years now... I ain't even got money to buy 'er a souvenir."

"Now that I think about it, it'd be hard ta show our faces ta our kids when we're doin' *this* for a livin', huh? Even if we buy somethin' for 'em, it'd be dirty money, so..."

"Uh... Hang on. Can't we all just start workin' as hunters? We've gotten half decent at that these last few years..."

The other bandits all responded as one: "***YER RIGHT!***"

It would've been nice if they'd realized that a little sooner.

Either way, though, today was the day that every member of the bandit brigade decided to wash their hands of crime and set out on new careers as hunters.

Not long later, the pelts they brought back with them managed to sell for a high price due to their premium quality, and eventually, they used the money they made to form a big hunting troupe.

For its first proper activity, the troupe went out on a three-day hunt, bringing back all sorts of pelts that they then sold to major stores, earning them a solid reputation. Of course, they received considerable money for their goods as well, and it wasn't long at all before they were richer than they'd ever been in their bandit days.



Their families wept for joy when they returned, thrilled to see that the rough kids they'd never been able to handle had turned a new page in their lives.

It was a real triumph in the lives of these former bandits.

\*

"Hey, Mister—why'd you suddenly use an attack spell?"

"Oh—didn't you see? There were a fair few people on both sides of the road, and they'd set up ropes across the road to try and cut us off. They *had* to have been bandits, however you look at it. Surely I'm allowed to give them a bit of a thwack as we go past..."

"Sure, but did you have to cast *Tornado* out of nowhere?! I feel like that's kinda overkill..."

"Would you rather I'd used one of my magic items? The thing is, in *this* world, my magic items always seem to have more of an effect than I expect them to. And I was hoping to not destroy *too* much of the nature here, you see..."

When you used a carefully crafted weapon from *Swords & Sorceries* in this world, it tended to be stronger for some reason. Whether the reincarnators' abilities were just that much more powerful here or there was some other factor at play, Zelos didn't know. He also couldn't help but feel like his magic seemed a tad stronger here too.

"Oh, right—you were a crafter, weren't you? Speaking of which, I get kinda worried about the defense that mage gear gives you, y'know? Maybe I'll ask you to make me some..."

"If that's the case, then how about you learn some hand-to-hand fighting skills? Your level should already be boosting your physical abilities, so if you keep fighting for long enough, you should be able to acquire Limit Breaker... Do you think you could do that? Though, hmm...maybe not, if you're relying on your gear."

"Mmm, yeah... But like, if you do melee stuff, you get blood all over you, right...? Isn't it just smarter to fight like a mage?"

"I think it's a good idea to at least be *able* to fight up close, personally. And

I've come to figure out that our notions of common sense aren't quite as *common* here as they were back on Earth... Things are a little different here. And who *knows* how much we should rely on the way things were in *Swords & Sorceries*."

"Can't I just get Limit Breaker as a mage?"

"You can, but you'd have to work on being a crafter. And you'd need to use massive amounts of materials to level up. Mages are best suited to crafting jobs, after all. Alchemist, apothecary, blacksmith, tailor, engraver, weaponsmith, armorsmith... Then again, I guess *that* might not be the case here either."

"Yeah... We probably shouldn't get the game mixed up with reality too much. I wanna get stronger, but there's no guarantee I'll be able to learn Limit Breaker... Anyway, I guess I'll just focus on leveling up for now. But I still want that new gear..."

This was an isekai, but it was also a real world. There was no way of being sure whether the awakened skills even existed here like they did in the game, and there were no little tricks for boosting your crafting skills with minimum effort. Plus, it took a fair while to acquire a skill in the first place.

Zelos couldn't say for sure how much of his knowledge from *Swords & Sorceries* would apply here.

The reincarnators—Zelos included—had a real tendency to act on the assumption that their knowledge from the game would apply here too. But when a moment of carelessness could get you killed in this world, you had to be careful.

"New gear, eh...? You'd have to get the materials for it yourself. Hard to imagine the mercenaries here being able to obtain the sorts of materials I'd need. Anyway, yes, I'd imagine that crafters in this world spend their whole lives trying to master their jobs. So I suppose it makes sense that the dwarves have so many skilled crafters, since they live for so long..."

"Hmm... So you're saying it's a tough world for crafters? I guess you may be right—by our standards, Jeanne's and Lena's armor has really low defense. I'm only, like, mid-level, and my equipment's way tougher than theirs."

“And I wonder whether it might only be so tough because it’s well-made dwarven armor. To the discerning eye, even the knights here have pretty shabby armor. Or, rather, it *looks* good, but it wouldn’t last against high-level monsters.”

“Yeah... I think I’d get better gear if I got you to make it for me.”

“Just consider—I’d need to get some measurements if you wanted me to do that. And would the others be all right with that too, I wonder? I’d be taking your three sizes, effectively. If you’re okay with that, then I could make you something? Oh, and I’d want payment too, mind you.”

“Isn’t that just, like...a lose-lose for us? You grope our bodies, and you take our money... I dunno if I’m up for that.”

“Being realistic, you need measurements to make weapons or armor. Think of it as being the same as getting clothing made to order.”

Iris wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

She wanted good equipment, but that’d mean having Zelos take her measurements. If she was just getting clothing made at a store, usually it’d be a female employee who did that, and she’d be completely fine with that. But when it was someone she knew, it was kind of embarrassing.

Especially when that someone was Zelos—a man. She couldn’t rule out the possibility that a misunderstanding while he was taking her measurements could lead to some kind of crazy situation, and as long as that possibility existed, it’d be hard for her to ask Zelos to make her anything.

“Ah—how about you ask Luceris to take your measurements for you? That’d work, wouldn’t it? I just need your sizes, after all. I don’t have any interest in actually seeing your bare skin.”

“Are you not interested in women, Mister? Like Lena, and...Jeanne?”

“I’m *very* interested! I’d love to see them! Well, Lena’s one thing, but...*Jeanne*! Yes! I’d love to see her! In bed!”

“Th-That was a quick reply... And you really went for it, huh? You’re in love, aren’t you? L-O-V-E! Right?!”

“Well, the age gap bothers me a bit, but I do have a temporal rewind potion, if I really need. I wonder, would it be a good idea to get younger...?”

“Mister, you liar! You were so cold, pushing your sister aside when she asked for something like that...”

“What’s the problem? I need her to regret everything she’s done. To suffer from her regrets until she’s in the grave. But, well...I don’t have high hopes.”

Zelos had the feeling that Sharanla—who now had an unreasonable grudge against him—would be popping up again. And when that time came, he was determined to deal with her once and for all. He’d destroyed her doll last time, but that wasn’t enough to get rid of his hatred.

“Ooh! Mister! I can see a village now!”

“Well, then, let’s get off the motorbike around here. Probably not a good idea to have them see my Harley-Sanders Model 13.”

“Isn’t it a bit late for that? And can you do something about that name, by the way? It kinda makes me think of a robot strumming a guitar...”

“You know, I’ve wondered this for a while now, but Iris... Why do you know so much about anime and manga? You even seem to catch a lot of old references. Are you sure you’re not a lot older than you say you are?”

“*Rude!* My dad was a hardcore otaku—*that’s* why! My mom was a cosplayer too. They said they met at a...doujinshi sales event? Apparently their first meeting started with my dad going, ‘Miss, you’ve dropped twenty-five tins of mackerel!’”

“*Mackerel tins?* At a doujinshi event? Why? And *twenty-five* of them... Are you sure it wasn’t at a supermarket? I don’t get it. I have no idea what that has to do with anything...”

As you’d expect, even Zelos was bewildered by what sounded like a family where one parent was a time traveler and the other was a small-minded boy.

He just couldn’t understand how you get a ‘meet cute’ out of *tinned mackerel* in the middle of a crowded event. He himself lacked common sense at times, but even he was coming up blank here.

And...twenty-five? Really? Who walked around with twenty-five tins of fish? It was a mystery.

Musing that there were some things out in the world that could never be understood, Zelos hopped off his Harley-Sanders Model 13 and started walking toward the village. He still couldn't get the whole tinned mackerel thing out of the back of his mind, though...

\*

Zelos and Iris arrived at the village of Hasam.

It was a small village that mostly got on by growing wheat.

It was engaged in dairy farming too, and there were cows grazing, seemingly looked after by the village as a whole.

What most interested Zelos was the rural landscape.

At first glance, it was nostalgic, bringing back memories of his time in rural Japan. But in this world, it seemed, wheat was grown in submerged paddy fields. To Zelos and Iris, who'd grown up in a rice-based culture, seeing *wheat* grown in paddies was strange. The plants here had to be different somehow.

The cucumbers surprised him too. Apparently cucumbers were grown underground here, with farmers harvesting vivid green cucumbers from the mud like they were lotus roots.

Here in Hasam, they turned the cucumbers into easily preserved pickles, which were then shipped out for sale. And the village had other local specialties too, like jerky and cheese.

"Why is the wheat growing in paddies? It looks weird..."

"They're picking cucumbers out of the mud as well, if you haven't noticed. Which is also strange. But I suppose this *is* a different world..."

"Aren't you hand-waving too much here with, *oh, don't worry about it, it's another world?* I saw potatoes growing on trees the other day! *Trees!*"

"The potatoes are *fruits* here?! Being in a different world is really something else. This place seems hellbent on destroying everything I took for common sense back on Earth."

What was conventional wisdom on Earth didn't necessarily hold true here. And while the two of them understood that on a technical level, actually seeing things like this in person just made it feel that much more...off. It was another reminder of their reality here in this world.

"It's probably nothing important, but aren't there, like...not that many people in this village?"

"Hmm... You're right, yes. And even the people I *do* see out working the fields seem lethargic..."

The two of them muttered as they swept their gazes across the village.

No matter how you looked at it, this had to be a farming village, and judging by its location, Stihla would have to be one of its main customers. That was backed up by the size of the village's fields and paddies.

Yet, despite that, there just weren't enough people actually doing the farmwork here. And there wasn't a single child in sight.

By the way, Zelos and Iris didn't know it, but this village had a population of about fifteen hundred.

"What's going on, I wonder? For its size, this place feels pretty devoid of life, and there aren't that many people working out in the farms..."

"It really is weird, isn't it? And now that I look at it, aren't these villagers kinda...injured?"

"You're right. They're all bandaged up... W-Wait! *Move!*"

All of a sudden, Zelos pulled Iris toward him, holding her close before leaping backward.

And right as he did, something heavy dropped where the two of them had just been standing.

"Wh-What was—?!"

"This is...an *anvil*? Like blacksmiths use? And a hammer... If that had hit us, we would've died."

The heavy metal implements had fallen from above their heads.

And they had no idea who had dropped them.

“Why would someone do that? I don’t wanna just die like that!”

“Hmm... I’ve got an idea of who might. *Elemental Eye.*”

Zelos cast the light spell Elemental Eye on himself and Iris. A convenient spell for finding hidden monsters.

Take ghosts, for example, or spirits, or faeries. You could suss out their location by tracking their mana, but if you wanted to make sure you landed an attack on them, you were better off being able to see them.

And just as Zelos had thought, there they were.

“Th-They’re so *cute*...” Iris said, staring up at the translucent faeries that had appeared in the sky.

“So it *was* them. Don’t let yourself get tricked by their looks, okay? You’ll regret it.” They had pointy ears and big eyes, there were buglike wings growing from their backs, and they weren’t wearing any clothes.

Technically, then, they were naked. But clothes didn’t really matter to the faeries, who were usually invisible.

Faeries didn’t have biological sexes either, so it wasn’t like they had anything to hide in the first place.

*Aww. I missed! Just a little closer, and their brains woulda gone all SPLAT! BOOOOOOM!*

*Tee-hee! You suck! I’m next, okay~?*

“Faeries, eh? Nasty little things, these.”

“What?! They’re so cute, though! Are they really that bad? I find it hard to believe.”

“They’re coming for us, you know. Right now.”

“Huh?!”

The faeries levitated farming tools that were sitting in the fields and came flying toward Zelos and Iris at high speeds.

“W-Wait! Hang on! *Stop!*”

“Looks like they’re just as horrible in this world... *Hup!*”

Without delay, Zelos drew his dual shortswords from his waist and swatted away a sickle and a hoe that were flying toward him and Iris.

But the farming tools, controlled by magic, didn’t just fall to the ground. Even when Zelos knocked them away, the things kept stubbornly flying back at the pair. This was clearly malicious.

*Come on! Hurry up and die already~! Show me some pretty red blood!*

*These ones are stubborn, aren’t they? And they’re only humans... Who do they think they are, seriously? They should just die already.*

“No. *You die. Gamma Ray.*”

The faerie extermination spell, Gamma Ray, converted mana into a powerful gamma ray before firing it directly at a magical body to destroy it. It had a drawback, though: It could only be fired straight ahead.

While gamma rays were waves of light, they couldn’t be seen with the naked eye, so the spell was liable to hit your allies too if you weren’t careful. It had effective penetrating power, making it highly effective against faeries, whose bodies were just plain mana.

After carefully adjusting his mana to make sure there wouldn’t be any collateral damage, Zelos fired off a focused gamma ray laser.

It landed a direct hit on a faerie, which promptly disappeared.

*Eep!*

“Now—you’re next. You tried to kill us, so surely you’re ready to die as well, hmm?”

*N-No way! You can see me?! You can see me! Wheee~! Save m—*

But before the other faerie could escape, it too was destroyed by another cast of Gamma Ray. All that was left behind were faerie gems, the magic stones dropped by faeries.

Yet somehow, the faeries had still seemed *happy* as they were getting



annihilated.

“That’s the last of them, right? Now, surely not, but... Don’t tell me the villagers’ injuries are all because they were the targets of these things and their nasty pranks?”

“Wow... You really don’t hold back, do you, Mister? From memory, faeries have a lot of mana, but they’re actually pretty weak as far as monsters go, right?”

“You do know they play cruel pranks on people, yes...? They steal, they kill, and they never feel the slightest bit of regret about it all. My policy is if I ever see them, I kill them. No hesitation. I think I’ve told you this before, haven’t I?”

“You say it like you’re talking about killing mosquitoes... But yeah, they *are* mean, huh? Feels like it’s worse than just pranks.”

“It’s all just fun and games to them, after all. They don’t care how many people they kill.”

Faeries had no concept of right or wrong. They were purely hedonistic, playing pranks just for fun. There was a wide scope to their pranks, ranging from child’s play to twisted, evil crimes, and sometimes they would dissect monsters weaker than themselves. Then, when they were done, they’d leave the mangled remains in someone’s house or room, and laugh at them as they panicked.

If you wanted to put it politely, you could say they were pure, innocent; otherwise, you’d say they were selfish, cruel. Either way, as far as humans were concerned, they were wicked creatures.

However, they didn’t harm priests of the Faith of the Four Gods, which had led to an increasing number of people joining the religion. Simply joining the religion didn’t stop you from being a target, though—and the priests didn’t exactly stand in solidarity with their followers, often saying that they simply didn’t have enough faith to escape the faeries’ mischief.

That attitude had led to growing distrust. But the clear fact of it was that the priests weren’t targeted, so the other believers had no choice but to accept what they were told, as frustrating as it was.

“I wonder why they don’t attack the priests. I’m sure there must be some sort of reason... They’re not the most intelligent creatures in the first place. Not enough to treat the priests separately and go after the general public. I can’t imagine them trying to remember everyone’s faces, so do they just base it on whether someone’s wearing the *clothes* of a priest, perhaps...?”

“I mean, even crows are able to remember faces. It wouldn’t be *that* weird if the faeries could do it too, right? And their pranks are on the level of a human kid’s.”

“It’s the fact that they have the intelligence of a child that makes them a pain to deal with, yes... And children are cruel, you know?”

Even human children could do terrible things without batting an eyelid.

They’d crush ants just for fun, or start a little fire as a bit of a prank only for it to turn into a huge blaze. They were innocent, but that was also why they could easily do things you’d never expect.

Humans learned ethics as part of growing up. But what if you *never* grew up? What if you permanently remained a child?

Sometimes, people were born with an inclination for committing grotesque crimes. Maybe it’d start with crushing insects. But gradually, the crosshairs would turn from insects to small animals—and eventually, to humans.

It was all because they were curious. Because they found it *fun* to kill people.

Now, this was just an example, and it wasn’t like all criminals fit into that mold. But when it came to the faeries, at least, that was the obvious explanation.

“Let’s say we assume that since the Faith of the Four Gods protects the faeries, the faeries distinguish the priests by their clothing. But then...who told them to do that in the first place? Even if it was a witch doctor, they can only contract with spirits, so...”

“I can’t even tell faeries and spirits apart. What makes them different?”

“On a physical level, they’re built the same, I suppose. But spirits have weaker wills, and they’ll abide by contracts, while faeries...well, you can form contracts

with them too, but they'll get up to their usual nasty pranks when you're not looking. And they do some *really* crazy stuff to the people who've contracted them."

Spirits as a species were heavily involved in the harmony of the world; they didn't just act on their emotions like faeries did.

However, they were very active in natural disasters—either in making more victims or, conversely, minimizing the scale of the disaster. If you had to describe it as anything, the thought process of spirits was *mechanical*. *That* was the big difference between them and faeries.

"It seems we've come to a bit of a troublesome village. I'm not sure you can really call this an *adventure*..." Zelos sighed. "This is going to be a pain."

"I think it *is* an adventure, though! Our quest could be something like, I dunno... 'Save the village from the faeries'? It could be fun!"

"Sounds more like a hassle to me. Though I suppose we could deal with it by just eradicating all the faeries..."

"Is *eradicating* them the only thing you can think of? Don't you wanna try and come up with another solution?"

"There are a whole lot of them here, by the looks of it, and it pisses me off. I'd feel a lot better if I *did* eradicate them all."

"Wow, you've...*really* got a thing against them. Poor faeries..."

Zelos already hated the faeries to begin with—and what made it worse was the way their attitudes reminded him of his older sister. It only made him want to exterminate them all the more.

His complete and utter lack of mercy left Iris a little put off.

She loved cute things, and she felt a sense of pity for the faeries, now that they were in the sights of the worst enemy they could possibly have. She let out a deep, slow sigh.

## Chapter 10: The Old Guy Gets Mistaken for a Hero

Even while walking along the village's main paved road, Zelos and Iris weren't seeing many people. The place really felt deserted.

Occasionally, they'd see a child peeking out from a house, but someone—presumably a parent—always hid them back inside before long. It was like they were afraid of something.

What was more, some sort of a foul smell—a *rotten* smell—emanated from the houses, making Zelos and Iris nauseous.

They felt like they already had an idea of what might be causing it.

"I wonder if this is the faeries' fault too?"

"It probably is. At least, I think they have something to do with it. It'll be some sort of harassment against the defenseless villagers, I bet..." Zelos sighed.

"They're such a pain."

"They look so cute, though..."

"Well, that's about par for the course for faeries, really—cute, but horrible. Didn't you encounter them yourself in *Swords & Sorceries*?"

"I mean, I did, but...they were cute, so I let them get away."

"I understand how you feel, but there are plenty of cute-looking monsters that are horrible on the inside, you know?"

Sure, faeries were cute. But they had a cruel nature that was at odds with their appearance.

To faeries, killing other living beings was all just a game, and they whiled away their days on those sorts of sadistic "pranks."

Two major reasons for that were their long lifespans, and the fact that—since they could survive entirely off the mana found in nature—they didn't need to worry about finding food. In other words, they had a lot of free time. And with their intelligence being about on par with a young human child's, they had no

concept of morality, no sense of right and wrong.

On top of that, they were immune to the majority of physical attacks and elemental magic, so barely anyone could harm them. They knew it too, so they tended to get carried away.

The fact that regular humans couldn't see them didn't help either.

"Y'know, I was thinking of forming a familiar contract with a faerie back in the game..."

"You made the right choice by not going through with it. You would've had something terrible happen to you, just to let you know. Guaranteed."

"Whoa. You're really confident about that, huh? Guess that's where being a veteran player gets you..."

The two of them continued to walk along the road. After a while, they came across a large throng of people, and heard shouts filling the air.

Specifically, the people were out the front of what seemed to be a church. Villagers were surrounding a priest, and they were loudly protesting about something.

"As I've told you, though, the faeries are very pure beings. They do not have even a shred of ill will. Unlike humans, who act on greed, they are a truly *free* species; their hearts are innocent."

"You really think that makes it okay for 'em to kill so many of our livestock? Can you tell me that? *Hah?! Our lives* are on the line here, dammit!"

"Yeah! And it ain't just the livestock! Those little bastards'll bury us in holes, or throw us off a cliff while we're asleep; all *sorts* of shit, just because they *feel* like it! What the fuck about that is 'pure' and 'innocent'?!"

"It wasn't even that long ago that they tore a baby to shreds! My neighbor Meetha was so traumatized that she couldn't leave her bed!"

"Judan's kid got taken to the forest and *dissected alive*! We've had *enough* of this!"

"Must be nice bein' a priest, huh? They never go for *you*!"

“That is because we are devout followers of the Faith of the Four Gods. Would it not stand to reason, then, that the faeries only target you all because your faith is insufficient?”

It was hardly a pleasant discussion. And it sounded like the faeries’ mayhem had been going on for years, at least.

Here were the victims of that mayhem, at their wits’ ends, and the priest was doing nothing but bragging about his own piety and how blessed he must be. He was essentially trying to get out of the whole situation by passing it all off as the will of the gods.

To top it all off, the priest was saying that the villagers just *weren’t believing hard enough*. Of *course* they were going to get mad.

They were already upset by all the faeries’ mischief, and the priest’s comment only added fuel to the fire. It wouldn’t be strange for a riot to occur at any moment now.

Zelos decided to gather some more information by pretending to be a clueless traveler who was vaguely curious about faeries.

“Excuse me. What’s this gathering all about?”

“Hah? Who are you? A traveler? Don’t see many of your sort ’round here.”

“We were taking the highway to Santor, so we just happened to be passing by. Anyway, what’s all the fuss about?”

“Faeries. And all the havoc they’re causin’. We’re tryin’ to ask our priest from the Faith of the Four Gods to convince ’em to stop. But...”

“But he has no intention of listening to you, so you’re wasting your time. Am I correct?”

“Wha—?!”

Zelos was already sounding like he knew too much.

The crowd’s glares focused on him, and he could feel their bloodlust rising.

But seeing as he knew how faeries operated, he decided the best way to get out of the situation he’d put himself in would just be to tell everyone the truth.

“The faeries don’t care about the Four Gods. They just know the priests aren’t going to harm them, that’s all. They probably just distinguish the priests from everyone else based on what they’re wearing. If a priest changes into regular clothes, they’ll be attacked.”

“Hold on a second. They ‘don’t care about the Four Gods’? Then why don’t they attack people in priest robes? It doesn’t make sense.”

“I can’t say for sure, but... Perhaps someone made a contract with the faeries? Something like, ‘if the faeries agree not to attack anyone wearing priests’ robes, we won’t harm them.’ That’d all make things add up, now, wouldn’t it?”

“Who’d even make a contract like...? A mage? No, mages don’t get along with priests...”

“I don’t know *that* much. But even if this priest here tries to convince the faeries, it’d probably be meaningless. And that being the case, here’s what you should do if you want to keep your village safe from now on: kill before you’re killed. Fortunately, you can get some decent alchemy ingredients from faeries while you’re at it, so I don’t think it’d be wasted effort.”

Everyone exchanged glances with each other and started discussing the best way to defeat faeries.

Normal attacks didn’t work against faeries, and they had high resistance against magic as well. But at the same time, their endurance was incredibly low, so even a villager could defeat them by swinging a weapon infused with mana.

Those weapons came from the plant monsters, called treants, that lived in the forest. They were tree monsters, essentially, and if you used their wood to make clubs or the like, there would be some small amount of mana that remained within. And that would make it possible to defeat faeries.

Right as Zelos was explaining this to everyone, the sole voice of dissent spoke up.

“Everyone! Wait, please!” the priest said. “Let not yourselves be swayed by the words of this mage. The faeries are pure creatures. Are you truly thinking to *kill* them? You will face the retribution of the gods!”

“Are *you* gonna stop ‘em for us, then? We’ve got corpses pilin’ up because of those little pricks! If they’re such ‘pure creatures,’ why are they always causin’ problems for people?!”

The other villagers chanted together: “*Yeah! What he said!*”

“The faeries are young of heart. And that is what makes them so innocent, so untainted, like children. We humans should be more like them, I believe”

“If they’re so innocent, why’re they tearin’ our kids to shreds?! What, does bein’ pure and young mean you’re just able to do whatever you want?!”

The priest was crying by this point.

If he protected the faeries, he’d be antagonizing the villagers. But if he sided with the villagers, he’d be going against his doctrine.

Within the Faith of the Four Gods, it was said that the faeries were the first creatures that the God of Creation had brought into existence. Killing them was forbidden.

Yet the faeries were, indeed, performing all sorts of horrible pranks. It left the priest racking his brains.

In a sense, he was a victim here too.

“Hmm... If the faeries are recognized as a humanoid species, then couldn’t *they* receive retribution from the gods as well? If your doctrine says it’s okay to kill bandits who attack merchants, then surely something similar should apply to faeries too.”

“J-Just what sort of frightening rhetoric are you trying to...? Faeries have power that far outstrips that of us humans! It is absurd to even suggest that we could contend with them! I say, this is why low-level mages are so...”

“I’ve already dealt with two of them since I arrived in this village, you know? They attacked me, so I just killed them. No holding back. Is that a problem?”

“*Wh-What* did you say? You... You killed faeries? There is no way you should have been able to...”

“It’s kill or be killed. That’s really how simple it is, okay? They tried to drop an *anvil* on our heads, for context.”



The main strength of faeries was their mana. They had a lot of it, and they were proficient at controlling it, which made them capable of potent magical attacks. The problem was that they only used that impressive power for their own amusement.

They were free to use their powers as they wished, of course. But when they started being a huge nuisance to others, it became an issue.

If the faeries really *were* recognized as a humanoid species, then it wouldn't be odd if what they were doing turned into a war between species. Permission might even be granted to eradicate all faeries.

And if *that* happened, then the Faith of the Four Gods, which protected the faeries, would be dropped from the position of state religion.

"How about you hire a mage to deal with the problem? It can be difficult to take them out either physically *or* magically, but out of the two, magic stands a better chance."

"Right... Yeah, guess we'll try askin' the duke. With how bad the faeries are bein', he may do somethin' for us."

"Wait! Do not be rash! Killing faeries would be akin to turning your backs on the gods! Think it over!"

"Shut up! What have the gods done for us?! They let those faerie bastards kill a baby that wasn't even a year old!"

"Yeah! And it ain't *just* about who's died. We got so many people who've been hurt bad! If we keep lettin' the faeries do what they want, who *knows* what'll happen to us!"

It was sounding like the faeries had been causing even more harm than Zelos had expected.

In truth, the foul smell he'd been noticing in the village came from the innards of dissected livestock, which the faeries had hidden underneath people's houses, where the humans couldn't get to them. There, the innards had rotted, causing them to emanate the smell. It was, of course, yet another of the faeries' "pranks."

Zelos also heard that the faeries had left freshly severed livestock heads at people's front doors; buried old, disabled people alive; and pushed pregnant women into the river. It was horrible.

"Mister... A-Are the faeries really...? What about my dream fantasy world...?"

"It's all well and good to have dreams! But this is reality. Besides, even the faeries in old English folklore and the like played their fair share of nasty tricks on people; I doubt they were on good terms with humans. Even if they are considered a humanoid species, they're completely different from us humans—unlike, say, the beastfolk, with whom we can actually communicate and get along. Faeries, meanwhile, never listen to what people have to say. And even if they did listen, they'd forget it right away anyway."

"Hey, Mister... What'd the faeries in *Swords & Sorceries* even do to you? With how much you hate them, it feels like they must've done even worse things to you than all the stuff we've been hearing about... I mean, it sounds like you *really* have a thing against them."

"When I was still a low-level, they pushed me off a cliff. After I landed in a river, they dropped a boulder on me from above. Which slammed me down to the bottom of a frozen waterfall and crushed me against it. I had to respawn. Another time, when I was fighting against a rare monster, they tangled ivy around my legs, stopping me from moving, so I got hit by a charge. Then there was the time they stole my healing potions when I was fighting a raid boss, and the time they made me fall down into a pit trap... The list goes on."

"Whoa... Yeah, okay, that's really mean. I kinda get why you hate them so much, then."

The villagers didn't quite get what "Swords & Sorceries" or "respawn" meant but they knew just how cruel the faeries and their pranks could be, so they were nodding along as they listened to the conversation between Zelos and Iris.

They sympathized with Zelos, from the bottom of their hearts. It was a pain that only faerie victims could know.

"Plus, since they're able to pass through walls, they can get into anywhere, and the weak are perfect targets for them. And they know they can just get away even if they're found out."

“They’ve got such strong abilities, and they’re wasting them. I’m almost kinda jealous. Except for, y’know, the part where people hate them...”

“You *can* defeat them, if you use a weapon that holds mana. But with how small and nimble they are, it can be difficult. How about you raise some faerie-eaters? They’re a mutant variety of another monster species known as man-eaters, except they prey on faeries, not humans. Faeries are stupid, so they get lured in by the high concentration of mana—and then they get eaten. The faerie-eater seeds can also be used to make potions and things, by the way. Oh—and I have some of those seeds with me, if you’re interested?”

The villagers replied in unison: “*Sell them to us, please!!!*”

“Wh-Whoa!”

They’d really latched onto that.

The villagers understood perfectly well that things couldn’t continue as they were. Until now, they’d been powerless to do anything about it, so they’d had no choice but to endure their situation. Now, all of a sudden, there was something that could get them out of this situation; of *course* they were going to latch onto it. And that something was in Zelos’s hands.

The priest seemed anything but pleased. If this mage here destroyed the status quo, he’d lose all honor he held as a priest. He had to prevent his devout believers from deserting, whatever it took.

“A-Are you saying you intend to make use of monsters? How *frightening*! Monsters are beings of evil! They defy the will of the gods! Only a demon would attempt to use their powers!”

“You know, personally, I think that doing everything in your power to obtain happiness through your own hard work is far more respectable than sticking to the teachings of gods that sit around doing nothing. If refusing to just stand here and watch while people die makes me a demon, then I’m fine being a demon.”

“You *must* be aware that benefiting from the spoils of evil monsters is akin to selling your soul to the Dark God! This is why mages are all—”

“Oh, please. Benefiting from monsters? You’re doing that too, aren’t you?”

“Wh-What are you... I most certainly am *not* benefiting from such evil creatures, and for you to suggest that I am is—”

“That priest robe you’re wearing; it’s made from the thread of a silk crawler, isn’t it? Your staff comes from a dire treant, and the magic stone in that defensive magic tool you’re wearing on your finger came from a monster too. Are you still going to try to say that you’re not benefiting from monsters?”

“What?! Certainly, these materials came from monsters, but... These objects have been purified by way of holy magi—”

“I don’t care about your excuses. The long and short of it is that you’re benefiting from monsters. That’s an irrefutable fact. And I don’t think it makes much sense to say that it’s fine when priests do it but it’s some kind of terrible crime when anyone else does it, hmm?”

The reason priests hated mages was that mages had the habit of using logic to refute religious doctrine. However much priests tried to sway mages with religious arguments, mages would counter it all with logic.

In similar fashion, the priest here had been defeated by this shady-looking traveling mage.

“Mister, I know you hate the Four Gods, but did you really have to take it out on some low-ranking priest like that...?”

“That wasn’t my intention... It’s just that if a priest’s doctrine prevents them from actually doing anything when the people of their village are in need, then the village would be better off without them. Wouldn’t you agree? Oh—here are the faerie-eater seeds, by the way.”

“Where’d ya suddenly pull those out from?! Ya weren’t holdin’ anythin’ just a few seconds ago, right?”

“It’s a trade secret. A mage never reveals their secrets to others. Because then they may take countermeasures, you see.”

Zelos took the faerie-eater seeds from his inventory and handed them over to one of the villagers.

These were seeds that he’d collected when he’d first come to this world and

was surviving out in the wild. He'd collected more while doing combat training with Celestina and Zweit. He still had plenty more left where these came from, so he didn't mind giving some away.

Regardless, from the villagers' perspective, this mage in front of them had suddenly pulled the seeds out of nowhere. They were realizing he was probably a far more amazing person than his appearance let on.

But the priest, who'd seen Zelos taking the seeds out from his inventory, was different.

"A-Are you..." The priest paused to correct himself. "I mean, *Sir*, are you...a *hero*?!"

"Oh, no; I'm just your average shady mage. A 'hero'? What's that? Never heard of it!"

"Please, do not try to deceive us! I just now witnessed you pulling items out of thin air; that is a special ability granted to heroes! The fact that you are able to use it means that you too must be a hero, Sir!"

"Unfortunately, though, I'm not one. Really. Nor do I plan to start calling myself by some silly title like that."

"*S-Silly*?! Why would you say such a thing? Why would a hero go against the gods? You are one of the chosen ones...!"

"*Chosen*, eh? You and your ilk all just use the word 'heroes' to refer to people you forcibly summoned to this world for your own convenience, don't you? I don't have any interest in categorizing myself as a *tool* used for the benefit of the state. And besides, I'm not a hero in the first place, okay? I wasn't summoned."

"But that power you display is unmistakably that of a hero! Why do you repudiate the gods?!"

"You're a stubborn one, aren't you...? Besides, the word 'heroes' shouldn't be used for some 'chosen ones' in the first place; it should be kept for people who do something to *deserve* it. Even then, people have a word for those sorts: 'champions.' The title of 'hero' is just something that gets forced onto people who don't want it. It sickens me, really. It's just...shady."

Here was a man, who looked plenty shady himself, using that same word to refer to the heroes. It was surreal.

“You’re not gonna be able to convince him, Mr. Priest. He absolutely *haaates* the Four Gods, so if you keep trying to squish him into whatever little box is convenient for you, he’s gonna get angry, y’know?”

“A-Are you telling me to *accept* that this mage denies being a hero?! He has been given this power by the gods, and yet in spite of that—”

“Seriously, I don’t recommend finishing that sentence, okay? He might kill you if you do.”

Zelos raised an eyebrow at Iris. “Just what kind of person do you think I am? I wouldn’t just start blasting people with magic like that.”

“Mmm~? You were pretty happy to fire off that big attack spell at those bandits who were waiting for us, though, weren’t you? You can’t change the past now, all right?”

Zelos felt like he was getting an idea of how Iris viewed him.

The priest, for his part, was looking at Zelos as if he couldn’t believe his ears.

Heroes were meant to be the soldiers of the gods, brought here by the summoning ritual (the Faith of the Four Gods didn’t consider summoning sigils to be *magic*) that had been left by the Four Gods.

They were soldiers that obeyed the wishes of the Four Gods and carried out their missions. And the only country allowed to summon those heroes was the Holy Land of Metis—the headquarters of the Faith of the Four Gods.

At the request of the archbishops, they saved countless people. They were supposed to be agents of divine will, demonstrating the power of the gods.

That was why the priest here couldn’t believe that this mage with the power of a hero was repudiating the Four Gods.

The heroes were, effectively, obedient to the Faith of the Four Gods, and they enjoyed excellent recognition for their service.

“So ya were a hero?”

“Do I look like one? What even *are* heroes, really? I struggle to believe that the heroes working at the moment are acting on their own judgment; it seems more likely to me that they’re just going with the flow, if anything. Well, whatever the case, I’ll fight them if they stand against me. Don’t want them being in the way.”

“Are you truly saying you intend to fight the heroes?! Are you that insistent on denying the fact that you are a hero yourself?”

“I’ve *told* you already: I’m not one. How many more times do I need to repeat it?”

“Yer... Ya look kinda shady—more like ‘hermit’ than ‘hero,’ huh? Maybe even ‘homeless.’”

The others all nodded in agreement. Everyone other than Zelos and the priest agreed, after all. Even Iris was nodding along with them, which...did bug Zelos a little bit. He was all on his own.

To be fair, when it came to his appearance, he *did* dress all shady like this because he liked it. Still, it hurt a little to have people treating him like he was homeless.

That was when a villager came running up to the throng of people, clearly in a panic.

“C-C-C-Come quick! It’s terrible!”

“What is it? What happened?!”

“I-It’s Simon’s little boy! He’s been... He’s been attacked by faeries! In his house!”

“Those little *bastards*... So—Father!!!”

“Y-Yes?!” the priest answered.

“Focus up! Come quick! Please! Someone’s been injured! We gotta heal ’em, now!”

“O-Of course. Let us hurry.”

The villagers started moving in a panic, leaving Zelos and Iris alone out the

front of the church.

A whirlwind passed before their eyes.

“Uh, Mister... Shouldn’t you go join them? This is probably some kinda event, right?”

“This isn’t a video game, you know? There’s no way it’s something like that. Personally, I think it’s just a coincidence.”

“But your secret gadgets might come in handy, right? C’mon, let’s go!”

“Secret gadgets? What am I, some sort of futuristic cat robot? I mean, I suppose I *do* have a bunch of tools that do things along those lines, but...”

“C’mon, Mister *Great Sage*! Go get ’em! It’s time to show what you’re made of!”

“Uh, Iris? Why are you so...excited about all this?”

Because this was an *adventure*, of course—an adventure with one of the Destroyers she so admired.

And now an *event* had started. Just thinking about it all had her getting hyped.

Given a push on the back by Iris, who was filled with more motivation than was perhaps reasonable, Zelos chased after the villagers and eventually arrived at a house.

He somehow pushed his way through the throng of people crowding around the entrance and managed to make his way inside.

There, he saw a young boy, brutally lacerated and stained with blood.

Fortunately—if you could call any of this fortunate—he wasn’t going to die, despite all his injuries. If he’d been dissected, it would’ve been too late, but with the state he was in now, Zelos figured he’d be able to heal the boy.

Iris winced at the smell of blood, doing her best to fight back her urge to vomit. She now completely understood something that she had never seen in *Swords & Sorceries*: just how cruel the faeries could really be.

“Quickly, Father! Please, hurry up and save my Luo!”



“I-I know. By the compassion of the gods, let this one’s wounds be healed...  
*Light Heal.*”

What the priest had just used, Light Heal, was one rank higher than the beginner healing spell, Heal. The only difference was that it had a slightly better restorative effect; it was undeniably lacking when it came to treating serious injuries like this.

That was just how low this priest’s level was. Most likely, his Intelligence stat wasn’t all that high. The boy’s wounds weren’t healing fast enough.

“He’s going to die at this rate. I’ll do it myself.”

“*Blrgh...* Are you...gonna be able to save him...Mister?”

“The priest here will probably end up losing face, but, well, this is an emergency, so I’ll do whatever I can. I don’t think I’d be able to sleep at night if I just let this boy die when I could save him.”

For what he’d labeled as an emergency, Zelos walked over to the patient with a very relaxed gait.

And perhaps because he’d noticed that, the priest lashed out at Zelos, his face scrunched up in anger.

“Wh-What is it? There is nothing a mage can do here! Leave! This moment!”

“This is an emergency, so please, keep healing him. Now, then—*By My Almighty Hand of Mercy, I Restore Health unto Thee.*”

The healing spell Zelos had just used—*By My Almighty Hand of Mercy, I Restore Health unto Thee*—incorporated both Refresh, which cured all status effects, and Grand Heal, a high-rank healing magic, in a heavily modified magic formula.

In terms of just its functionality, it was essentially the same as Resurrection, which healed status effects and near-death wounds. But *By My Almighty Hand of Mercy, I Restore Health unto Thee* had a more powerful healing effect.

Zelos had created the spell to try to minimize the gap between mages and priests, the latter of which received a job-based effectiveness bonus to healing magic. After testing the spell, he’d found it didn’t help reduce that gap, and

he'd had ended up depressed, feeling his effort had all been for nothing.

Later on, though, he'd found that the gap caused by the effectiveness bonus could be reduced via equipment. In the end, it hadn't *all* been for nothing.

This was also, by the way, a straightforward spell, and if a high-level priest used it, its effect would be tremendous. Zelos was a mage, so he didn't get an effectiveness bonus from his job, but he had no problem using it to heal one child.

It would be a different story entirely in a raid boss fight, where the slightest difference in healing potency could mean the difference between life and death. It wasn't perfect.

At least, that was how Zelos saw it...

"A-A mage used holy magic?! A-And it's so *powerful*... What's...?"

This was a healing spell that even the priest didn't know. And it was so effective that words like "potent" and "tremendous" didn't even begin to describe it. The boy's injuries were disappearing before their eyes.

The world of *Swords & Sorceries* had been a pretty hardcore one—you could die from bleeding out, and there were even stats to numerically represent things like how much blood you had left.

It had been possible to restore missing limbs and the like in the game too, though Zelos had no idea whether that would also hold true in *this* world.

After all, if you lost an arm in reality, it wasn't as if it'd just grow back. And even if it could, you'd need a lot of nutrition, and the materials that served as the building blocks of the body. A human body just didn't have enough materials to recover entire lost limbs.

Either way, Zelos had used one of his insane custom spells here, and between that and—perhaps—the way everything he did seemed more potent in this world, the boy's injuries were being healed at a tremendous pace. It didn't take long at all for the boy, who had just been in critical condition, to return to the picture of perfect health.

The villagers erupted in a cheer.

*So the effect really is stronger here. I'd been thinking my regular magic was more potent than I was expecting it to be too... Maybe the concentration of mana is higher here or something? Even the priest's surprised. Though...maybe that's just because of the difference in our levels?*

Thinking back on all the magic he'd used up to this point, Zelos was convinced that it had all been significantly more powerful than back in *Swords & Sorceries*. And that seemed to very much also be the case with this healing spell he'd just used.

He didn't know for sure whether that was the effect of coming to another world, or whether there was some other factor at play, but at the very least, even a spell as powerful as this wouldn't usually heal wounds so rapidly. After all, this spell—By My Almighty Hand of Mercy, I Restore Health unto Thee—cured status effects too, and that was meant to come at the cost of its healing effect being slower.

*It's almost like a game. I'm a mage, but I was just able to heal someone so easily... Is it possible that I've been getting so caught up thinking about things like levels that I've overlooked an incredibly important detail?*

Mages couldn't hope for their healing magic to be as potent as that of priests. If you chose a mage in the tutorial of *Swords & Sorceries*, your healing magic would be about half as effective as a priest's. In this world, however, it seemed like Zelos's healing magic was stronger than what priests were innately capable of.

It was bugging him that he didn't know whether that was due to the level difference or whether there was something different at play.

"S-Such powerful holy magic... Why, it is almost as if this is a miracle from the gods..."

"It *did* work better than I was expecting, I have to admit. I'm surprised it was *that* effective. But if we call this a trial, then these are some very nice results." *What even is this? It's...almost like I've got full-blown cheats here, isn't it?*

"Y-You... You have such incredible power, and you are even capable of using holy magic; do you still intend to insist that you are not a hero?! Someone whose power is so clearly blessed by the Four Gods... And you are able to use

holy magic, as a mage!”

“Holy magic, eh? This is really just plain old *healing* magic, though... There’s a bit of other elemental magic mixed in too, but the point is that it’s a modified spell I worked on myself, so not once have the Four Gods helped me out with it. It’s all the fruits of my own labor.”

“P-Preposterous! Are you trying to say that a mage created a holy spell?!”

“Mmm... Again, that’s what *you’re* saying. And then trying to deny. To explain, I didn’t create a *holy* spell. What you’re labeling holy magic is really nothing different from any other kind of magic that *mag*es use. If that wasn’t the case, then a mage wouldn’t be able to optimize or use healing spells, now, would they?”

“H-How could this...? Th-Then does this mean that one day, *every* mage will be able to—”

“Able to master what you call holy magic? I’d imagine so, yes. Not that I particularly care either way. But yes, it’s just a matter of when.”

Zelos was dropping world-changing facts as if they were nothing.

The priest—who’d been granted holy magic and devoted himself to the people and to spreading the faith—was suddenly dumbstruck in the face of that reality. If holy magic was just another category of magic that mages used, then that would effectively mean that priests were mages too. This harsh reality was difficult to swallow for one as devout as he.

“Oh—I’m not trying to undermine your entire religion here, okay? In fact, I think that preaching about morals to the common people is admirable. But I don’t have any mercy for the scumbags who abuse their authority to try to satisfy their desires in secret. And there *are* some priests like that, you know? Betraying their peers who *actually* try to preach a righteous life so they can do whatever they please, indulging in money and women...”

“I-I cannot deny it. Humans are flawed by nature, of that I am aware...”

“But isn’t it a priest’s duty to straighten out those flaws? Correct failures? Teach people how to be better and more righteous? It *is*, I think, quite important to realize that power isn’t everything, to teach people to use what

power they have for good. And you would agree, no? Now, personally, I don't think that needs to be done in the name of any gods, but if you believe that the gods are necessary for you to lead people to the right path, then I say go ahead and use them. But don't you think that focusing on priest this, mage that, is all just kind of pointless?"

"Yes... What's most important is the goodness of one's heart. To think it would take a mage to give me a better understanding of my own religion's creed..."

"My motto is 'A quiet life's a good life,' so I really just want to spend my time nice and quietly, that's all... Hmm?"

Partway through his discussion with the priest, Zelos noticed a presence and cast Elemental Eye without an incantation.

"What is it, Mister?"

"*Shh!* They're here."

The whole room fell quiet, blanketed by an indescribable silence.

But it wasn't long before that silence was broken by an awfully cheery voice that echoed throughout the room:

*Aww... They healed him! I wanted him to die...*

*Ahh, whatever, it's fine! There are still plenty of targets left, y'know? Hey, hey, which one should we go for next?*

*That one earlier was fun, though, right? Going all, 'Nooo! Mom! Heeeeeeelp!' It was hilarious!*

*Maybe we should've plucked out his eyeballs too? And pulled his guts out through his eye sockets!*

*We did that before, remember? And it was so fun, wasn't it~?*

The faeries seemed annoyed that the boy they'd sliced up was now fine, but they still chattered away with incredible cheerfulness.

Their species—which had great power, and never mentally matured over the course of their long lives—was pure, yes, but that very purity also made them

evil.

*“Gamma Ray.”*

Without warning, Zelos fired off a concentrated attack that annihilated multiple faeries in an instant. Faerie gems clattered to the floor.

The villagers and the priest couldn’t even tell what had happened. Even the faeries couldn’t detect the attack, leaving those that hadn’t been hit baffled.

*Huh? Where’d everyone go?*

*They’re gone, they’re gone! H— ...Huh? Are these our gems?*

*No way! They got killed?! By a human?!*

*Lots of mana... Was it that guy?*

*Kill him! Kill him! He’s an enemy! He’s dangerous!*

“Sounds like you’ve been having quite a bit of fun, eh? But it’s *my* time to have some fun now, if you don’t mind. *Gamma Ray.*”

Zelos let loose a slightly wider-ranging Gamma Ray this time, destroying all but a single faerie.

*Eep! Wh-What was that? What’d you do~? ♪*

“What, you ask? I hit them with an attack that you faeries have no chance of surviving. So—how does it feel? To be the hunted instead of the hunter for once?”

*You’re gonna make the princess angry! And if she gets angry, you’ll go squish, just like that!*

“The princess? Oh—is there a faerie rose? That means you’ve got a settlement nearby, yes? It’s starting to sound like we’ll have to eliminate the problem from the root. You’re the ones that started this war, so surely you can’t complain if it ends in your deaths, hmm?”

*Meeeeaaan! We just played some pranks, didn’t we?! Why do we have to die for that! You’re such a bully!*

“I’m sure the people you killed had the same thoughts.”

*Humans are all so weak! So they're only good as toys, right~? You'll keep making more of each other anyway, so it's no big deal if we kill a few, yeah? ♪*

"The same goes for you, doesn't it? By your own logic, surely you wouldn't mind if we kill *you*, hmm? You're *all so weak*, after all. Heh heh heh..."

A complex sigil appeared in the palm of Zelos's hand.

It was a layered sigil, consisting of several stacked circles, and the magic formula etched into it began converting mana into a physical phenomenon.

*I'm kidding! I was only kidding, okay~? We won't play any more pranks~! S-So don't—*

But before the faerie could finish begging for its life in its ever-gleeful tone, it was destroyed.

The little demon had been obliterated by a far greater, far more demonic individual than itself.

The villagers and the priest were dumbfounded by the stone-cold way Zelos had passed judgment on the faeries.

"Uh, Mister, aren't your methods kinda a bit...evil? If you're the good guy, try to look a bit cooler!"

"I have no intention of playing the part of the stereotypical 'good guy.' Pure ideals of justice are full of weaknesses; they'll leave you powerless against any real villains. That's what I think, at least. I mean, if they take any hostages, suddenly we're powerless."

*"Ngh. I remember that happening to me, so I can't even say anything back..."*

Iris had been captured by bandits once before herself. It had happened because they'd used children as hostages, which had left her unable to keep her calm and cool. Ultimately, she'd been close to becoming damaged goods.

It would've been a very dangerous situation if Zelos and the knights hadn't come to save them. But real life wasn't like fiction; you couldn't usually count on a savior coming when you needed them most.

"Anyway, it sounds like the faeries have a settlement nearby; what would you like to do about it? At this rate, the bodies are just going to continue piling up as

soon as we leave the village.”

“Wha—? You truly intend to eliminate the problem by the root? To annihilate the faeries entirely? But such a thing would be—”

“Look, I feel bad for you, being a priest of the Faith of the Four Gods and all that. But this is a big problem for this village, and if they want to live peaceful lives, this is the only way to make that happen. Ultimately, the decision is up to the villagers here. And also...”

“A-And also? Also...what? What else is there...?”

“If you really recognize the faeries as a humanoid species, then this would amount to war between the faeries and the Magic Kingdom of Solistia. And however much the Holy Land of Metis may protect the faeries, if it came here trying to find fault with us after we got rid of an enemy that attacked us, it’d count as meddling in another country’s domestic affairs. After all, if the faeries are a proper species, the only choice is to leave their own matters up to them. If the Holy Land of Metis still tried to butt in despite that, I imagine *that’s* what would lead to a large-scale war. One in which a lot of lives would be lost.”

“Wha—?!”

The priest had been sent here from the Holy Land of Metis, and he had a responsibility to report back to his country.

But if he reported that a faerie settlement in the Magic Kingdom of Solistia had been annihilated, then it was entirely plausible that that could develop into the worst-case scenario.

It was a huge mess of a situation for the priest.

“Well, you can just follow your common sense on this, eh? Do you send a false report for the sake of the villagers, or do you follow your doctrine and responsibility and report the truth? That’s up to you. But it’s important that you make a choice you won’t end up regretting.”

“You...” The priest sighed. “You may well be more of a priest than I am. Advocating for your principles, guiding others to the right path...it is no easy thing to do.”



“I’d prefer to refuse that praise. I’m a mage, so I’m just doing this because I want to. That’s all.”

After much deliberation, the priest decided not to report the events.

As long as the faeries were recognized as a sentient, humanoid species, this problem was between them and their Solistian targets. And it was true that another country—*his* country—meddling in that would represent foreign interference.

If that interference led to war, a great deal of blood would be shed, and that wasn’t something the priest wanted to see. He too wished for a peaceful world.

“Almost like the sages of legend...”

The priest mumbled under his breath as he stared at the mage, who was surrounded by grateful villagers.

Though he would never in his wildest dreams have expected that he was right on the mark.

And so went the first chance meeting between priest and Great Sage.

# Chapter 11: The Old Guy Meets Another Reincarnator

After Zelos had healed the child, he and Iris were invited to the home of the village's mayor.

It was a modest house, but it was full of old, well-loved furniture, and it had the real vibe of a warm, countryside home.

But as much as the village was home to tranquil houses like this, the truth was that it was facing a terrible problem: the faeries.

The faint smell of rotting flesh wafted through the floorboards, serving as a reminder of that problem.

"This is terrible. Are they pulling these kinds of pranks on *every* house in the village?"

"Indeed, they are. We are utterly at our wits' end."

The faeries were hedonists through and through, and they refused to listen to whatever people had to say.

Whenever they saw the villagers in a panic, they found it hilarious, and their only response was to start rolling with laughter.

"Faeries have settlements, but they tend to have a pretty wide range of activity around those settlements," Zelos said. "They're like crows."

"They're meaner than crows, though, right? Crows go through your rubbish, but they don't do the kind of horrible stuff faeries do."

"Who's to say? Crows *are* pretty relentless about attacking pedestrians who happen to walk too close to their nests, you know? Though that's only during their breeding season, I suppose."

"Yeah, I don't really like that either, but..."

Iris had now awakened to just how bad faeries could be. She hadn't expected

such cruelty.

“Now, you two...” the mayor said. “I have a favor I would like to ask of you.”

“Exterminating the faeries, I’d assume? Well, when it’s this bad, I can’t imagine just letting it go anyway.”

“You have my deepest gratitude... For payment, how does the entirety of our upkeep budget sound? As you may be aware, we are but a poor village, so I hope we can at least preserve enough funds to buy seeds for crops...”

“No, no; I’ll take my compensation from the faeries I annihilate. Faerie wings and elemental magic stones sell for a pretty good price.”

“O-Oh...! So you intend to accept the request?!”

“I’m in too deep to say no at this point. And I *do* need to stock up on some materials. They don’t carry faerie drops in material stores, you see...”

The Holy Land of Metis—a theocracy centered around the Faith of the Four Gods—not only protected faeries but also pressured other countries to take a similar stance. Since The Holy Land of Metis was a major power, smaller nations generally did what they could to meet its requests.

Because of that, faerie materials weren’t really available on the market. It was a sad fact of life for alchemists and apothecaries.

“One way or another, we’ll have to start by finding their settlement. Should I bring out a scouting familiar or something?”

“A familiar?” Iris asked. “Aren’t the coccos your familiars?”

“You would’ve seen my familiar back when I saved you from those bandits, wouldn’t you? Though...if anything, it’s closer to a shikigami, I suppose. Or ‘a creature replica formed with mana,’ if you want to be precise.”

“Wait—are they items? Whoa! I want some!”

“I’m not giving you any, okay? Magic paper is just ridiculously expensive, and they take quite a while to make. It’s a bigger pain than you might expect.”

“Sell me some if I manage to save up the money, then! Every mage needs some scouting items, right?”

“You know, Iris... Is it just me, or are you holding back less and less around me over time?”

Iris was trying to stake out her life in this world as a mage.

While her goal of obtaining better equipment and getting stronger was all well and good, it was fair to assume she'd never been in a *really* harsh battle, one where her life was truly on the line. It felt like there was still a naivety to her that she had yet to break out of.

Zelos sighed. “This hurts my head.”

“What? Why do you look so exhausted? And why are you looking at me like I'm some poor little kid?”

“Must be nice, being just blissfully unaware...”

“Is it just me, or are you, uh, really treating me like an idiot right now?”

Even Zelos was reluctant to show how cruel the world could be to someone this pure and innocent.

He faced a decision at the moment: Did he force her to prepare for the possibility that she'd have to kill people to stay out of danger, or did he let her stay as she was and protect her?

“Oh, that's right—I haven't served the two of you any tea yet, have I? Yui! Sorry, but could you fetch these two some tea for me?”

“*Kaaay*. Just wait a little bit longer, all right? I'm in the middle of boiling the water.”

The voice of a young woman rang out from further inside the house. Zelos figured she was probably just the mayor's granddaughter and went back to putting together a picture of all the harm the faeries had caused. After all, he'd realized that if he delivered this information to Duke Delthasis, it'd probably be useful as political material of some sort.

Before long, the young woman emerged from the back, carrying tea on a tray.

And the moment she did, Zelos was unable to hide his shock.

She had shoulder-length, chestnut-colored hair, and the aura of a gentle,

traditional Japanese beauty—except she was wearing a priest’s robe. And to be specific, it was the priest robe you started out with in *Swords & Sorceries* if you created a priest.

“Wha—?!”

“Hmm? What is it? Is there something on my face?”

“No...”

What surprised Zelos more than anything was that the woman was pregnant.

From how she looked, she was probably in about her fifth or six month of pregnancy. But no reincarnators should have been in this world that long ago.

In other words, she must have arrived in this world while she was already pregnant. But then that meant the Four Gods, who’d said they’d *reincarnated* the people they’d brought here, had *lied*.

Because this would mean that it wasn’t a case of being reincarnated in another world, but of being *transmigrated* there.

Reincarnation would mean that the people had died, then been born here anew. Transmigration, on the other hand, would mean that they’d been moved, physical bodies and all, to a different place. And if it was the former—if they’d all been reincarnated, and their new bodies had been given the powers of their *Swords & Sorceries* characters—then it was strange someone would end up in this world with a child still in their belly.

Even if a player in *Swords & Sorceries* got pregnant, they’d still only have a single character. Which then raised the question—*what about her child?*

“Uh... Mister?”

“What is it, Iris?”

“A married woman has gotta be taking it too far, right? Her husband’ll kill you.”

“You know, Iris, I’m starting to get a clearer idea of how you see me. And it’s not exactly positive...”

Iris had gotten a weird misunderstanding.

The woman named Yui placed down the tea and quietly sat.

“Is this your granddaughter?” Zelos asked. “Must be exciting waiting on a great-grandchild, eh?”

“I’d have been happy if that *were* the case, but no; she’s not my granddaughter, unfortunately. We saved her when we found her collapsed out in front of the village about...four months ago, was it now? She didn’t have anywhere to go, by the sounds of it. So we’ve been taking care of her here.”

“You don’t say...”

“Hey, Mister...” Iris said. “He just said ‘about four months ago,’ didn’t he?”

Most likely, this young woman was in the same boat as Zelos and Iris. But just to be careful, Zelos decided to pry a little further before saying anything for certain.

“Yui, was it? I have one question I’d like to ask you...”

“Sure. What is it?”

“If I say ‘Saiyan,’ you think...”

“Huh? Um... Nappa, maybe?”

A cold silence swept over the room.

“O-Of *everyone* you could’ve said... *Something’s wrong with you, Katejina!* What, do you like the big burly types?!”

“Huh? I don’t know; he’s just a kinda cute old guy, isn’t he? Is it really that weird?”

“Uh, yeah...” Iris chimed in. “You could’ve at least gone with Vegeta. Do you have a thing for middle-aged dudes, Yui?”

“My fiancé... I mean, Ado said the same thing to me. Ugh... I mean, it’s *fine*, isn’t it? He’s attractive in his own way!”

Zelos and Iris gave the same response: “Uh...sorry. I don’t even know how I should react to that.”

“Fine,” Yui said, sulking. “Laugh. You’re allowed to laugh. Go ahead! Do it!”

“Anyway, ‘Ado,’ you say... As in, the deputy guild leader of Extra-Large Tonkotsu Chashu?”

Yui’s gaze suddenly snapped to Zelos, the shock clear on her face. “Y-You know Ado?!”

“Oh—I’m Zelos, from the party called ‘Take Your Hobbies to the Extreme.’ We used to party up with him fairly often. He was an excellent crafter.”

“So *that’s* what your party was actually called, Mister... I think ‘the Destroyers’ is a much better name.”

Iris was more surprised by Zelos’s lame party name than she was by finding out Yui was a reincarnator.

“Oh! So the two of you are acquaintances, eh? In that case, I shall excuse myself for a moment. I’m sure you youngsters have a lot to talk about between yourselves,” the mayor said.

“Oh, you don’t have to!”

“Yeah, you can stay here! It sounds like she doesn’t know him directly anyway.”

“No, no! This could finally be the girl’s clue to finding her husband, so please, take your time and have a good chat. I’ll rest in the back while you do. My age is catching up to me these days, anyhow...”

And with that, the mayor left for a room further inside the house.

With Yui being pregnant, they couldn’t push her too hard. Zelos decided to just ask her for some simple information.

“Would you mind telling us about your situation, Yui? I don’t mind if it’s just what you were doing right before you got to this world.”

“Y-Yes, of course... Hmm. Let’s see. I was...”

Yui (or Yuika Funabashi, as she’d been known in her previous life) had been dating her childhood friend Toshiyuki Ando (character name Ado) in *Swords & Sorceries* upon his invitation.

Or...well, to zoom out a little further, Toshiyuki and Yuika were childhood

friends with a five-year age gap, and they'd ended up in a relationship.

Each side's parents had approved of the relationship too. But with Toshiyuki in university while Yuika was still in high school, they'd been told to hold off on marriage until Toshiyuki found a job, and the parents had trusted them with that.

The two of them were supposed to have kept their relationship platonic until Yuika had graduated from high school—emphasis on *supposed to*. Judging by Yui's belly, their 'platonic' relationship had evolved into something decidedly more intimate.

Their parents had been furious, of course, and Toshiyuki had scrambled to find a job. It had been quite the chaotic period.

Eventually, Toshiyuki's frantic job hunting efforts had yielded a tentative job offer and he had bought Yuika a DreamTech console, through which the two of them had started to date in *Swords & Sorceries*.

It was probably his way of being considerate toward Yuika, who couldn't go outside as much once she was pregnant.

But thanks to the Four Gods effectively dumping their toxic waste in the form of the Dark God, Yuika had ended up being reincarnated in this world.

Though, well...at this point, it wasn't entirely clear that she *had* been reincarnated here, technically. That was about the gist of it all, though.

"And when that happened, you got separated from Ado, yes?"

"Yes... All I remember is being enveloped by a black fog. So, um... Do you know where he could be?"

"I haven't met him yet, unfortunately. But, well, knowing him, I'm sure he'll be up to something or other," Zelos said.

"How are you so confident about that, Mister? There's the chance he could be—"

"No, there's not. If Ado is here in this world, then he'll have some misgivings about the Four Gods, that much is for sure. Just like me... And he'll absolutely start doing something to cause problems for them."



“You really *are* confident, huh...” Iris mused. “Sounds like the two of you must’ve been pretty close.”

“He was like a disciple of mine. He even fought like me, so— Oh. *Oh.*”

Zelos’s mind suddenly flashed back to the black-clad mage he’d fought when he was out on a part-time job with Hamber Construction. The man’s fighting style had been similar to his own, and above all, he’d clearly been a high-level player. His age just about fit with the apparent age of Yui’s lover too.

*Surely not... But if that was Ado, then should I tell his girlfriend here about it? No. Not yet. I’m not confident, so let’s set that aside for now.*

And so Zelos decided to stay quiet about his clash with the man who vaguely resembled Ado. He hardly wanted to get her hopes up only to bring them crashing down by saying, “Oops, wrong person!”

“Well,” Zelos said after some thought, “if something happens, he may come looking for me. He has a good intuition for things like that.”

“Could you please tell me if you meet him, then? I don’t know why, but I just know he’s here in this world too. I can *feel* it.”

“W-Well.” Zelos and Iris responded together. “It sure sounds like you have quite the relationship...”

Zelos wasn’t sure whether the black-clad mage had actually been Ado or not. Leaving that aside, though, he promised Yui that he’d make sure to tell her if he ever did happen to meet the young man. It was for Yui’s sake, in part, but he also had another reason.

“Anyway, I should be heading off now to start on that job the mayor gave us. Well...I say ‘job,’ but it’s more like volunteer work, I suppose. Oh—Iris, can you stay here with Yui? She *is* pregnant, after all.”

“Yeah. Got it. I’ll tell her about your older sister, then. We don’t want her getting tricked, do we?”

“Nice! Yes; I want to tell as many people as we can about her, so that we can stop her from leaving more victims wherever possible. She’s human scum, so...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Leave it to me.”

With that exchange, Zelos left the mayor's house.

As he walked off, he heard Yui exclaim, "*Whaaa—?! Can someone even be that horrible?!*"

In response, he muttered in his head: *Oh, they can. They very much can...*

\*

Around sunset, Zelos walked through the outskirts of the village.

This should have been a peaceful village, but even out here, there was the inescapable stench of rot. The faeries were beyond terrible.

"Around here will do, I suppose..."

As he spoke to himself, Zelos pulled three arcana out from his inventory.

The first was for summoning a familiar, while the second was for sharing his sense of sight with it to help with the search. The third was for recording the familiar's observations onto a piece of magic paper the size of a sheet of drawing paper.

Zelos channeled mana into the first arcana and an owl-shaped familiar appeared. Next, he took out three magic stones and fed them to the owl. They would act like batteries; if the mana that Zelos provided the familiar was about to run out, these magic stones would replenish it. It would allow the familiar to act for longer.

This familiar was also able to see faeries. So even if the faeries were hiding themselves, Zelos, as the familiar's controller, would be able to see them clear as day. It was an extraordinary little helper.

"All right, then. Your time to shine."

The owl launched itself up into the sky. It wasn't long before it was soaring through the air.

Zelos focused his awareness on the second arcana and started searching for the faerie settlement. He was looking for a mana well. Faeries were spiritkin, and they were born from places with a high concentration of mana.

The differences between faeries and spirits was that the latter had weaker

personalities, as well as the fact that spirits were devoted to their own elements, and lived in different places accordingly. For example, fire spirits might live in a volcano, while air spirits would live their lives floating around in the atmosphere.

Faeries, however, settled down in highly concentrated mana wells, replenishing their mana there before heading off wherever else to wreak havoc. When their bodies got low on mana, they'd come back, fill up, and head back out.

Those mana wells could stagnate. A reasonable simplification would be to say that clear mana wells spawned spirits while impure mana wells spawned faeries.

If the stagnation of a mana well got worse, it would change into miasma and eventually start polluting nature. And if things went further south, such wells could begin spawning demons, so they could be dangerous.

With all that in mind, Zelos was using his familiar to search for places with an unusually high level of mana.

*Hmm... Northeast, eh? Among the mountains, then...*

Zelos sensed what direction the mana he'd detected was coming from and sent his familiar flying off that way.

It zipped through the sky at an impressive pace, arriving at its destination in no time at all.

However...

*"Gah?!"*

It was such a ghastly sight that Zelos couldn't help but make a noise.

Animal corpses were strewn all around the settlement. It was clear what had been happening here.

This was the faeries' playground—a hell where creatures were dissected alive.

*This is horrific... You'd have to give this an R-18 rating for sure. No way I could show this to Iris... It'd be bad for her education.*

Entrails were lying here and there, slowly rotting.

Zelos's destination was further in, though, so he urged his familiar forward.

*Wh-Whoa. This is worse than I'd expected... I feel like I'm about to puke.*  
*BLERGH...*

Countless faeries were flitting through the sky. At first glance, it made for a whimsical scene. But the light emanating from the faeries illuminated countless monster corpses and earth that was entirely coated in blood.

And even now, the faeries were innocently giggling as they dissected a small animal. There had to be something horribly wrong, Zelos thought, with any religion that considered these things *sacred*.

Most disgusting of all was the sight of a red-haired girl, with wings as beautiful as a swallowtail butterfly's, gleefully dragging someone's organs out from their body. This was the princess of the faeries: the faerie rose.

The victim was probably a bandit. They were in an absolutely hideous state, yet despite it all, they were still alive, having not yet been granted the mercy of death.

*They've flayed his skin, plucked out his eyeballs... The word "repulsive" isn't enough. These things are demons, however you look at it.*

Faerie roses had a special ability: Faeries' Revelry. It anchored creatures' souls within a set radius.

Zelos had already known that the faeries were horrible, but even back in *Swords & Sorceries*, he'd never seen them do something this gruesome. This was more of a nightmare than he'd ever expected.

*I suppose I'll record this too... But should I really be showing this to people? If someone sees me carrying around a picture of this, they might think I'm insane.*

Despite his misgivings, though, he used his third arcana to print the scene onto magic paper.

It was a fair decision...but it also alerted the faerie rose to his presence.

A tiny amount of mana leaked out as he printed the image. And the faeries, who were sensitive to even the slightest fluctuation in mana, were able to

notice and detect him. Or, at least, his familiar.

At a frightening speed, the faerie rose was right before 'his' eyes.

*Shit! Self-destruct!*

Zelos's sense of sight blacked out.

He slowly opened his eyes, and found himself standing in the outskirts of the farming village.

"Phew... That was bad for my heart. Still..."

As he took a look at the image that had been printed onto his third arcana, he heaved a sigh.

He was conflicted. Should he show this to the villagers, or should he not?

Whatever he chose, he felt like nothing but tragedy lay ahead.

## Chapter 12: The Old Guy Heads to the Faerie Settlement

*“BLEEEEEERGH!”*

When Zelos had used his familiar to scout the faerie settlement, he’d found a mountain of rotting corpses emanating a foul stench.

He’d recorded the scene onto a piece of magic paper for proof, and he’d just finished showing it to a gathering of the villagers and their village chief. Just as he’d expected, every last one of them parted with the contents of their stomachs.

The sight was just that disgusting and despair-inducing. It was enough to make you realize full well what a danger the faeries posed, whether you wanted to or not.

Even the priest from the Faith of the Four Gods had his hands over his mouth. And as he continued to battle his nausea, he started to harbor doubts about the teachings of his religion. He’d been told that the faeries were a pure, innocent species. Now, it seemed like they were actually the complete opposite—pure *evil*.

*“Glhrp—! To think that... That the faeries were... So wicked...”*

“Mm-hmm. You can’t let their appearance deceive you. It’s like with humans—there are ugly people who are beautiful on the inside, and beautiful people who are actually such nasty scumbags you end up wanting to kill them. Anyway, yes, it *is* a little gory, but this is the faeries’ true face. Horrific, isn’t it?”

“Th-This is simply...” The village chief struggled to find the right words. “This is *heinous*. It’s beyond all imagination. *Blrgh...*”

“This ain’t just... ‘a little’...gory...”

Even as they continued to contend with nausea, they all understood. The faeries were monsters that had to be taken out; they were monsters that could

never coexist with humans (or with other species, for that matter).

Well, they weren't *technically* monsters, but they were even *worse* than actual monsters. Monsters typically killed to eat and survive according to the laws of nature. That was a far sight better than the faeries, who killed solely for the fun of it.

"Why do faeries even exist, I wonder?" Zelos mused. "Monsters are living creatures, so they have to prey on other species to survive. I understand *them*. But faeries don't do that sort of thing. Sure, sometimes they'll carry pollen like insects, but that really is only *sometimes*; it's not their *thing*. They don't always do that. I just don't get what their whole purpose for existing is... It's almost like they're here solely to embody mischief. What do you folks say? Think I'm onto something?"

His question was met with another refrain of gagging. Their nausea was still far too bad for them to voice their agreement, it seemed.

Faeries didn't have any natural predators apart from the faerie-eater. It was the only strong monster they'd even get close to, and that was only because they got lured in by all its mana.

They lived their lives doing whatever gave them enjoyment, be it minor practical jokes or horrific acts of slaughter, and yet none of it was done with the slightest bit of ill will. From the outside, they did indeed seem evil—from the faeries' perspectives, however, it was all just a game.

"Th-They're fucked up... How could they *not* be evil?!"

"E-Exactly! How could they ever be forgiven for doing something so horrible?!"

"They *aren't* evil, though—and that's the problem. Sometimes you get humans who take pleasure in killing other humans, but faeries killing other faeries just isn't a thing. From their perspective, it's us humans who are the ones always killing each other; they probably think that *we're* the ones who are 'fucked up.' In fact, one book I read in the great library of Istol theorized that they're just mimicking human behavior... Or, perhaps, it *started* that way and then they escalated from there?"

“Certainly, you might have a point about humans. But does that truly justify faeries killing prey they could communicate with for sheer amusement? It sounds like they are savages to anybody who isn’t of their kind, does it not?”

“Yes, you’re right. And it’s not just humans. Even, say, the beastfolk and the elves have intraspecies wars. But that’s not the case for faeries. They never fight each other. In that sense, I suppose you could say they’re peaceful. But it’s a different story when it comes to how they interact with *other* species. They probably just see us all as new toys. Still, if this torture they’re carrying out is how the faeries see *us*, then that’s just...horrible. Too horrible for words.”

Humans naturally formed groups as they adapted to their environments. Then eventually, depending on their situations, those groups might end up in conflict with other groups. War could erupt—and killing could ensue—as a result of anything from politics, to religious differences, to simple matters of emotion. And as those groups and conflicts grew in scale, they could escalate into full-fledged wars between *countries*. Such things were frequent not only among humans but also among beastfolk and the elves, so from the faeries’ perspective, the strange ones were probably all of the *other* species that seemed so willing to kill their kin.

However, faeries were incredibly slow to mentally mature. That was partially due to the fact that, since long ago, they’d only been able to live in certain environments. These closed ecosystems meant that they didn’t properly interact with external society. Even if they did have little doubts about the way things were, they were only the *simple* kinds of doubts—the kinds children might have.

As a result, faeries ended up with a rather simplistic world view. It went something like: *We won’t fight our friends, but that means as long as someone’s not our friend, we can do whatever we want to them, right?* And that primitive way of thinking evolved over time into the faeries deriving *pleasure* from harming others.

Perhaps because they were a long-lived species, they didn’t think much of individual lives. They didn’t even really care about seeing their friends slaughtered before their eyes.



In a strange way, then, they *did* follow the laws of nature. Their world was one in which the fittest survived, and the likes of revenge were alien concepts.

They didn't even feel strong emotions like anger; everything they did could simply be explained as an extension of their play. It'd be fair to say that the entire species felt no emotion apart from joy.

"In other words, you can think of a faerie as an insanely selfish, willful, uncontrollable child who was given a knife and started innocently killing animals. Of course, the knife in this scenario is a magic sword with some kind of amazing hidden power."

"They're pure, but it's that purity of theirs that makes them cruel. I feel like I'm beginning to understand where their cruelty comes from. But—gods, *why*? Why would you make something like...?"

"Morality is what lets us form our opinions and determine right from wrong, at least after we've grown up. Faeries have no such concept, which is why they're always, well, going off the rails like you just saw."

Faeries had a sense of neither morality nor mortality. Even if they encountered someone who'd come to kill them, the ensuing fight to the death would be nothing but another game to them. They were such straightforward creatures that they were incapable of change—and that was what made them so nasty.

The priest had lived his whole life up until now trying his best to safeguard the faeries. But seeing Zelos's image had just completely and thoroughly smashed his beliefs into little pieces.

Zelos couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him.

"Anyway, that's about the gist of it," Zelos said, "so I'll be heading off to deal with the faeries. Do you get it now? The faeries might be 'pure' in a sense, but it's not exactly what humans have in mind when they hear the word."

"I... I understand. I understand it very well. The faeries are not beings I should be protecting. But if word of this gets back to the Holy Land, I imagine I will be in for a visit from the Inquisition."

"Father... You ain't in the wrong. Apart from the whole faerie thing, you've

been workin' damn hard for everyone in the village, haven'tcha?"

"Yes! If you hadn't healed us when we were hurt by the faeries, who knows how many of us would be dead by now..."

"It's them folk at the top protecting the faeries who're the bad ones! You ain't a bad guy, Father!"

"A-All of you... Thank you. Thank you so much... *Hic...*"

It seemed like—apart from the situation with the faeries—this priest had sincerely devoted himself to serving the people of the village and spreading his faith. He was merely an unfortunate victim of the decisions made by the bishops higher up in the church.

And it looked like the villagers recognized all the hard work he'd been putting in.

He had tears forming in his eyes, overwhelmed by the villagers' support.

"All that aside, I wonder why the idea of protecting the faeries even came up in the first place? It's a real bother."

"Around five hundred years ago, they say, the Four Gods sent a revelation to a saint. It said: 'Protect the faeries, they who are the children of the gods. They are pure beings, who shall be our messengers in the time to come.' Even in the Holy Land, the mischief of the faeries is too much to bear. But however much those like myself appeal the issue, we are told that it is all merely 'a trial,' and ignored if we say any more. I rejoiced when I was chosen to be a missionary. And yet..."

"And then the faeries started to be a problem here too, yes...? Hmm... I wonder if even the bishops aren't able to do anything about them? We're talking about a revelation here, after all."

"It is said that revelations of that sort continue to be given too. Saying that 'the killing of faeries is strictly forbidden.'"

It seemed like the priest had had it tough. He was powerless to do anything about all the harm the faeries were causing, and unable to follow through on the wishes of the local believers.

He was stuck between a rock and a hard place. It had to be stressful.

“Well, I’m a *mage*, myself, so revelations have nothing to do with me. I’m happy to destroy whatever I need to get myself some materials.”

“By the way, when you speak of getting materials from faeries, what exactly are you talking about...? I’m not sure what you intend to use them for either.”

“Ah—there are faerie gems, which can be used for mana potions, and faerie wings, which can strengthen wind magic. They’re indispensable for making magic tools too.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever heard of items made with things like that!” the mayor said. “Have you defeated a lot of faeries before?”

“I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of them. If you look at the healing potions that are on the market, a lot of them are well-made, but not particularly effective. And that’s probably because of a lack of faerie materials. It’s a great opportunity to make some money... Anyway, with that said—I’m off to slaughter some faeries!”

Zelos preferred to get annoying tasks out of the way as soon as he could.

When the villagers saw him promptly stand up and walk toward the front door, they gasped. “Yer goin’ *now*?! It’s almost dark!” they called out as one. “Wait!” someone said. “This is when the faeries are most active! It’s dangerous!”

“If they come at me, *they’ll* be the ones who wind up dead. What is it they say—like moths to the flame?”

“Uh, no, you see—”

“Look forward to the good news. Well, then, I’m off.”

And with that, Zelos wasted no further time making his way to the faerie settlement.

“Is he, uh... Is he gonna be okay?”

“Who knows...”

Once the shady old man was gone, the villagers were all left with a tinge of

concern.

From what they'd seen of him, they weren't sure he was reliable.

His robe was *gray*, after all...

\*

"Oh. Iris. What's up?"

Iris had been waiting outside the mayor's home. "Mister..." she called out as Zelos was leaving. "What should I do if the faeries come to the village while you're not here?"

"Hmm. Let's see... If you have to defend against an attack, then it'll probably just be you against the faeries. Do I have something good for this, I wonder...?" Figuring she had a decent point, he started rummaging through his inventory, until eventually he took out five throwing knives and one thick-bladed combat knife.

All of the throwing knives were shaped the same, and each had a patterned hilt with a magic stone embedded into it.

The combat knife was similar. But when Iris drew it from its sheath, she saw there was a detailed magic formula engraved into the hilt, from which she surmised that it was some kind of magic blade.

"This is..."

"The throwing knives are Blades of Binding. Effectively, they pin your target to a surface. The other knife is an Astral Slicer. It lets you make non-elemental magic attacks, to cut things like faeries. Faeries are strong against elemental magic, so while non-elemental attacks that just use pure mana are a little weaker, at least they'll actually work. Anyway, I'll lend you these for self-defense."

"Do you have to actually throw the throwing knives for them to work?"

"Yup. They temporarily bind your target—oh, but non-elemental magic will be able to get through the binding, so you can get through with the combat knife and slice them up paper-thin. I've only got five here, so make sure you don't waste them."

“Mnh... So they’re like a trump card? I mean, I hope I don’t *have* to use them...”

All of a sudden, Iris was anxious.

Zelos was obviously strong. And because of that, Iris had been reassured to have him by her side. Frankly, splitting up like this left her scared. While Zelos would probably be able to defeat faeries like it was child’s play, they’d still prove troublesome opponents for Iris.

After all, while she had every skill she could to strengthen her magic and increase her magic resistance, her only *physical* resistance skills were Swiftfoot and Strengthen Body, and both of them were only at low levels. Plus, since she was a mage, their effects weren’t all that impressive anyway.

She didn’t have any melee combat skills either, so the idea of having to engage in it left her worried. Especially because faeries were so small, which made them extra-annoying to actually land physical attacks on.

“Yes, I very much hope you don’t get an opportunity to use them. But you see, it’s possible that the most savage of all the faeries—the faerie rose—will come to this village while I’m gone. They *do* seem to travel pretty far from their settlements...”

“Don’t tell me that! I don’t wanna have to fight against some big scary super-faerie!”

“Well, this is all just for insurance, mind you. And I think you should be able to defeat a faerie rose anyway. Though they *do* look like pretty little girls...”

“The more I hear about this thing, the less I want to fight it! It’s like you’re telling me to kill some little kid!”

“It only *looks* like a child, okay? Besides, if you’re a monster-fighting mercenary, then you need to be able to defeat faeries like this. What would you do if this were a request you’d taken on for work?”

“Ngh!”

There were actually quite a few monsters out there that looked like children.

You couldn’t just turn down every subjugation request for certain monsters

because of how they looked. And that was doubly true if it was a direct request from the guild. It'd affect your guild ranking, after all. It just wasn't feasible to be that fussy about which requests you took.

If you weren't willing to take on requests you didn't like from time to time, you'd be stuck at a low rank forever. In the worst-case scenario, you could even get your guild membership canceled.

"Myself, I'm intending to deal with the faerie issue from the root—every last one of them, including the faerie rose. Just to make that clear."

"But won't that hurt your conscience, Mister...?"

"Not in the slightest. It might look like a little girl, but it's a little girl that has no qualms torturing people in gruesome ways. So I won't feel all that bad, even if I burn it to ashes. Oh—I took a picture as evidence of what they do, actually, and it's *incredibly* gory. On par with the very worst you'll see in horror films. You'd need to censor it... *Blergh*. Just remembering it makes me want to vomit..."

"I... I've never watched any movies like *that*, but..."

"Do you...*want* to see it? Really? Are you sure? Just a heads-up—you won't be able to eat any meat for a while if you do. It's bad enough that seeing it could change your whole outlook on life. So let me ask again: Are you *absolutely certain* you want to look? For what it's worth, I haven't shown you so far because I think it deserves an R-18 rating."

"I-Is it seriously that bad? You're not just kidding?"

"I'm completely serious. And the word 'bad' doesn't do it justice. In fact, every person who saw it started spewing. They couldn't stop either..."

Iris was grateful for the consideration Zelos had shown her.

"Well, you've got those trump cards I gave you, so I'd recommend equipping them now while you have the chance. If you don't use them, then that's fine; no harm done. But it never hurts to be safe, all right?"

"Hey, Mister... Are you *enjoying* scaring me like this?"

"Oh, perish the thought. I don't have the time to be playing around like that

right now. If there's work to be done, get it done ASAP—that's a motto of mine."

"And it sounds like this 'work' is gonna be really gross. I mean, you've gotta kill a faerie that looks like a little girl, right?"

"Here's the thing: I don't care how many bandits or organized crime figures or whatever these faeries kill, but I saw women and children among the corpses at their settlement. So I feel like the only option is to take all the faeries out, pronto. Speaking of which, I'm off."

"Wai—!"

Wasting no time, Zelos ran along the road that headed northeast from the village.

That *Zelos* was in a hurry just went to show how serious the situation was.

"Ugh. I really hope I don't have to use these, but I guess I should get them ready. Just in case..."

Iris took some items that could serve as trump cards of her own out of her inventory and equipped them to her arms and neck. Since they were for a mage, they were on the ornamental side—bracers and a necklace—but they were the strongest pieces of equipment that she had right now. Some of them were one-use-only, though, so if she used them here, she'd be incurring a heavy loss.

After all, they weren't the sort of things she could just buy again.

*You'd better pay me back if I have to use these, okay, Mister...?*

Zelos, and Zelos alone, was capable of creating such equipment.

So Iris figured that if she *did* end up having to use these things, she'd get Zelos to remake them for her later.

By the looks of it, the frugality demanded by her lifestyle as a mercenary had made her just a bit more of an adult. Mostly in the sense of a thrifty middle-aged lady, though...

She'd learned you had to be stingy with your money if you wanted to get by in this world.

Zelos had become one with the wind.

Or...more literally, perhaps, he was distorting the wind. He hadn't even gotten on his Harley-Sanders Model 13 and started tearing things up.

He was, quite simply, running as fast as he possibly could. *Insanely* fast.

Just by sprinting along a narrow mountain trail that branched off from the highway, he was leaving huge clouds of dust in his wake. And they were forming a few seconds after he'd run through.

He was almost like a human Formula 1 car. Or, perhaps, a certain superhero from a retro anime running alongside a bullet train, so fast you couldn't even see his feet. Or maybe a cyborg fitted with an advanced acceleration system.

Actually, no; the best comparison might be to a little android girl from one of the best-known works of a particularly famous mangaka.

Whatever you wanted to compare him to, though, he was *fast*, and he'd just run over a boar monster known as a mount boar.

"Aha ha... I'm a human... A *human*... I did *not* just run over a monster... And I'm certainly not running fast enough that my legs are just a blur... Aha ha ha ha..."

Zelos was hoping to outrun reality too.

About the only time Zelos had run full-out since arriving in this world was when he'd had to escape a whole army of ferocious monsters during his survival days right after getting here. Back then, his priority had been survival, and he hadn't had the luxury to test the limits of his stamina.

He'd known that he was unusual, sure. But he hadn't had the slightest idea of just *how* unusual he was.

He could easily beat most opponents—and apparently he was tough enough to escape unscathed from a high-speed collision with a mount boar. The world had quite the superhuman on its hands, by the looks of it.

Perhaps he just had his automatic skills to thank for the fact that he was able to exert only a regular level of strength in his day-to-day life.



After all, if you went about your average day with this sort of ridiculous strength, it'd probably be a massive pain, and potentially dangerous. You'd shatter a ceramic cup into tiny little pieces just by trying to hold it. Zelos was getting a better idea of just how much his Hold Back skill was helping him out.

Regardless, as he ran, he could feel his body colliding with objects that disintegrated on impact. Apparently they were faeries that were being smashed into bits by the shock of Zelos's speed. He was practically a freight train.

In fact, he was running with such outrageous force that you could imagine it being a good idea to create a new road sign: *Danger! Middle-aged man ahead! This vehicle is unable to perform sudden stops. Please make way!* And he wasn't exactly eco-friendly either.

He had good reason for being like this, though. He was hesitant to leave the defense of the village solely to Iris for too long, so he was in a hurry to get to the mana well where the faeries lived.

It was an unbelievable situation, and it had him in despair.

"Aha ha ha... It feels like I got asked, '*Do you want to go to another world? And do you want to stop being human?*' and I had to say yes to both, or I would've just died. Oh, how lovely it would be to just be *normal*..."

Right now, Zelos was about the furthest thing from normal that a human could possibly be.

He'd already understood that he was a foreign entity capable of turning this entire world on its head if he wanted to, but he'd never thought it was *this* bad. As he continued to lament his situation, he leaped up high into the air.

At the same time, he hid his presence, vanishing into the forest.

Though he couldn't do anything to hide the huge cloud of dust that got kicked up as he landed.

He immediately looked to see how many faeries there were in the dimly lit forest.

*What? What's this?! Something's here!*

*I don't see anything... What was it, though?*

*Enemyyyyyyy! Enemy attaaaaaack! ♪*

It looked like the faeries were surprised by the sudden assault—though with Zelos having hidden his presence, they couldn't actually detect him.

But while you'd usually expect people to be panicked by something like this, the faeries were instead curious, excited. They were frolicking around like children looking forward to playing detective.

*I'm still not even at my destination yet, but there are six hundred of them here... I never would've thought there'd be so many. Are they using the mana well as a nursery to reproduce, perhaps? The place itself looks like it belongs in a beautiful fantasy scene, but everything I can see illuminated around it is like something straight out of a nightmare...*

The trees were teeming with faeries, and the sight of their vivid lights flitting about the forest could be summed up with a single word: *mystical*.

Zelos could've stood there watching it forever...if not for all the carved-up animal remains strewn around the trees. It was utter carnage surrounded by utter beauty.

And he was still a little ways away from the mana well. The further in Zelos got, the more corpses there would be.

*"Gamma Ray, times twenty, full burst."*

A plethora of multilayered sigils appeared as Zelos multicast the spell, burning down the trees and the faeries within.

The corpses all turned to ash, and the foul stench of burning protein spread throughout the forest.

That was the start of his assault.

Zelos fired off more and more casts of Gamma Ray as he walked, and the faeries were annihilated, unable to escape. The carbonized trees made horrendous cracking sounds as they fell, sending up waves of sparks that then ignited the next trees out.

If the wind blew just right, the smoldering flames could ignite more, starting a full-fledged forest fire.

But for now, Zelos's priority was culling the faeries.

*What a terrible smell... Let's just get this over and done with. And I suppose I'll give the victims a proper funeral, while I'm at it...*

Of course, as Zelos kept up his onslaught, he was essentially announcing his presence to the faeries.

His Gamma Ray traveled in a straight line, allowing him to exterminate entire groups at once if he made the ray large enough. The faeries had good magic resistance, but they weren't able to resist *this*. It'd penetrate right through any magic barriers they tried to put up.

If the faeries had higher magic resistance, they might've been able to defend against it. But then again, the one casting Gamma Ray was *Zelos*, so perhaps they would've been screwed regardless.

And unlike a bullet, there was no stopping this attack once it had fired.

The drawback was that its range could be affected by gravity. But Zelos wasn't planning on doing any long-range sniping here, so it wasn't really a problem for him.

As for the radiation exposure, Zelos had prevented it in the design stage by tinkering with the mana conversion component of the spell's formula...but this was another world. There was still the scary possibility that things were different here, and it had Zelos hopelessly worried.

*Hmm... Back in Swords & Sorceries, I thought it just used regular gamma rays, like the name would suggest. But maybe the spell is actually something else that's just similar to gamma rays? After all, when I use it, the magic changes back into mana after a certain distance... Are there certain limitations to it, I wonder?*

Normally, gamma rays would just keep traveling in a straight line at a speed that was impossible for humans to perceive. They were affected by gravity, but that just meant that their trajectory had a slight curve, so if you were aware of their effective range, you could account for it.

Here, though, at a distance the ray turned back into mana, which then dispersed and could be detected. So...perhaps this world had something like a

concrete law about the effective range of spells, and if a spell went beyond that threshold, it would immediately turn back into pure mana?

Not that figuring this out really meant anything to Zelos.

Sure, he'd found that there was that difference between the world he was in now and the world of *Swords & Sorceries*. But at this point, he didn't intend to make any other new spells or modify his existing ones, so he just stored that information away in a corner of his mind.

At the moment, what was important was stopping the faeries from creating more victims and saving the village of Hasam. To that end, Zelos had to kill every last faerie he could.

He felt like he was working a pest control job.

*From memory, was it...around here?*

He continued to fire off wide-area attacks in this unfamiliar forest, and when he wasn't able to see any more faeries, he immediately concealed his presence again and set off in a sprint toward the spring where the mana well was located.

And while he arrived in no time at all, he was met with such a potent rotten smell that he found himself attacked by nausea, and couldn't help but pinch his nose. He felt like the smell might be stuck in his nostrils forever by the time he was done.

*Hey, hey, look! A rotten eyeball! ♪*

*I've got some more guts. Should we go hide them in the village again?*

*Nah. I'd rather bring back another kid. I wanna play tag! ♪*

*Hmm... Should I go stabby-stabby with a spear? Or cut them up into little bits? Ooh, or bury them alive? That one's good too!*

Swarms of faeries were gathered around the trees, replenishing their mana above the mana well in the middle of the spring. There was a spectacular mismatch between the fantastical beauty of the vivid, colorful lights dotted around and the repulsive gore of the corpses and rotten flesh strewn about. Anyone who found this scene as a whole to be beautiful probably had something very wrong with their head.

Amid it all, Zelos could see faeries that had been newly born from the mana well. And from that, he figured he was going to have to disperse the mana that was gathered here. If he didn't, the faeries would just keep popping up after he left.

*Is the faerie rose not here? Maybe it's gone somewhere else... No. Don't tell me...*

Judging by the number of corpses around, the faeries probably split up and abducted people from all sorts of different places.

They'd kill their abductees for just some casual fun, then go back out looking for their next prey. Apart from replenishing their mana, they could live without the need to eat or drink, so their barbaric games continued around the clock, day and night.

And the higher species—the faerie rose—could store a particularly large amount of mana, which gave them a wider range of activity than the average, lower-ranked faeries.

*If I destroy this mana well, that should at least cull their numbers a little bit, but... I'm going to have to use my annihilation magic here, won't I?*

A mana well was like a blockage that appeared in the flow of mana through the land. For one reason or another, mana could begin to accumulate in a particular place, and as long as mana continued to flow, that blockage would only get larger and larger. Eventually, when it reached a limit, it would explode, dispersing the mana throughout the world once more.

Faeries and spirits came to inhabit these mana wells and increase their numbers. If they continued to multiply without end, then eventually the mana in the mana well would run out and it would disappear...but there could be a problem if there was a dragon den directly below. If there was an endless amount of mana continuing to flow from a dragon vein, then the mana well would never run dry, and eventually, powerful beings could be born from the well. This was how the likes of demons and sacred beasts were born. And if that did happen, they could pose a problem that was orders of magnitude worse than just faeries. There was a need, as such, to purify the whole place, mana well and all. But the issue was Zelos didn't know how big this particular mana

well was. He didn't have the time to calm down and methodically survey it either, so it seemed like he had no option but to just blow up the entire area.

*OoOoOoOoOooooOOOoO!*

*Urgh... A demon's trying to form. Well, with this many corpses around, I'm sure there'd be a lot of miasma and hatred, so it makes sense... Okay. Better nip that in the bud before it's formed. Yeah...*

A thick miasma was emanating from inside the mana well.

Demons were mainly formed from mana wells in places where lots of lives had been lost, like battlefields. And like faeries, they would use mana wells to try to increase the numbers of their kin. As part of that process, they would try to make the miasma even thicker by killing intelligent creatures like humans, contaminating the mana well.

Now, while demons and faeries had similar dispositions, they were otherwise polar opposites, and the demons were even strong enough to prey on the faeries. They would then use the mana of the faeries they devoured to give life to kin or underlings, allowing them to further increase in number.

The demon devouring those faeries would also grow in power itself, potentially even becoming a demon lord with time. Zelos hadn't expected to see faeries giving birth to a demon like this.

Normally, the protagonist of a story would fight against a demon *after* it had been born. But Zelos was being pragmatic here; he didn't see any need to sit around and wait for that to happen. So without further delay, he unleashed a high-density magic formula from within his subconscious, manifesting it in the palm of his hand.

A highly condensed sigil took shape in the form of a cube with a pale glow.

*"Gluttonous Void."*

Zelos released the sigil. It floated toward the mana well, and when it arrived, the magic formula contained within began to rapidly activate, forming a jet-black sphere.

The faeries—who'd just been playing with corpses—were all of a sudden very

curious about this black sphere that had appeared from nowhere.

*Hey, what's that? I wanna know what it is!*

*A new toy? It's got so much mana!*

*I wonder what it is? It looks FUN! ♪*

Zelos, for his part, evacuated as fast as his legs would carry him. He was like an arsonist who'd just lit a fire.

*I'm sure as hell not getting caught up in that. Later, you little shits!*

And as he did, the black sphere started to draw every last bit of nearby matter toward it, drawing them inside itself and growing denser as it did.

Unable to oppose the force drawing them in, the faeries yelped as they were sucked up— seeming, as always, to enjoy every last moment.

*Whoaaa! It's pulling me iiiiiin! ♪*

*Wheeeeeeeeeee! ♪*

And of course, the mana well was no exception. Nor were the water accumulated in the spring and the corpses and bones littered around the ground; they too were all drawn indiscriminately toward the void, which continued to devour every last thing it touched as it grew, and grew, and grew.

Then it reached its critical point.

*VROVROVROVROH...*

Once he'd finally sprinted his way to a safe distance, Zelos turned to watch as the faerie settlement disappeared.

In a mere moment, the trees and earth all vanished at once. And then, an instant later, an enormous explosion rang out, causing a powerful shock wave to ripple throughout the valley between the mountains.

This physical shock wave alone had enough force to annihilate any remaining faeries it hit.

And even at the distance he was at, Zelos was by no means unaffected.

*AAAAHHH!!!*

He'd thought he was safe, but the shock wave—resulting from his own spell, mind you—had ultimately hit him too as it continued to spread.

The shock wave gouged deep into the ground and sent the bedrock flying, hitting everything in its path. Ultimately, an enormous crater was formed in the valley between the mountains.

Having been blown away by the shock wave, Zelos was now caught on a branch of a tree that had just barely managed to avoid being felled.

It wasn't the coolest pose.

"So even Gluttonous Void ended up being this powerful... What sort of magic did I unleash that other time, then...?"

Zelos would never forget his time in the Far-Flung Green Depths.

He'd had a horde of goblins relentlessly chasing him, and when he'd finally managed to shake them off his tail and find a hiding spot, that hiding spot had turned out to be...a huge goblin settlement. The stress of that realization had made his brain short-circuit, and in a panic he'd used Dark Judgment, a wide-area annihilation spell.

Gluttonous Void was the prototype of Dark Judgment, and it was a powerful area spell in its own right.

It used ultrapowerful gravitational compression to attract surrounding matter, which it then absorbed to grow larger. Eventually, the resulting black hole would self-destruct from its own gravitational force, imploding and erasing its surroundings.

Dark Judgment, meanwhile, sucked in monsters and formed a gravitational field, and similarly self-destructed to annihilate the caster's opponents. If you were only looking at the initial effect, Gluttonous Void was stronger. But Dark Judgment used every last enemy in a massive radius to fuel the creation of the gravitational field, ultimately making the attack larger—so from a logical perspective, it was Dark Judgment that caused greater damage.

The more enemies there were in the area of its effect, the more potent a gravitational field it would create. And the spell would just keep going until there were no more enemies left to consume; it wasn't exactly a flexible attack.



That was why Zelos had hesitated to use it here.

With Gluttonous Void, in contrast, the caster could freely control the size of the area affected. But the greater share of the damage came from the shock wave, the secondary effect caused by the self-destruction of the gravitational field.

In other words, the spell itself only caused a single wave of damage in an area, but the resulting shock wave would devastate the surroundings.

“Sheesh... There’s just nothing left.”

The mana well was gone—but so too was the verdant forest that had existed around it.

And all this was still Zelos holding back.

Sure, it was good that he’d managed to get rid of the mana well. But he’d failed to prevent the secondary effect, and it had done a lot more damage than he’d expected.

He certainly hadn’t predicted *this*. Back when he’d used the same spell in *Swords & Sorceries*, it had been so much weaker. But here in reality, it seemed to be properly dangerous.

*It wasn’t all that powerful when I used it against the Dark God, I swear... And this is what happened when I was limiting the power. I wonder just how much destruction I’d cause if I went all out with this thing? It’s on par with wide-area annihilation magic.*

He’d used it thinking it’d just be regular area magic, but apparently it was actually quite an insane spell.

The shock wave had probably eliminated any faeries living in the surrounding area.

It had, after all, sent all of the natural mana here flying out. And the combination of the physical shock wave and the subsequent *mana* shock wave had effectively created a tidal wave of sheer faerie destruction.

Faerie bodies were half mana, so the mana shock wave had destroyed them one after another as it spread throughout an enormous area.

Its range was incomparable even with that of the physical shock wave the spell had caused. You could say it was a proper tertiary wave of damage in its own right.

Zelos couldn't help but break into a cold sweat.

"W-Well... What's done is done. Let's just pretend I don't know anything about it. If anyone asks, I can just say, *Oh, when I cast a spell, the mana well suddenly exploded, and it nearly killed me!* Yes, yes... Aha ha ha haaah..."

Knowing that the villagers wouldn't have any way of determining the real cause anyway, Zelos just decided it'd be fine to lie his way out of it.

He was a nasty piece of work.

And he was far too willing to just brush these kinds of things off.

It seemed like he hadn't grown out of the bad habits he formed during his *Swords & Sorceries* days.

His failure would result in a serious but temporary water shortage for the village of Hasam. The crater he'd made, however, caused an underground spring to gush forth and form a lake, which within a year was an abundant source of water.

About another two hundred years down the line, the area would become famous as a resort area catering to royals, and it would be closely managed as a nature preserve.

Another three hundred and fifty or so years after that, the people would discover old annals written by Duke Delthasis, revealing to the world that this lake was actually all the result of a big screwup on the part of a Great Sage. Such was the origin story of what would eventually come to be known as Merlin's Lake...

But that was a story for another time. For now, it would be more than five hundred years until the truth behind this incident became known to the public.

\*

After Zelos had left for the faerie settlement (or, no, was it a...nest—a hive?), Iris was meandering through the village with free time on her hands.

For what it was worth, she'd been tasked with defending the village. Even if she couldn't see faeries, she could detect their mana. So if there were any there, she'd be able to identify roughly how many there were and *where* they were. For the time being, though, she wasn't able to detect the mana of any faeries.

Iris continued to amble her way along a path between some rice fields. But then, she felt like she heard something that sounded like a voice.

"Huh? I wonder who that is? It kind of sounds like...a kid?"

But the children were all supposed to be hidden away in their homes right now. They shouldn't have been outside.

Thinking there could be faeries after all, Iris headed in the direction the voice was coming from. But when she did, she witnessed something she could hardly believe.

It was a cow...floating in midair, with its stomach torn open and its guts dragged out of its body. And there was nobody around—just the cow, the guts, and the thick, rusty smell of blood stinging her nose.

"C-Cattle mutilation?!"

Iris prepared for battle. She was getting a bad feeling about this.

There was a high concentration of mana around the cow, and that mana was ripping the cow apart as if it had a will of its own.

*Aww...it died. Mmm... Oh well! Looks like I've got a new toy to play with now.*

"Wha—?! *Mana Bullet!*"

Feeling a strong sense of danger, Iris immediately fired a bullet of mana toward the spot where she felt the highest concentration of mana.

She heard a cutesy-sounding yelp, and her target materialized: not a little faerie, but a red-haired little girl, with bloodred wings patterned like those of a swallowtail butterfly.

She wasn't wearing any clothes, but instead, she had what looked like ivy wrapped around her body.

“A... A faerie rose...” Iris said.

The faerie rose gave her an innocent smile.

## Chapter 13: Iris Fights Alone

*Aha ha ha ha! ♪ You're so mean, attacking me out of nowhere! That hurt!*

While the faerie rose had gotten hit by Iris's attack, it hadn't taken much damage. In fact, it had a big smile on its face.

While Mana Bullet was only a non-elemental beginner spell, it still should've dealt a decent chunk of damage given Iris's level and skills. Yet the faerie rose had endured it.

The faerie rose, Iris judged, must have had higher magic resistance than she'd expected. She tried to calculate the optimal distance that would let her keep attacking while staying out of melee range.

She knew that the faerie rose would just dodge if she attacked now, so she wasn't intending to launch a head-on attack.

Faerie bodies were made of mana, after all. Even if they evolved and grew larger, body weight was a foreign concept to them, so they'd still be able to move just as quickly.

In other words, if Iris just fired off magic without much thought, the faerie rose would simply dodge, and she'd do nothing but waste her mana.

"Guess I should've expected this from an evolved one. Magic like this won't do anything to it."

*Mm-hmm! Magic doesn't work on me. Tee-hee! ♪*

The faerie rose puffed out its chest with pride.

It was easy to get tricked by a faerie rose's cute appearance and underestimate just how dangerous it could be—but it was *not* an enemy around which you wanted to let your guard down. And Iris knew that. In fact, she had seen this one having a whale of a time dragging out a cow's entrails just moments ago. She knew perfectly well how brutal it could really be.

*My turn now, okay~?*

“Wai—!”

All of a sudden, the ground swelled, and out shot spears of earth that surged toward Iris.

It was effectively the Gaia Lance spell. Countless spears of earth came at Iris from every direction, and she ran frantically around to dodge, setting up trap magic as she went.

*Aha ha ha ha! If you don't run faster, I'm gonna get you! You're gonna get stabbed! It'll be all like, THUNK! SPLORCH!*

The spears continued to hound Iris, and as she slipped through them, she manifested a sigil in the palm of her left hand.

But she didn't activate the spell. And she proceeded to form several more of the same sigil, fixing them in place for later.

She was stocking up on delayed magic—and, at the same time, trying to pick the best time to activate it.

“You know, you look cute, but you're *evil... Homing Bullet!*”

*Hmm? What's thiiiiis~?*

The faerie rose dodged the bullets of mana, chattering away in a silly voice as it made all sorts of complex maneuvers through the air. It had a humanoid form, but it was moving more like a certain kind of mobile weapon.

As fast as the faerie rose was, Iris kept casting more of the same spell to keep it in check. She was bombarding it from all directions, including above.

*Oh noooooo! ♪*

“I...can't tell whether I'm actually giving it trouble, or whether it's toying with me. But...”

The faerie rose descended closer to the ground as it flitted through the sky, continuing to dodge the barrage of projectiles with ease. If any of Iris's attacks had actually hit it, they hadn't done much damage.

However, the faerie rose had made a slight miscalculation: It had let Iris lead it right where she wanted it to be.

“Now’s my chance! Trap magic, activate!”

At this point, the faerie rose couldn’t avoid the magical land mines Iris had set up in advance. It got blasted, and hard.

These “land mines” were, to be precise, non-elemental trap spells called Force Geyser. And Iris had led the faerie into just the right spot to get hit with direct blasts from the concentrated flurry of mana that sprung up like—you guessed it—geysers.

But of course, something like that wouldn’t be enough to take down the faerie rose.

Trying to hammer home her advantage, Iris sent out more Homing Bullets to block the faerie rose’s escape and lead it toward another sigil she’d set down.

*Wheeeee~! Waaaaaah~! Hwaaaaaah~!*

“I...*think* I’m cornering it now. Right? It’s not just playing with me. Right?!”

As soon as Iris got a spare moment amid the exhausting battle, she used a potion to replenish her mana.

But the faerie rose’s utter lack of concern—apparent in its behavior and its “screams”—stopped Iris from feeling at all in control here. She was left doubting whether she was actually giving this thing any trouble at all.

Faeries didn’t feel pain. The faerie rose might have said “that hurt” earlier, but it had been simply mimicking humans.

Species like elves and dwarves, which were closer to spirits and faeries, had acquired physical bodies over a long process of evolution. But in exchange, they’d lost the abilities of their ancestors.

Pain was an important way of telling you something was wrong with your body, and species that didn’t feel it—like faeries—couldn’t feel danger. Even if their bodies were breaking down or falling apart, they wouldn’t even be aware of it. And so, they’d lost their fear of death.

Or...no. They’d never *had* a fear of death to begin with.

Over many years, the likes of elves and dwarves had become closer to humans, and the changes in their bodies had given them a better sense of what

it was like to be *alive*. But beings like faeries, which remained closer to the original forms of their ancestors, were indifferent about losing their lives. They would continue frolicking around until their very last moment.

Perhaps you could say they were the happiest species in existence. They'd never been afraid of death, after all.

Though to Iris, who was having to deal with one of them right now, that particular trait was nothing but annoying.

"Can you just hurry up and, like, run away already? Or lose? I'm getting seriously exhausted here..."

*Aha ha ha ha ha! Why? This is so much FUN! It's my turn now, okay~?*

"Huh? What do you m— *Hyuwah!*"

Something grazed Iris's shoulder.

It was a stem from some kind of plant—and it was covered with thorns.

"A... A rose stem? Is this Rose Whip?!"

As its name would imply, Rose Whip was a spell that created whips out of rose stems. It was mostly used for restraining your enemies or keeping them at bay, but the faerie rose had spawned countless such whips from the ground and sent them lashing toward Iris.

Iris had seemed to have the upper hand just moments ago, but the situation had very suddenly done a one-eighty. She was dodging for her life now.

*Hey! Heeey! You gotta try harder than that! Or they'll hit you! And then I'll pluck out your eyebaaaaaalls!*

"How is it... Just how much mana does this thing have?!"

*Ooh, ooh—I can do this too! Hi-yah!*

The faerie rose sent countless bullets of mana flying toward Iris, just like Iris had done to it earlier.

She was dodging as best she could, but the bullets of mana continued to hound her. And eventually, a few found their mark.

*"Agh!"*



*I got you! I got you!!! Yaaaaaay! ♪*

“Don’t...get...cocky!”

Without missing a beat, Iris cast Homing Bullet again, forming more bullets of mana that intercepted the faerie rose’s.

The projectiles exploded as they hit each other in midair, filling the area with loud, booming noises.

*Ooh! Whoa! That was COOL!*

“Delay formula, release! *Force Missile!*”

Force Missile was an advanced version of Homing Bullet, and its power was on the higher end.

It fired off more projectiles than Homing Bullet too, and it was an effective attack against creatures like faeries that had high elemental resistance. The faeries had high defensive resistance against the four elements, but they had no resistance to non-elemental magic.

And as a result, it would become a battle against the spell’s power and the inherent mana resistance of the faeries.

“Delay formula, release! Full burst!”

*Aaaaaagh~!*

As the faerie rose took hit after hit from the Force Missiles, it gradually grew transparent. Eventually, it disappeared.

“Did... Did I...” Iris panted. “Did I get it?”

She couldn’t sense any presence nearby, and she couldn’t see the faerie rose either.

But she wasn’t letting her guard down.

She knew that faeries could conceal themselves.

They’d used a similar trick against her back in *Swords & Sorceries* to steal items and the like. And an evolved species like a faerie rose would have an *especially* easy time of hiding itself if it wanted to, she’d determined.

Her time spent on Earth as a shut-in gamer hadn't been all for nothing. Not that it was anything to be *proud* about either, mind you...

"No... I just jinxed it. There's no way it's over yet, right? A higher species should be about the same level as I am. Surely I can't have beaten it *that* fast..."

If this was the monster from *Swords & Sorceries*, it probably would've run away by this point. But this was a *real-life* fantasy world. Going by the concentration of mana lingering in the area, it seemed highly likely that the faerie rose was still around.

Iris got the feeling she'd had the faerie rose on the ropes. But it was, at the end of the day, a hedonistic monster that saw even a fight to the death as just another game. She just couldn't believe it'd be done in so easily.

"I mean... I know it's just playing, but that doesn't make it any less of a pain to deal with."

To the faerie rose, this wasn't even a battle at all. Just playtime.

It had the intelligence of a child, after all. There was no way a child obsessed with playing however it pleased would simply *do as it was told*.

And as it turned out, Iris was right.

"It's coming!"

All of a sudden, a flurry of rose stems shot up from the ground. They encircled Iris from all directions, as if to prevent her escape.

They stretched high into the sky, not only extending around Iris but also covering the sky above her. She was completely trapped by roses now, with nowhere to go.

"Crap! *Explode!*"

*Hyawaaah~!*

Iris cast the most powerful spell in her arsenal—Explode—and obliterated the cage of thorny stems. In a hurry, she searched for the faerie rose...but it was nowhere to be found.

What she *did* see were more rose whips rising up to strike at her. She ran

around in a frenzy, somehow managing to swat them back with her Runewood Staff.

Judging by the voice she'd heard just now, she knew that the faerie rose wasn't completely hidden.

The problem was, she didn't know where it was, or where its attacks would be coming from.

It was stealthier than you'd expect a faerie to be.

*I can't even detect its mana. In that case, I guess an AoE should at least let me find out where it is...*

Iris had omnidirectional attack magic of her own.

It wasn't particularly strong, though. Plus, it wouldn't have much of an effect on any faeries, given their high level of magic resistance.

It was light magic, after all, for use against undead. And it consumed a lot of mana.

*Argh... Why'd I even buy a spell like this? I want to go back in time and smack some sense into myself...*

There were absolutely spells that would be effective in a situation like this.

Iris, however, had never bought them; she'd prioritized learning spells she'd needed for quests. The only area spell she had that could inflict significant damage was Explode.

Explode was a frontal cone attack centered around an enemy within range. And seeing as she didn't know where the faerie rose was, she couldn't just use it recklessly.

Iris grabbed a mana potion with her left hand and cast the light spell.

*"Purification Force!"*

A large area centered around Iris was engulfed by a dome of light.

This was Purification Force, a purifying spell used against undead and spirits. It didn't have any effect against physical living beings like humans, but it was highly effective against ethereal beings and the undead. Faerie bodies, for their

part, were made of mana, but they were able to become completely corporeal, so the spell didn't deal all that much damage to them.

Besides, this was *area* magic. It wasn't the sort of thing you were meant to use against a single opponent in the first place.

*Gyah ha ha ha! That's not gonna do anything to me at ALL~!*

It wasn't clear whether the faerie rose was trying to avoid the attack or whether it was acting on instinct, but it immediately turned its incorporeal mana body into a physical one.

As always, it was enjoying this whole situation immensely. But it was playing into Iris's hand. She activated a spell she'd been keeping for just this moment.

*"Force Missile!"*

*Hyawaaaaaah!!!*

*"Now I just keep pressing, and— Agh?!"*

The moment Iris stepped forward to try and land a follow-up attack, she was suddenly midair.

The ground had crumbled beneath her feet. She was falling.

*"Oof! A... A pitfall?!"*

*Aha ha ha ha ha! You fell for it! You fell for it!*

"Wait... Did it mimic my trap magic? Are these things seriously able to learn that fast?"

*I caught youuuuuu! No more running away, okay?*

*"You little... Ngh!"*

Feeling a sudden pain in her right leg, Iris looked to check what it was, and saw thorns piercing her thigh.

Before she could react, more thorny stems coiled around her all at once, while the one piercing her leg gouged deeper and deeper into the wound. She was hit by a wave of pain like nothing she'd ever felt before.

*"AAAAAAGGGHHH!"*

Her scream rang out through the night sky.

And it wasn't over yet. More thorny stems flew out from around her, and those too wrapped themselves around her body, preventing her from moving.

Iris used her right arm—the only part of her that *wasn't* restrained—in a desperate attempt to pull off the stems coiled around her throat. But they were squeezing her with such strength that she couldn't get them loose.

All her effort earned her was a bunch of thorns piercing her palm, and a trickle of blood.

*Hmm... What should we do now~? Should I flay your skin? Or pluck out your eyeballs? It'd be boring if you just died right away, though...*

With Iris now captured, the faerie rose immediately began thinking about what to do for its next “game.”

By nature, it followed whatever whim appealed to it the most. So as soon as one game was finished, it would start thinking about the next way to have some fun.

What was more, it didn't have the slightest hesitation about killing other living creatures. It could dissect people alive with an innocent smile on its face.

For the first time since arriving in this world, Iris felt true fear.

*Ooh! Maybe I could control you like a puppet? Aww, but then you might just enjoy it. Grooosss! ♪*

Iris was desperately trying to think of a way out of this situation.

The only thing she could move was her right arm. The rest of her body was restrained by the rose stems, unable to move.

So what could she do?

She racked her brains trying to think of a way to escape, all the while resisting the pain.

*Ngh... Ugh... I've only got one more set of trap spells left. And even if I wanted to escape, I've got these stems wrapped around me. There's nothing I can do with just my right hand... Mister's not back yet either. If only I had a trump card*

*or something... Oh!*

The words “trump card” suddenly reminded her of a certain set of tools. Being careful not to let the faerie rose see them, she took the five Blades of Binding out of her inventory.

*Oh! I know! I'll carve something into you! ♪ I wonder how your screams are gonna sound?*

It wasn't clear where the faerie rose had gotten it from, but it was suddenly holding a rusty knife.

The blade was dark black—a color built up by rusted blood, perhaps. It was probably just something the creature had picked up somewhere or other, but most likely it had been using it for a fair while.

Iris finally understood what Zelos had told her: There was no reaching an understanding between humans and faeries. Even trying would be utterly futile.

*“Ngh... That's a pretty dirty knife you've got there... Did you find it somewhere?”*

*Yeah! I did! I forget when, though. Anyway, that doesn't matter. ≡ Playing's more fun than talking!*

*“I mean, I kind of get you, but...you know you're causing trouble for people, right?”*

*Causing trouble? But I'm just playing! Don't humans play games all the time?*

*“So—are you gonna cut me into pieces with that knife of yours?”*

*Yeah! ≡ It'll be SO much fun! You know, if you cut someone's tummy open while they're still alive, their guts go all SQUELCH and stuff!*

It had taken her long enough to fully grasp it, but Iris was trembling with fear at the faeries' worldview—at the fact that they could say the most barbaric things with innocent smiles.

Nonetheless, she stifled her fear as best she could and bided her time, waiting for the faerie rose to get close enough that it wouldn't be able to dodge.

She was only going to get one chance. She couldn't waste it.

*Hmm... Should I start with your skin? Or cut off your ears? I could just go THLUP and they'd be off, just like that! Oh... Or how about your nose?*

As the faerie rose went back and forth wondering whether it should carve something into her flesh or cut a part of her off—and if so, *which* part—it carelessly drew closer to the hole Iris was stuck in.

The creature's mistake was Iris's salvation. It gave her a chance. A chance she could use.

But the faerie rose was unaware of that, simply continuing to ponder the question of how best to dissect Iris's body. Faeries had a tendency to underestimate human cunning like this.

*Ooh! I know! I'll open up your head! Then I can fiddle with your brains! It's super fun, you know?*

"As if...I'd let you!"

Once the faerie rose had descended into the pit and gotten close enough to Iris, she threw the Blades of Binding at it with all the force she could muster.

The blades spread out as if to surround the creature, and followed the commands that had been built into them to manifest a binding sigil in the form of a pentagram.

This was a powerful restraint. Anyone or anything hit by it would have their movements sealed, preventing them from escaping for a certain amount of time. There was no getting away; this was a binding sigil made by a Great Sage.

With the stage set, Iris used her final set of trap spells.





*“Force Blast! Force Blast! FORCE BLAST!”*

Force Blast was a single-hit spell that boasted the highest power out of any non-elemental attack spell.

And Iris multicast it, blasting the faerie with one hit after another.

It was still on the weaker side compared to elemental magic, but it made up for that by being effective against almost any monster; there were only a few rare exceptions. Its attack power was reliable too, though it wasn't phenomenal either—“reliable” also meant “middle-of-the-road” here.

The faerie rose continued to take Force Blast after Force Blast head-on, sending it flying out from the pitfall.

Or, at least, it *would* have been sent flying, if the Blades of Binding weren't preventing it from moving. But they were—and so the faerie rose had no choice but to bear the full brunt of the barrage until the binding effect disappeared.

As the barrage continued, Iris was released from her own thorny bindings, and she didn't miss a moment drawing the other knife Zelos had given her: the Astral Slicer.

*“Buff magic: Hopper!”*

Iris used a buff spell that boosted her jumping ability to leap out from the pitfall and stab at the faerie rose.

She'd been stifling her fear of death, but now, all at once, her emotions exploded back to the fore as she used the Astral Slicer—which could cut through even spiritual bodies—to slice off the faerie rose's limbs. This was a monster that had the appearance of a little girl, but at this point, Iris mercilessly hacked away at it. She wasn't about to give it time to recover its mana.

She had to finish it off, here and now.

*Aha ha ha ha ha! Wow! I'm in pieces! I'm everywhere! ♪*

The faerie rose was still giggling with pure glee.

*“You're kidding me. It's *still* alive...?”*

*It's my turn now, right~?*

The faerie rose's four severed limbs turned into mana and gathered around its body before rejoining it, the creature reconstructing itself almost as if nothing had happened at all.

Actually...no. Something *was* different now. The faerie rose's body was faint—enough so that Iris could see through to the other side of it.

She'd dealt enough damage to bring it right to the verge of death.

But Iris was out of mana, and her body was no longer doing what she told it to. She wasn't able to mount a counterattack of her own.

Once again, a flurry of thorny rose stems began to emerge from around the faerie rose.

*Mmm... You're pushing me so hard. It's kinda annoying. Oh, well. Whatever. Just die.*

"No. *You* die."

A glint of light swept through the faerie rose's body from top to bottom.

*Hyawah?!*

The faerie rose let out its silly little voice for the last time. And then it was gone.

Standing behind where it had just been was a gray-robed mage with a shortsword in his hand.

"So it *did* come here... I couldn't see it back where I was, so I got worried. I didn't *think* it would, but I hurried back just in case, and, well..."

"Y-You..." Iris stifled a sob. "Took you long enough!!!"

"Sorry about that. I made a little oopsie, you could say, and I ended up at a loss for a while..."

"Uh... 'A little oopsie'? Mister... What did you *do*?"

But Zelos was silent as he tried to put on his best innocent expression.

Iris could tell from his behavior that he'd made some sort of massive blunder.

"Anyway! Let's get those injuries of yours healed. Don't want you dying of

blood loss now, do we?”

“Ow... Yeah, now that you remind me, it really hurts...”

“*Light Heal.*”

It seemed like the adrenaline coursing through Iris’s body had made her forget about the pain for a little bit.

Zelos’s healing magic immediately closed up the wound in Iris’s thigh. It was effective, even if it was quite the unpleasant sight.

“Healing magic, huh...? Must be nice... I should’ve bought some too.”

“I can sell you some, if you’d like? Assuming you’ve got space left in your subconscious. I’ve got some spare scrolls, so I can make it cheap. What do you say?”

“But you’re still trying to *sell* it, huh...? Not gonna give a freebie to a friend?”

Zelos sighed. “What value is there in a cheap relationship like that? In fact, wouldn’t you say that the better you know someone, the worse it is to get in each other’s debt? Still... I suppose I could give you Heal, if you’re okay with that?”

“What, your improved version? A really strong one?”

“I don’t know what you’re expecting here, but it’s just the regular old version they sell anywh— Oh. Actually, no, it isn’t, is it? The Faith of the Four Gods has a monopoly on healing magic here.”

“Whatever—Heal’s fine, so give me that! Please! If I can’t buy it anywhere, I’ll be happy to take it. I’d appreciate even just being able to do a *bit* of healing.”

Iris was looking out for herself.

Healing magic was valuable in this world, and the Faith of the Four Gods had a monopoly on all of it.

It wasn’t something you could just buy from a magic goods shop.

“Anyway... Can you stand?”

“Oh. My head’s a little fuzzy. Maybe because of all the blood loss...”

“Mmm... Ah, well. Guess I’ll have to. Can’t have you pushing yourself too hard. Come on—I’ll carry you.”

“Huh?! Wai— *Whargh!*”

Iris started blushing hard as Zelos scooped her up in his arms.

She hadn’t been picked up like this since her early elementary school years.

“H-Hang on! This is *embarrassing*, you know?! Can you let me down? Please?! I’m begging you here!”

“If you push yourself too hard, you’ll faint from anemia. We’re not playing a game right now.”

“But that doesn’t mean you can just— *Argh...*”

Zelos was right: If she forced herself to walk, she was likely to collapse. Nevertheless, that fact didn’t make this princess carry any less embarrassing for her. But she’d *also* feel awkward if she brushed off his concern, pushed herself, and caused a hassle as a result...

Ultimately, Iris resigned herself to being carried. And when the two of them got back to the village, they were spotted by their fellow reincarnator Yui, who shot them a suspicious look.

That night, Iris’s frantic shout of “I-It’s not what you think it is, okay?!” rang out through the village of Hasam—a village that was now free from the threat of the faeries.

\*

Returning to the site of a certain crater that had “appeared” in the mountains...

Four figures were floating quietly in the wide, starry sky.

“This... This was *that* man, wasn’t it?”

“No waaaaaay! He *musta* died, right? In that hell we sent him to...”

“I... I don’t know. But if...he *isn’t* dead, then... What do you think *they’ll* do when they find out?”

The fourth one yawned. “I guess we should send him back. What a pain...”

These were the Four Gods that managed this world. Or at least, that's what they were typically called here.

"I don't wannaaaaa! I don't wanna deal with a monster like that anymooooore! I mean, it's not like I had to before, but, I mean, y'know..."

"Throwing a tantrum isn't going to get us anywhere. If this really *was* his doing, then... Why, we wouldn't stand a chance against him."

"Abandoning him in that hell was a mistake. Just made an enemy..."

"But Windia... You agreed too. Ugh, tired..."

The ghastly scene before them resembled the calamity that the Dark God had caused in this world once upon a time. This was the *last* thing the Four Gods wanted to deal with.

"The one who suggested it was... Flaress, though."

"Hey! C'mon! Aquilata was cool with it too!"

"What about Gailaneth? She... Well, she said nothing at all, I suppose. Or, no, she *did* offer a 'whatever's fine'..."

They were each trying to pin the blame on each other.

These goddesses really were good for nothing.

"Anyway, what matters is this: if this really *was* his doing, then... Then I doubt even the heroes would stand a chance against him, right?" Aquilata asked.

"They got, like, destroyed last time too, right~? Just sealing the Dark God away was all they could handle..." Flaress said.

"I don't sense him around, though. Did he...disappear somewhere? Ugh, what a *draaag*..." Windia added.

"*Mmbam mbah*... Down the hatch... Bleh. That's *terrible*. Tastes so bad I want to die. Give me seconds..." Gailaneth said.

One of the four goddesses was down for the count.

The other three responded as one: "She's *sleep-talking*... And what does she mean, she wants *seconds*?"

“Whatever the case, we must prepare ourselves,” Aquilata said.

“But... We don’t have our sacred treasures anymore...” Windia said.

“Those damn heroes screwed it up!!!” Flaress exclaimed. “Like, destroying the sacred treasures? I mean, *seriously*?! Who *does* that?!”

“What’s done is done!” Aquilata said. “For now, we must think about what to do going forward...”

And so, for a while after that, the three goddesses used all of their intellect trying to come up with a solution. But they came up with nothing.

Ultimately, they ended up discussing the matter until morning, got into a fight, and went their separate ways.

Leaving behind *one* of the four, of course...

“And...the climax of this week’s episode iiisss... *Click*. MmbImbl...”

Gailaneth was having a lovely little nap.

It was probably wise not to pry too deep into just what kind of dream she was having.

\*

It was the morning after Zelos and Iris’s return to the village of Hasam.

Zelos was performing charity work—distributing various medicinal herbs and faerie-eater seeds among the villagers, and gently teaching them how to cultivate medicinal herbs and the like as he went.

As for his motivation... Well, the village’s water source had just been blown up. Life in the village was going to be hard for a while, and it was his fault.

He was good at worming his way out of it, though. The way he explained it, the mana built up in the mana well had overreacted when he’d used his magic, and *that* was what had caused the massive explosion.

Phenomena like that had been written about in books—there really *were* cases when someone just using a minor spell had suddenly caused a mountain to blow up.

In fact, this was something Zelos had read about in a book he’d found in the

great library of the Istol Academy of Magic. He never would've expected that little tidbit of knowledge to come in handy so soon.

Iris, of course, shot him a cold look.

Regardless, Zelos and Iris had just about wrapped things up in the village, and they were getting ready to return to Santor.

"Now, then... What do you say we get going?"

"Yeah, let's go. I'm tired in just about every way possible. I wanna just get back and relax for a while."

"You need money if you want to keep living as a mercenary, you know? And if you're not out there working seven days a week, you *will* run out of money sooner or later, I think."

"Ugh... Should I get some kind of side hustle after all?"

"If you can make your own potions, that'll let you save quite a bit of money, plus you can sell them. And if they're a high enough rank, well, the sky's the limit! I taught you how to make them before, didn't I?"

"I...don't have the tools, though. So I can't."

She had the skills, but she didn't have the tools. And she didn't have enough spare money to *buy* those tools.

As the two of them continued their discussion, they moved to leave the village mayor's house.

"Going so soon? Looks like you're in quite the hurry!" he said.

"I'm a little worried about how my field is doing, you see," Zelos replied. "If I laze around here for too long, I could get back to find the whole thing overrun by grass."

"Ah! I see. So you're a farmer, eh, lad? I thought for sure you were a mercenary!"

"Well, I *am* working as a mercenary now too... It's a long story. But the plan is to get back and take it easy with farming for a while."

"Really, thank you again. You've been such a big help. Well, apart from the

thing with our water...”

“Please talk to the duke about that. That’s out of my area of expertise.”

Zelos just didn’t want to be questioned anymore about how he’d blown up the spring.

“Oh, by the way—Yui. If I meet your husband, I’ll give him your regards. And I’ll tell him you’re here in this village.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate it. Still, this is Ado we’re talking about. I just hope he hasn’t gotten up to anything too crazy...”

“Hey, Mister... Are you *sure* you’re not going after Yui here? Is this NTR? Are other guy’s wives in your strike zone?”

“Iris, Iris, Iris... It sounds like I’m going to have to spend a whole night giving you a good talking-to. Seriously, what are you even...”

“A-A *whole night*, he said...” Yuri said. “Good for you, Iris! Next year, you’ll be just like me!”

“I-It’s not like that, okay?! The two of us aren’t that way!”

Yui was clearly convinced that Iris was in love with this middle-aged man.

And however much Iris denied it, it all just went in one ear and out the other. Yui was getting excited about it, and nothing could stop her. Apparently, she thought Iris’s denial was just her trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Well, we were only here for a night, but thank you again for having us.”

“If I’m ever around the area for work, I’ll come visit you, okay?”

“Of course. Safe travels!”

“Now, Iris, remember—it may hurt the first time, but the more you do it—”

“I’m *telling* you, it’s not like that! *Listen* to me, dammit!!!”

“Go die in a fire, Ado...” Zelos muttered.

Iris was storming out the door in a huff, her face red, while lonely old Zelos was burning with jealousy. But one way or another, the two were off on their way to Santor once more.



Zelos was pondering healing magic as he tore along the highway on his motorbike.

It was a simple thing he was thinking about, really: It would be good to increase access to healing magic.

It was often called *holy* magic here...but really, it was just regular magic, the same as any other type used by mages. If it became more widespread, then the mortality rate among mercenaries would almost certainly decline, and there'd be a significant decrease in the number of people suffering from various ailments. That thought on his mind, Zelos figured he should bring the topic up with Duke Delthasis when he got back to Santor.

By the way, this line of thinking wasn't just him feeling a sudden urge to do good for the world. It was also, in part, him thinking that it'd be fun to annoy the Four Gods, who protected the faeries—beings that caused the world nothing but harm.

With this and other wily plans running through his head, he and Iris arrived at Santor.

The sun had already set for the day, and the inns were full, so Iris went back to sleep at the orphanage.

Alone once more, Zelos returned to his home, and was aghast to see the place looking like one big grassy meadow. Apart from the area around the henhouse where the cocos lived, and a part of the field where vegetables were growing, the whole property was overgrown with grass and flowers.

It seemed like the cocos had ignored the weeds and focused on nothing but training themselves day after day.

Just thinking about how much weeding awaited him in the morning left Zelos feeling dizzy.

## Chapter 14: The Old Guy Suggests Causing a Bit of Trouble

Zelos was finally back from his guard mission for the Istol Academy of Magic.

After a good rest at home, he headed to the ducal castle the next morning to report to Duke Delthasis.

The strange thing about this castle was that there was a Solistia Trading office just to the left of the area where the duke welcomed official guests. Guests from the nobility were taken straight to the guest area on the right, while anyone here to talk business was guided through the office on the left.

Essentially, the building was designed with two different paths you could go down, and which one you took depended on the purpose of your visit. If you took a lot of detours along the way, you could reach doors permanently guarded by pairs of sentinels; even if you just wanted to hand the duke some documents or something, you needed to get advance permission.

Honestly, Delthasis thought the whole setup was a waste of time. He needed *some* way of separating the two, though, and he hadn't been able to think of any better ideas so far.

Right now, an employee was escorting a gray-robed mage down the left path reserved for merchants. They had just requested permission for the mage to have an audience with the duke.

"Sir Zelos has come to see you, Your Grace. May he enter?"

"Come in."

Permitted entry by the duke's curt reply, Zelos entered the room alongside the employee who'd escorted him.

"Do remember: When you're bringing someone in through *that* door, you're to refer to me as Chairman. We'll have chaos if people start mixing my jobs together."

“My deepest apologies. I’ll make sure to remember.”

“Good.”

“Well, then, if you’ll excuse me...”

As soon as Zelos entered the room, he saw Delthasis buried under a mountain of paperwork.

Delthasis hardly struck him as the sort of man to let so much work pile up, so he assumed the duke must have been busy with some serious matter that had required him to leave his office unattended.

“It’s been a while, Your Grace. The job was a success.”

“Yes. Thank you. I apologize for the hassle. I’m quite understaffed right now, and it’s left me busy. Sorry again for forcing you to go to all the trouble. Ah—by the way, I’m working as a merchant right now, so I would ask that you refrain from calling me ‘Your Grace.’”

“You’re thorough with all this, aren’t you? Well, that’s fine. I’ll call you Mr. Delthasis, then. And...well, work’s work. No skin off my back. Anyway—did you take a trip to the royal capital or something? It looks like you have quite the backlog of work piled up there...”

“I...had some minor business to take care of. I needed to pay back a debt I’d owed for a long time, you could say. I was merely gone for a few days, and I ended up with *this*.”

“You know, I’m a little scared to ask what this ‘minor business’ of yours might have been...”

Zelos had no idea what the duke was getting up to.

He had a hunch, though, that this “minor business” had been something rather *dangerous*.

“Now, about your pay for the job: From memory, you hired three other mercenaries to help, yes? And assigned them to guard Croesus and Celestina as well, or something of the sort. I appreciate you taking the time to do that.”

“Ah, not quite. We all had to draw lots to decide who was assigned to whom. We got unlucky, and none of us were assigned to Zweit, so I sent some of my

coccos to stay near him instead. Long story short, he survived the trip.”

Delthasis paused for a moment, taken aback. “Coccos, you say? Are you talking about wild coccos? They’re on the weaker side as far as monsters are concerned, no...?”

“*Pfft...* Not quite. *My* coccos are some real powerhouses.”

Delthasis still looked confused.

He would never in his wildest dreams have imagined that *coccos*—monsters he’d only ever seen as trivial little things—had evolved into a different subspecies and gained truly monstrous power. Not that you could blame him. Zelos himself hadn’t noticed for quite a while.

Coccos weren’t known to even have the ability to evolve like that. Nobody would expect them to be Level 400 and have the immense power to match, that much was for sure.

What was more, these coccos had been sparring with Zelos on the daily. They were about as strong as heroes by this point. And given their wide array of melee combat skills, they were practically without equal.

“Well, let’s put the coccos aside for a moment. I hear two of the assassins changed sides?”

“News travels fast, it seems. Yes. One of them’s a warrior; he’s with the guards for questioning at the moment. The other one’s staying with Zweit.”

“I hear the other one’s only a young girl—but she *is* an assassin, isn’t she? And the boy ended up as a criminal slave due to some moronic idea of his, from the sound of it.”

“The girl may be young, but she’s strong, I can tell you that. Probably Level 800, at the very least. I’m just worried being around her might make Zweit go down the wrong path and develop a thing for little girls.”

“From the way you describe her, it sounds like *he’d* get the worse of it if he tried to pull anything on her. Not that he’s enough of an idiot to do so in the first place. Anyway, I suppose I’ll bring on the girl as a guard and pay her a wage. That just leaves the warrior boy; it sounds like his behavior could be an

issue, though, no? They say he tried to make himself a slave harem, of all things... What a fool. A man's worth lies in getting the ladies to fall for you themselves. He should know that much."

"News really *does* reach you quickly. What did you use? Was it a carrier pigeon? No... I can't imagine even *that* would've gotten word back to you so soon. Oh, well. I'm a little curious about your methods, but I suppose it's for the best that I don't know. Anyway, what *are* you going to do about the boy? He's quite strong himself; feels like it'd be a waste to just send him down to work in the mines or something."

"Hmm... It may be interesting to test Zweit by seeing how *he* would handle the fool. It's a good learning opportunity. How about I give the boy a pardon, set him free, and make him a personal guard? There'd be no more second chances for him, of course..."

It seemed like Eromura was going to be freed. The circumstances surrounding it were a little scary, though.

He could be stupid, sure, but he wasn't by any means a bad person, so at the end of the day, this seemed like a fair compromise.

"Oh, and... Here's a sketch of the other assassin. The one who got away."

"A woman, eh? Why all these different versions, though? There are almost twenty of them. You've even got one of her as a child..."

"She has youth restoration potions. And she's taken one already. I can see her getting mad about the whole 'shortened lifespan' thing, taking another potion to get even younger, and turning up at my doorstep in a different form, so it's just a safe measure. If you happen to get your hands on her, I'd appreciate it if you burned her at the stake. After some good, thorough torture, that is."

"I heard she's your older sister. Do you really want to get rid of her so badly?"

"It's embarrassing to admit, but she's a parasite. Lives her life leeching off other people. Don't think about trying to use her; just make sure you *get rid of her*. Although... The side effect from the potion means she'll be dead in a few years anyway."

"I see... So she's *that* type."

Delthasis saw Zelos as the ultimate pawn.

He'd been thinking, then, that the older sister of such an individual could be well worth using too. But between the report he'd received and this testimony from Zelos, it sounded now like getting rid of her would be the smarter option.

She was greedy with money, and liable to betray you at the drop of a hat. Trying to turn someone like that into a subordinate was an enormous risk, and Delthasis didn't even want to *imagine* what might happen if she leaked information about his movements to his enemies.

She was quick-thinking enough to take those kinds of opportunities too. That was one thing you could praise her for.

Perhaps he could intentionally feed her false information, expecting her to leak it, and use her that way. But going by the testimony of a former Hydra member Delthasis had just recently managed to scout, there were issues with her unquenchable greed.

Between the report and Zelos's own words, it was clear that her personality wouldn't let her devote herself to any organization.

Above all, it was hard to see her as too valuable a tool when she didn't have long left to live—especially when her dwindling lifespan was her own fault to begin with. She was a fool, and there was no way around it.

Long story short, she was nothing but trouble, whether you looked at her personality, her financial habits, or her behavior. Trying to use her would just be more trouble than it was worth.

“Understood. Now... What's *this* picture you have here? It's disgusting.”

“This is from a village that was being attacked by faeries; we came across it on our way back from the job. I brought it along as evidence of what happens to the faeries' victims. I used a special familiar for this, you see—it let me record what was happening, exactly as it was.”

“What sort of evil is... *These* are the monsters that the Faith of the Four Gods protects?”

“They're brutal. Sort of like children. They're innocent, in a sense, but it's

precisely that innocence that lets them do all this without a second thought.”

“So they can’t even distinguish between good and evil; is that what you’re saying? I see...”

Delthasis immediately understood the danger posed by the faeries.

Just as children killed insects for fun, so too did faeries kill all sorts of living creatures for fun. And some of those living creatures happened to be humans.

But as gruesome as it was, this information could prove useful in its own way.

The Faith of the Four Gods had been rather troublesome of late; specifically, the Holy Land of Metis had been applying more pressure on other countries than usual. That included, among other things, requests to step up both protection of faeries and the authority afforded to priests, and it had been a headache-inducing problem for the duke.

After all, the Holy Land of Metis was the headquarters for priests, and the priests were the only ones who could use healing magic. If the Holy Land of Metis withdrew all of its priests from the Magic Kingdom of Solistia, the medical sector of the latter—whether it was treating wounds or diseases—would take a big hit. If that happened, the country would inevitably be at a disadvantage in the event of a war.

At least, that *was* how Delthasis considered things until the mage in front of him said something outrageous:

“Say, Mr. Delthasis—would you have any interest in selling healing magic?”

“Wh-What?”

“You see, a priest just makes ‘holy magic’ more powerful; in reality, even regular mages can use it. But at the moment, the Holy Land of Metis has a complete monopoly on healing magic.”

Delthasis thought for a moment before he responded: “Doing that could start a war with them. Their holy magic’s the main thing that gives them their standing in the world, after all. Still...it’s a fascinating idea. There are things we’d have to work out, but I can see the appeal.”

“Couldn’t you add more mages specialized in medicine to the army? There’s

no need to rely on priests for everything. And, I mean, it's inefficient to let a single theocracy keep the secrets of healing magic all to itself, don't you agree?"

"Hmm... It could be worth a try, I suppose. Even if they do find out about our healing magic, we can always just insist it came from our own research. Not that I expect them to just accept that."

"Wouldn't it work if we started selling healing magic in other countries too? If healing magic appeared on the market in a bunch of different countries at the same time, they'd probably assume that *all* of those countries were developing it. Anyway, priests being the only ones who can heal the sick and injured is a problem. If we allowed mercenaries to use healing magic too, I think we could save a lot of lives."

"We do also have doctors, for what it's worth. Though as with priests, I suppose, we don't have enough of them... Hmm. This is quite the attractive proposal you're making, but I feel like I need one last push. Or, rather... No. Mr. Zelos, saying anything more than you already have would be entering the realm of foreign interference. You're aware of that, aren't you?"

"I can plead ignorance. I'm just thinking out loud— isn't that right?"

"Hah. So it's all just small talk, is that it? I suppose, for the sake of chitchat— would this healing magic you talk of be magic that you've improved?"

Zelos sent his mind into overdrive for a moment before he answered.

He had loads of spell scrolls for regular healing magic. He'd used to sell them on the cheap to newbies back in *Swords & Sorceries*. Sure, he'd rarely sold his improved versions, but at the very least, he didn't feel like there'd be any problem with him selling the weaker default versions.

What was more, he felt like he didn't really need to hold back when they were up against a major power that protected something as nasty as the faeries. Still, there'd be issues if he just handed *all* of his scrolls over...

"Fortunately, I have a decent range of healing spells, ranging from beginner to intermediate ones. But what would you say about this: We provide the default versions to other countries for a bit of trade diplomacy, and the ones I've improved can just be sold in *this* country? Even the latter still won't be as strong



as what a priest uses, mind you. They'll just be a little more effective than the default ones."

"I see. Well, people *do* find healing spell scrolls in ancient ruins on rare occasion. And if something as strong as that went up on the market, the Holy Land of Metis would lose its edge. If they're not as effective, though...well, then it's a different story. Surely they wouldn't be able to complain about that. You know, I hear they've even been using the heroes as a threat to get their way lately. It could be interesting to use your little idea to make a move of our own."

"So...I don't need to be too careful? Is that what you're saying?"

"Exactly. That said...when you mention your *improved* versions, you aren't talking about *perfected* versions, are you? Are you intentionally leaving room for other mages to improve them?"

"If I *did* sell perfected versions, I'd just be robbing other mages of opportunities for growth. Besides, if I'm not careful, I could end up selling things that other mages aren't even powerful enough to use. So yes, I'd like to see some other mages put in the effort to improve the spells further themselves."

"Yes, things could go poorly if we misplay our hand. And the Holy Land *is* in the habit of picking fights with other countries, and capitalizing on those fights to try to take things from them... Now, then. Where do we go from here?"

The Holy Land of Metis inevitably came up with religious reasons to steal away any healing spell scrolls other countries happened to discover in ancient ruins or the like. They actively spread the idea that healing magic was *holy* magic, and that only priests could ever use it—but if word spread that mages had succeeded in creating healing magic, then things would change.

If mages could use healing magic, then priests who used it to earn money for church operations and the like would see their revenue fall. Further, the discovery that mages could heal wounds too could cause cracks in people's faith, creating a real possibility of the religion losing followers, and fast.

It was simple to change little things like incantations, so even if the church tried to find fault with the healing magic others were using, it could just be brushed off with "this was the result of a lengthy development process." And as it happened, the Holy Land of Metis was hated by nearby countries, so Delthasis

figured those countries would likely be more than willing to cooperate in whatever plan he put together.

For smaller countries, priests dispatched from the Holy Land of Metis were something like claimants, or parasites, who demanded bribes as “charity” in the name of their gods. Sure, there were decent priests out there too, but they didn’t tend to be the ones involved in politics; it was always the greedy ones who got involved in that particular endeavor, making sure to use their diplomatic immunity to do whatever they pleased.

You couldn’t underestimate the Holy Land of Metis’s national power or military might either. In fact, dispatching a single hero could be all they’d need to rout a small nation’s entire Order of Knights.

At the end of the day, if you put knights—who averaged about Level 200 in this world—up against a Level 500 hero, it wouldn’t even be a fight. And if there were, say, *three* heroes, they’d be able to destroy a whole army division with ease.

Heroes apparently had one special bonus that let them level up faster, and another that made them physically stronger—and with the two combined, they could get rather powerful. Plus, they had a habit of turning up at towns along national borders and wreaking all kinds of havoc.

As Zelos listened to Delthasis talk about the Holy Land of Metis, he took out some healing spell scrolls and placed them on the table.

“Sounds like they’re a troublesome bunch, eh?”

“Five of them, in particular: Himejima, Sasaki, Kawamoto, Iwata, and Yasaka. They’re the strongest ones, and they get preferential treatment. The others are sent out to fight all over the place, even now. I hear they even show up in other countries from time to time.”

Zelos squinted his eyes as he heard the list of Japanese names. They felt rather out of place in this world.

“Oh? Sounds like they’ve got a good amount of freedom, then. I’d like to meet them at some point if I can.”

“You’ve got a...dangerous look to your eyes right now. What do you intend to

do if you do meet them?”

“Well... It’d depend on specifically who I met, wouldn’t it? If it’s someone who’s gone all the way to another country just to cause trouble, I wouldn’t exactly be supportive. In fact, couldn’t you leverage that diplomatically?”

“It’s not that simple. They get obstinate and carry out their diplomacy through threats, that’s all it is. Now, then, it’s about time I get back to my work. My apologies, but I’d appreciate it if we could end the discussion here for today.”

“Of course. Sorry for taking up your time while you’re busy.”

“No, it’s no matter. Oh—I’ve already prepared your reward, by the way. I’ll contact the reception desk myself to make sure you receive it.”

“Well, then, I suppose I’ll be going for today.”

“Yes. Do make sure to get a good rest... Ah. There’s one last thing I was going to ask: I hear a spring was blown up in the mountains near the village of Hasam. Would you happen to know anything about that? Apparently people aren’t quite sure what happened.”

“Ah... You see, all the mana that had built up in the mana pool there sort of reacted to my magic and caused a secondary explosion. My *word*, that was a terrible surprise...”

“Mmm... I see. Sorry to press you for details like that when you must be tired. If anything else comes up, I may ask you to do some more work for me, but for now, you should take a rest. You deserve it.”

“I intend to do just that. Well, then—excuse me.”

After Zelos left the room, Delthasis folded his arms in deliberation as he pored over the scrolls Zelos had left on the table.

*Now, what’s the best way of using these...? I think the Holy Land has gotten rather too big for its britches. And trying to pull something on them does sound interesting. If we go by the plan we discussed, we should be able to deal a major blow to them. The only question then is when do I play my hand? If I’m going to act, then the sooner, the better, I suppose...*

Delthasis's lips curled into a dangerous smirk similar to Zelos's as he got back to work.

After all, this enormous backlog would only keep eating away at his time with his wives and mistresses until he got it done.

He was a capable man, and a capable man worked as hard as he could for the sake of his women.

\*

"Uh... Mister? Is this *seriously* just one person's worth of pay?"

"Oh, I'm very serious. Is there a problem?"

"Th-The bag's bulging with coins. It looks like we shouldn't have to work again for a while..."

"As long as we don't waste our money, that is. Well, we did protect the heirs to the ducal house, after all. This much seems about right."

Once he was finished at the ducal castle, Zelos headed straight to the orphanage and handed Iris her pay.

But as soon as Iris had taken the pouch containing her cut of the reward and looked inside, she'd been dumbfounded at just how much she saw.

It was two and a half million gol, enough for your average mercenary to go out and buy a full set of new equipment made by a skilled artisan.

"Jeanne and Lena aren't back yet, by the looks of it. What should we do about their share?"

"I'd be scared to hold on to all that myself... You keep it with you, Mister. I'm a little, y'know..."

"That works. Just make sure you bring them to see me and pick it up when they're back, okay? I never like to owe people money for long. If you don't get it cleared up fast and clear, it can really come back to bite you in the... Aha ha ha."

A dark hue seemed to take over Zelos's face as he recalled his fool of an older sister.

Iris, meanwhile, decided to push through her hesitation and ask him something she'd been meaning to ask for a while now.

"S-So, uh, Mister... Would you be able to upgrade my gear?"

"Heh, heh heh... Huh? Your gear? I mean, I can, but...do you have the materials?"

"Well, I have a bunch lying around that I got in *Swords & Sorceries*, so..."

"It'll also depend on *which* materials you have, I suppose. I could try to make it stronger as an experiment, if you'd like? I'll be able to make it at least a little bit stronger, depending on what materials you've got, but...can you tell me exactly what you're looking for here?"

"An experiment'? Uh... Well, money's still a thing, so I guess I'd be asking you to just strengthen the gear I've already got? Oh, and I learned the Novice Swordsmanship and Throwing skills when I was fighting against that faerie rose. So I kinda wouldn't mind having some weapons too."

In other words, it seemed like she wanted to adopt an all-purpose fighting style like Zelos's, allowing her to deal with any situation.

But that wasn't something she'd just be able to master on a whim.

Getting on par with someone like Zelos, who had been a top player back in the game, would require quite a lot of time.

Plus, unlike in *Swords & Sorceries*, developing a common skill into a job skill required you to keep up consistent training and experience real combat time and time again.

And this was a *real* world they were in now, after all, so unlike in a game, individuals would probably improve at different rates. Yes, levels were a thing here, but you also needed to go through rigorous, repeated training.

"Wouldn't it be a bit challenging to completely change your fighting style? You'd want gauntlets, greaves, a breastplate... You'll end up looking pretty crude, you know? Besides, if you're going to be fighting close-up, you'll have to get used to killing. Basic self-defense might not be enough to keep you safe at that range."

“Ngh... B-But if I don’t change, I’ll stay weak. I want more ways of protecting myself! Which is why I was thinking of training myself in real fights.”

“Well, I think it’s good in and of itself to have that mindset, but aren’t you forgetting the most important skill a mercenary can have: dismembering bodies? Can you do that? If you don’t get any more used to it, you’ll just throw up every time, won’t you?”

“Uh... Yeah, no. No way. That’s, uh...not something I’ll ever be able to get used to, I guess...”

“I... I guess that’s fine. Anyway, when you ask me to strengthen your gear—do you mean using your current gear as a base? Without changing its design?”

“Yeah. So, I mean, my robe, plus stuff like my boots and gloves and so on...”

Iris’s current gear had been made by an intermediate crafter, and she didn’t know what materials it was all made out of. But by the looks of it, at least, each piece was made out of some sort of textile.

The common method of strengthening this kind of gear was coating it in something and then fitting a layer of some kind of heavy armor over it.

Mages were physically weaker than warriors, though. So if *they* wore that sort of equipment, it might just inhibit their movements and counterintuitively put them in *more* danger. It was more efficient for them to just use gear that only prioritized protecting their vital organs.

Someone like Iris, who didn’t have warrior skills, would find heavy armor too encumbering to use.

“I can make it so your gear reduces the damage you’d take from a Level 300 or so attack, but if you’re up against an opponent with higher-ranked skills, it’ll come down to which one of you has the better skill bonuses and defenses. Hmm... This is just an offer, but what would you think about doing some training with my coccas?”

“Huh? With the coccas? But...why?”

“Because proper armor is heavy. If you tried to wear it without shoring up your combat skills and level, I doubt you’d even be able to move.”

An image flashed into Iris's mind of her wearing the martial arts uniform from a certain anime and lining up with the coccos to practice their forms together.

She couldn't quite decide if it'd be supercute or kind of just pathetic to be lined up doing drills like that alongside birds, but either way, the thought left her kind of embarrassed.

"Ugh... It'd feel kinda lame, though, wouldn't it?"

"It'd just be until I've strengthened your gear. And acquiring some warrior skills and training them up *would* make it easier for you to use heavy armor and the like. Leveling up increases what your body's capable of, after all."

"*Ngh*... I don't know. Should I train, or should I just give up? On one hand, it's scary, but on the other, I don't wanna die..."

It looked like Iris's fight with the faerie rose had taught her the fear of death.

For the moment, she was stuck between two choices: Did she endure a bit of embarrassment for the sake of training, or did she give up and stick it out as a regular mage? Skills were a must for protecting yourself, but in order to acquire those skills, you had to get experience in a wide range of professions.

Fortunately, the coccos were divided between four specializations: brawling, swordsmanship, ranged combat, and scouting.

"Are the coccos really gonna be teaching me? Are you sure *you* can't do it?"

"I've got a lot of weeding to do. I took my eyes off the field for a bit and now it's absolutely covered with weeds; I was intending to ask some orphans to help me out with it, but there aren't that many orphans here in the old town, you see. And the kids from the orphanage next door are going out to pick up rubbish... Apparently picking up empty bottles pays better."

"If your field bothers you so much, then why don't you just focus on crafting instead? I'm pretty sure it'd make you more money, right?"

"Oh, *much* more. Business would be so good I couldn't keep up. Just how crazy strong do you think all the equipment I've made is? Even just working with regular old steel, I've got enormous skill bonuses, you know? I'd end up drowning in work requests and die from overworking myself. Seriously..."

With the sort of equipment Zelos made, even just a regular piece of gear made with steel could be exceptionally effective.

Even if he used his Hold Back skill as he crafted, the equipment he made would inevitably end up with some sort of extra effect on it. In fact, making equipment *without* any special effects was the challenge for him.

“Kaede and the kids from the church are training every day too, you know? Just this morning, they were doing their martial arts drills and sword practice with the coccos. If you really want to get stronger, you’ll need to be ready to put up with a bit of temporary shame.”

“But they’re *kids*! I’m an *adult*!”

Zelos looked Iris over from head to toe and scoffed. “An adult, eh...? Heh. At my age, you *all* just look like kids. Especially— Actually, no, never mind. It’s nothing.”

“Hey! That’s a rude way to speak to a woman!”

But Zelos was telling the truth: To him, both Iris and Kaede looked equally like little kids. Especially when it came to their chests...

As Zelos looked at her with what seemed to be a tinge of pity, Iris could only respond with anger, meeting his gaze with a frustrated *graaaaaah!*

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Three days later, Zelos was outside pulling weeds, a straw hat on his head and a hand towel wrapped around his neck.

The weeds’ roots ran deeper than you’d expect, so pulling them out took a fair bit of strength. And he’d been at it for a while, bent over the whole time, so his back was hurting.

One way or another, the weeds were seriously impressive at propagating themselves. It’d be fair to say that by the time he’d returned, it was less a crop field and more a tangled mess of grass and weeds.

He was cutting the smaller weeds with his all-purpose sickle, then pulling out those that remained by hand; it was just an endless cycle. The coccos who’d stayed behind were helping out, which made things more efficient, but even



then, a third of the field was still covered by weeds.

Once he got tired of weeding, he harvested some vegetables, started pickling the root vegetables, and dried the soybeans and so on under the sun.

“Good morning, Zelos!”

“Oh—Luceris! What brings you here?”

“I thought I’d stop by to thank you for the eggs this morning. I was in the middle of my prayers this morning, so I couldn’t see you at the time; sorry about that.”

“No, no. We’re neighbors, after all. Don’t worry about it. Besides, I’d never have been able to eat them all by myself.”

“It was actually too many for us too, so we shared them around the neighborhood. People were delighted. Really, thank you.”

“Good! I’m happy to hear they aren’t going to waste.”

“By the way...” Luceris looked toward the coop and began to speak with a mixture of doubt and bewilderment. “What’s Iris doing over there? Is that...some sort of dance?”

“Ah... That’s her training. She’s trying to learn combat skills. She’s doing drills for her forms right now; essentially, she’s trying to teach her body to immediately react to what she needs it to do in any given situation. It *does* kinda look like she’s just doing a weird dance, though, doesn’t it...?”

Iris had spent the last three days or so at Zelos’s house getting along with the coccos and joining them in their drills.

But she’d always been the indoorsy type. You couldn’t say her movements even resembled any kind of proper drill, even if you were trying to be polite.

No matter how you looked at it, it just seemed like she was repeating a baffling cycle: First, she’d perform a weird dance for a bit, then stumble and fall over, then get back up to do it all over again. These form drills were essentially like tai chi, but a complete amateur like Iris wasted far too much energy in her movements to perform the drills properly.

They were only slow movements, but when you had to do them while

constantly regulating the amount of force you were using, and moving your center of gravity, and keeping your balance, and so on, it was actually surprisingly tough, And she was training her mana at the same time to boot, so it was quite the exhausting task.

“Also, um... Those clothes Iris is wearing—do you know where she bought them from? I haven’t seen her in those before. I feel like they’re kind of similar to what Kaede wears...”

“It’s sort of like special equipment for martial artists. Even mages can wear it, though, and she’s wearing it right now to help her learn the Apprentice Fist Fighter skill. She’s been saying she wants to get stronger.”

As a martial arts uniform, the outfit Iris was wearing had a special effect that made it easier to learn fighting skills. It didn’t have any particular defensive strength, though, nor did it provide any bonuses to your physical capabilities.

“But why is a girl like Iris trying to get stronger in this sort of way? She’s a mage, isn’t she? Does she really need to learn skills for close-range combat?”

“She nearly beat a faerie rose on our way back, but it managed to restrain her at some point and almost killed her. If you train your fighting skills, they’ll inevitably get added on top of your own abilities as bonuses, so...essentially, she’s training so that she doesn’t die, I suppose.”

“This is just going by what I’ve heard from Jeanne and Lena, but...I don’t think Iris is suited to violent work like being a mercenary. I can’t say for sure, but I feel like she must have been raised in an even kinder environment than we were.”



“That might be the case—but either way, it sounds like she’s intent on going into dungeons, so she wants to train her body to defend herself. Can’t fault her for working hard to achieve her dreams. Ah, to be young again...”

It was a similar case for the five children practicing not far from Iris. But while *she* was keeping up her form drills in spite of her continued awkward falls, the other five were doing their own drills with perfect coordination, flowing from one movement to the next; they were almost like the boys from a certain temple.

These were, by the way, the same five children from the orphanage: Kaede, Ange, Johnny, Laddie, and Kai.

“Right! Done with our forms~! ♪”

“Now we *spar*!”

“I shall aim to master unarmed moves as well. I *will* see it done! I will become the ultimate soldier!”

“Food *does* taste even better after a workout. Oh—and when we’re done, let’s go pick up rubbish in the afternoon! I wanna get some money.”

“Meat tastes *amazing* after a workout... I’m gonna be a meat hunter!”

Four of them shouted together: “And then we’re gonna clear dungeons, save up money, and live however we want!”

Leaving just one, Kaede, with a different goal: “I shall carve my name into the world as a military force unto myself! I swear it, on the name of my grandfather!”

Zelos and Luceris were silent, unsure how to react to all this.

The kids were certainly true to their desires. And *Kaede’s* desire seemed to be putting her on a path toward bloody carnage.

The two of them understood where the kids were coming from, but every time they heard these children making these big statements about their goals and desires, they couldn’t help but feel themselves becoming weak at the knees. It was all well and good to have goals for the future, but these were hardly the sorts of goals *children* should be having.

The five orphans—some bare-handed, some with weapons—started sparring with the coccos.

*FWOOSH! BANG! THUMP!*

You could *hear* the heavy blows from across the field. This was hardly the soundscape you'd expect from children sparring.

"I go just a short while without seeing those kids, and they've already gotten this much stronger... It's hard to even believe they *are* kids at this point. Feels like they might just be able to take out your average thug of a mercenary with a single hit."

"I'm not sure I agree with every part of their dreams, but at the very least, it's nice to see that they aren't headed down a bad path. And they're not causing any trouble for other people. But..." Luceris sighed.

"Have they stopped trying to extort people too? I remember the first time I met them—they just came up to me going, 'Gimme meat!'..."

"Selling herbs and things has given them more of an allowance than before, so perhaps they don't *need* to resort to that sort of thing anymore. It's thanks to you, Zelos..."

But she still looked away and groaned as she responded. It seems like she'd been quite embarrassed by the way the kids had been extorting strangers until recently.

They hadn't been doing it lately, though. They were focused on growing stronger to chase after their dreams.

The problem, if you could call it that, was that these children were getting stronger at such a rapid pace. They were sparring with coccos that were over Level 200, and it wasn't for nothing. Their combat skills were improving at an insane rate.

Fighting against strong opponents was honing the effects of their skills too, and their skill bonuses were skyrocketing. All that while their *own* levels were still only in the single digits. It was frightening to imagine just how far these kids could go.

“Mmm. Still, as their skill levels get higher, they won’t be able to level up so easily. Not unless they fight some quite strong monsters... Maybe I should take them out hunting somewhere.”

“Zelos?! They’re still only *children*! That would be so dangerous for them...”

“The thing is, though... They’re only a year younger than Iris, aren’t they? Don’t you think it’d be best to start training them up so that they’re strong enough to be independent?”

It was just as Zelos said: The orphans *looked* young, but they were really only one year younger than Iris. Under normal circumstances, this was about the age they’d be starting to help out with a job or something to get work experience and prepare for life. They just looked younger than they were because life at the orphanage had never been ideal; they hadn’t been able to get enough nutritious food.

Their environment had changed for the better lately, though, and Zelos got the feeling that they *had* grown a bit.

Becoming mercenaries might be a bit much for now, but perhaps they’d be able to do some hunting.

“They’re going to need some more experience before they head into society. They can make simple healing potions and salves by themselves now, at least—in fact, they’ve gotten pretty good at it. Still, Kaede in particular should probably get stronger so that she can protect herself. If she stays how she is now forever, then...”

“Yes... I suppose you’re right. But I just don’t want them doing anything dangerous. If anything were to happen to them...”

“That’s exactly why I’m training them—to make sure the worst *doesn’t* come to pass. Besides, they’re insisting they’ll go into dungeons some day, and they *will* do that at some point, I just know it. They’re truthful to their desires, after all...”

“I-I can’t deny it...”

As the pair of them continued chatting and weeding, they saw Iris finally join in on the sparring herself.

She was up against a black-beltocco. It might have only been a chicken, but it was one of very few chickens to possess the Teaching skill.

It seemed to be a very *caring* chicken too. Whenever one of Iris's forms was just a little bit wrong, it would give her a kind, thorough explanation to help her fix it.

That said...

*"Whuaaaaaah!"*

Iris was knocked high into the sky.

She was the higher-level one of the two, but when it came to melee combat, theocco was leagues ahead of her.

"Bok." ("Get up. If that was enough to make you throw in the towel, you'll die in a real fight.")

"I-Instructor! Go a little easier on me, can you~?! That was *terrifying!*"

"Caw. Bo-caw." ("One cannot traverse the path to mastery in a single day. Sticking to your training every day is what is important—do you understand? Sitting there and complaining won't make you any stronger.") "*Ngh...* You're so harsh, Instructor..."

This instructor was female. And it seemed to be the fantasy chicken equivalent of a reliable older student you could depend on in your club activities at school.

For these three days, it had continued to kindly teach Iris—who complained all the while—as an older-sister type, treating her with equal parts kindness and strictness. Its approach was helping Iris work her hardest to learn and strengthen skills.

"Not that it really matters," Zelos mused, "but I wonder how people manage to understand what they're saying? It's a mystery to me..."

"You know," Luceris said, "I've taken to training alongside the children as well. Just when I'm free. And that particularocco is a very thorough teacher. I've actually learned a lot about what I can do as a teacher myself, in fact."

"My coccos can seem even more human than humans sometimes, can't they?"

All right, I've decided. That one's name can be Meikei."

Zelos was surprised to hear that Luceris had been taking part in the melee combat training alongside the orphans. And then there was the one particular cocco that had been teaching them all various moves. The cocco that had just become Zelos's fourth named monster.

Realizing it had just been given a name, Meikei folded its wings in front of its body and bowed its head.

And while it might have just been his imagination, Zelos felt like Meikei had suddenly become a little bit stronger too.

"Lu! *Here* you are!"

"Oh, Jeanne. Took your time getting back, did you?"

Zelos and Luceris turned around as they heard a voice calling the latter's name from behind and saw Jeanne coming toward them.

It seemed like she'd finally returned to Santor—and she looked exhausted for some reason.

"Took my time? What do you mean? This was actually on the faster side of—Wait! How's the geezer here already?!"

"I just zoomed back along the highway. You're rather late in comparison, eh?"

"You'd know why, though, right? The wind changed direction, so the ship took longer than expected. Plus, Lena..."

"Ah... You don't have to finish that sentence. I understand. She went on a rampage, did she? Uh... Thanks for your service."

Zelos instinctively saluted Jeanne. He understood perfectly well the struggles she must have gone through.

"Yeah. And get this," Jeanne said. "Of all things, after all this time, the bitch tried to go after a little kid!"

"And then Ukei and the other coccos punished her for it, you tied her up in a mat, and you dragged her behind you the rest of the way back...? Really, I'm sorry you had to go through all that. Oh—here's your pay for the job. I've



already handed Iris's share over to her, so take this for yourself."

"Thanks. I'll go get some proper rest n—" As Jeanne took the payment and checked over it, her expression turned into one of astonishment. "Huh? Isn't... Isn't this too much?"

She'd never gotten such a big reward before. Her hands were shaking.

"Still, I'm...not sure whether it's a good idea to give Lena *her* share of the reward..." Zelos said, watching Lena flop on the ground like a fish out of water behind Jeanne with a slight expression of distaste.

"Oh... Yeah," Jeanne agreed. "She'll just use it to lure some boys into an inn with her, I guarantee you. What's the word for people like her? 'Predatory'?"

"Mmm... Who knows? In Lena's case, I think it's more that she's a slave to her own lust. You know, it may be best to just leave her in that mat."

"Are you... Are you gonna pay her? The money'll be gone in three days, you know that, right?"

It'd normally be impossible to use up this sort of money in just three days. But Lena, apparently, was an exception.

Lena—who was still tied up—seemed to want to say something, but Zelos decided to ignore her.

"You should probably let the two of them rest at the orphanage, Luceris. It sounds like they had a long trip; they must be exhausted. In more than one way, perhaps..."

"You're right. Would you like to stay at the orphanage tonight, then, Jeanne? You're probably too tired to go looking for an inn."

"Yeah, thanks... You're right. I don't have the energy for that right now. Because of *someone*..."

"Looks like you really did have it rough. Can you take Lena's share of the reward with you, though, please? As you may expect, I'm a little hesitant to just hold on to it myself..."

Lena was really glaring at him now.

And she was breathing really hard through her nose for some reason; her nostrils were flaring. She was filled with motivation of a different sort, by the looks of it.

If they untied the ropes around her, she'd probably sprint off to sate her lust.

"Also, uh, not a big issue, but...what's Iris doing?"

"Gyaaaaaargh!"

Iris's companions might have returned, but she herself was still getting beat up by Meikei. She'd been excluded from their little chat.

This was training, after all; there would be nobody coming to save her. This day, just as on the last few days, Iris would be sent flying into the air time and time again.

Over time, though, her hard work bore fruit. A week later, she succeeded at more or less acquiring the skills of a warrior.

As a bit of a side note, her training *after* acquiring those skills only got harsher and harsher—though as a result, she ended up managing to equip the armor of a warrior.

The bruises she built up from her training would take a while to disappear, though...

One way or another, she devoted herself to her training all the more, eager to acquire further skills and levels.

## Extra Chapter: Ado's Isekai Investigation

Toshiyuki Ando, twenty-three years old, was one of the unfortunate victims who'd gotten reincarnated into another world.

After about two years studying for a second chance to get into university back on Earth, he'd eventually passed the entrance exam for a nearby technical university. He'd been leading a laid-back life on campus.

He'd also been having a good time playing *Swords & Sorceries* with Yuika Funabashi, a childhood friend who was five years his junior and still in high school. Oh—and she was his fiancée.

The two of them had done the deed and gotten Yuika pregnant before marriage. Both of their parents had been absolutely furious at first.

Still, it seemed like they'd been prepared for the possibility that the two of them *would* end up in that sort of relationship at some point; eventually, they gave the two their blessing. They were quite the understanding parents.

This was going to be their first grandchild, so they were pretty happy about that, at least—happy enough that they'd gone on a shopping spree for baby goods before the child was even born...

With all that going on, Toshiyuki had dropped out partway through his university course. But then, right at a crucial time—when he'd just gotten an informal job offer from a famous toy company—he'd been dragged against his will into a whole other world as Ado.

If the Four Gods hadn't just dumped the Dark God inside the world of *Swords & Sorceries*, he probably would've been able to build a completely normal family.

And now, he was working with fellow reincarnators Lisa and Shakti in an effort to get revenge on the Four Gods.

That said...they didn't intend on dragging any innocent third parties into it. Their sole target was the Holy Land of Metis, a theocracy centered around the

Four Gods.

It was a major power—either the largest or second-largest in the world—and it was an enemy of the Kingdom of Isalas, the small nation that he'd arrived in upon first appearing in this world. The Holy Land of Metis was clearly scheming to take over the Kingdom of Isalas via coercive diplomacy backed by military might.

The Kingdom of Isalas suffered from a chronic food shortage. It was a small country nestled among the mountains, after all, so the average temperature there was very much on the low end, and none of the crops that grew on low-lying, flat lands would grow there. As a result, the country had terrible self-sufficiency when it came to food.

And because of that, the country had long been forced into agreements whereby it would receive food support on the condition that it handed over its mineral resources at bargain bin prices.

But those mineral deposits seemed like they would dry up sooner rather than later. And with how famished the people were, it seemed likely they'd be subjugated by the Holy Land of Metis before long.

The food support from overseas was clearly being provided with the intent to invade.

As for *why* Ado had ended up allied with such a poor country: He'd improved the food situation in a village he'd ended up in, and somehow it had led to him receiving a warm welcome throughout the country. He was a state guest.

Even then, he'd hesitated to set up base in such a small, poverty-stricken country. But the bordering country was in the middle of a war, and he figured that having *some* country to base himself in would be better for gathering information than just wandering the whole time.

He was also cooperating a little with a faction pushing for war. But if he didn't do that, he wouldn't be able to learn all the little details he needed to know about the world. And so, at the moment, he was out spying on the political climate of another country as something of a secret agent for the Kingdom of Isalas.

To be specific, he was inside the great library of the Istol Academy of Magic, in the academy city of Stihla, within the Magic Kingdom of Solistia.

His primary goal at the moment was information gathering, and he was perusing all sorts of different books to that end.

*It's weird... The laws of nature here seem similar to those in Swords & Sorceries, but at the same time, they're completely different. A bit of column A, a bit of column B...*

He'd been reading through a great number of books here for more than a week now—and through that, plus talking to his companions, they'd started to put together a number of hypotheses.

Ado called out to one of his companions, a female mage.

“What do you think, Shakti?”

The woman had wavy, shoulder-length hair, and almond-shaped eyes that she was narrowing as she focused on a book.

In fact, she must have been *really* focused on it, since it seemed like she didn't even notice Ado calling for her the first time.

“Hey. Earth to Shakti... I just asked you a question.”

“Let's see... If you ask me, this world's depictions of man-on-man love are too long-winded. And sort of crude. It makes it hard to get through. I feel like the writers need to have them going after each other with more gusto. More *passion*.”

“What are you... What are you even reading? We're here to do research, right?”

“And I *am* researching. Researching how this world sees love between men. You could say this is a test of sorts to see whether the heterosexual norms of love here can tolerate same-sex love. And if they can—if that's something that can be overcome—I think the discussion around the ethics of homosexuality could open a whole new page. You know, I think we should respect other people's outlooks on love; I think it's ridiculous for outsiders to ridicule people for their choices about this sort of thing. Wouldn't you agree? As someone who

was aiming to become a lawyer, I say we should respect each individual's approach to love. Even if love to them is something that happens between two members of the same sex, that's not something a third party should be butting into."

"Uh... No, seriously, what are you even reading? I'm not sure that kind of book is meant to be *educational*. In fact, why's it in this kind of library in the first place? That's weird, right?"

"Wouldn't you say it's here *because* this is a place for learning? For broadening our horizons? There were mountains of books like this on the shelves on the second floor."

"Seriously...?"

Ado was feeling some doubts about whether this library was devoted to serious scholarship.

Maybe you could say it was good for the library to have such an open attitude...but still, you wouldn't usually expect to find books like *that* in a place of learning. *If this is what constitutes common sense in this world, then honestly, the world can fall to ruin for all I care*, he wanted to say.

Still, they *were* in the middle of a public place, so Ado refrained from raising his voice and shouting that.

He was a man of common sense.

"So, Shakti..." he said. "What have you even been doing while I've been researching my butt off?"

"How rude. I've been doing proper research too."

"Oh? Researching *what*, for example?"

"Well, for example, I've found that relationships between men are common here in times of war. In fact, even on Earth, there were a lot of politicians and the like throughout history who had same-sex relationships. They just weren't written down in the history books. It's a similar story in Japan too. Shingen Takeda and Nobunaga—they had page boys by their sides, didn't they? They couldn't take women to the battlefield, so they developed these customs to

deal with the lust they felt while they were at war. And it's a historical fact that when peasants got conscripted, women tended to have bad experiences while sparring with their male counterparts. So if you consider that men managed to take the excitement caused by combat, and deal with it among men alone, you could say it's a healthy way of dealing with things. Nobody gets hurt that way, after all. And—"

"Wait! Wait a minute! Why are you doing research into *that*?! I thought we came here to compare the laws of nature in this world with the ones from *Swords & Sorceries*? To try and find out what kind of world we're in?"

"Of course. And it's perfectly reasonable to study this world's history as part of those aims, no?"

"But how does 'studying history' turn into a deep dive into same-sex relationships specifically? I think you've got the wrong idea about what we're actually meant to be investigating here..."

Ado and the others were here to get a better idea of the similarities and differences between the laws of nature here in this world and those in the world of *Swords & Sorceries*, with the hope of figuring out how much of their knowledge from the game would still be useful here.

They also hoped that getting an objective idea from other countries about various things—like the origins of the Faith of the Four Gods, or the history of the Holy Land of Metis—would be good references for planning their course of action going forward.

But Ado's compatriot, it seemed, had taken an interest in a very particular part of history, and had ended up diving into books that might be...less academically inclined.

"You know, Ado, seeing as we're helping out a small country, there's the chance we could get sent to the battlefield ourselves. And if that happens, don't you think you could end up putting your hands on some woman you don't know?"

"No. No, I'm pretty sure that's not gonna happen. I don't have any plans to assault some woman I've never met, okay?"

“But you can never know, right? Depending on how things go, a war *could* break out—and the country sees you as its most valuable military asset, Ado. If you *do* get sent into battle, and you can’t deal with your arousal, you might end up assaulting a nearby farming village and—”

“If I did that, my wife’d kill me, okay?! She’d send me straight to hell herself if she found out I did something like that.”

Ado was honestly scared of his wife, Yuika.

If he did somehow end up in a situation that threatened to pressure him into cheating on her, he was ready to hightail it out of there ASAP, even if it got him labeled a coward. He was just that afraid of his wife.

“Ado, are you... What’s the word? Whipped? Do you belong to your wife?”

“Don’t start... Everyone has some things they’d rather not tell everyone about. By the way, where’s Lisa?”

“Oh, Lisa? She went off earlier to find some books. Actually—here she comes now.”

A woman came walking over with books under both arms, her ponytail swaying from side to side as she approached.

She looked like a mage too. She was Ado’s other ally, Lisa.

“Have you figured anything out, Ado?”

“*Some* stuff, at least. We might be, like...*contaminants* in this world.”

The other two responded together: “Contaminants?”

“Yeah... Look, I don’t have any concrete proof, but the more books I read, the more discrepancies I find.”

“Like what?”

“Let’s see... Jobs, for example. In *Swords & Sorceries*, you chose your job during character creation, and it gave you certain bonuses. So, say, if you were a swordsman, your attack power with a sword would be a bit higher, or if you were a mage, then that’d have an effect on the power of your attack magic, and your magic resistance, and so on. This is another world, though, so a person



isn't going to be locked into one job like that. So those sorts of bonuses from your job might not exist either, right?"

After choosing your class in an RPG, it was often hard to change it. Sure, things could be different from game to game, but at the very least, there was a lot in which the class you chose at the start couldn't be changed afterward. But when the world you were in was *real*, that sort of thing didn't make any sense.

Real people changed their jobs sometimes, after all; it wasn't as if everyone just stuck to the same job their whole life. Your career could be affected by your individual situation and your workplace environment, and job changes were going to be normal whatever world you were in.

"That's a good point. In reality, it's insane to think that your job could be locked in place for life. Even if there was a world *similar* to a game where your job is locked in, every person has their strengths and weaknesses. There's no way it'd be impossible to change jobs."

"Right? It'd be weird if you couldn't change your job—based on what you wanted to do, based on your talents, all that sort of stuff."

"The next thing," Ado said, "is skills. Anyone can learn them, if they train hard enough. That much is the same as it was in *Swords & Sorceries*. That said, if you wanna develop them into high-rank skills here, you've gotta devote your whole life to it. Leveling up your skills requires real dedication and training. That's the difference between here and the game."

"Of course. A kid that's been practicing kendo since they were young is going to be better at it than a kid who only picked it up later on. It only makes sense that the gap between how long different people have trained and honed their skills is going to make a difference. And everyone grows at their own rate, right?"

"You don't forget what you've learned, though, do you? If you stop your training halfway, your body starts to get weaker. But as long as you've learned skills and techniques, you're never going to forget them, right?"

"Yeah. I mean, I haven't confirmed it, so I can't say anything for sure, but you're probably right."

Ado was explaining the hypothesis he'd reached from his investigation, but he wasn't entirely correct.

"Job skills" were a thing that existed among skills. Even if you changed your job, you'd never forget a job skill you'd learned before, and bonuses from those skills *did* exist, even if they were only minor.

If you didn't keep practicing, though, your skills would gradually weaken with time. And not only would the *bonuses* from the skills weaken, the techniques you'd cultivated would dull too.

It was only obvious, really. Even the most skilled artisan would see their techniques decline with time if they weren't doing any work.

"Lastly, there's the idea of levels, as they exist in this world. That's the most obvious difference from us. The maximum level for us is somewhere above Level 1,000, at the very least. I mean, *I'm* over Level 1,000, so, y'know. But in this world, it seems like the highest most people can get to is Level 500."

"Does that mean we're just ridiculously overpowered?"

"Mmm... I get that we've kinda got cheats here, but I kinda struggle to believe that there's *that* much of a difference, y'know?"

"From the perspective of the average person in this world, being Level 100 makes you sort of average. Level 200 puts you between average and experienced, and if you're Level 300, people might say you're the strongest person around. Then you've got 'heroes' and 'transcendentals' who get to Level 500. People like us who exist in this world with the system from *Swords & Sorceries* are probably exceptions to the rule. From what I've seen, there's apparently never been a single person about Level 1,000."

"So in other words, there's something different about us reincarnators, right?"

"Hm... I wonder if people like us, who make decisions going by the standards of *Swords & Sorceries*, could be a bad influence on this world? Asking the people from this world to do crazy stuff, for example..."

"I could believe that. And that's why we have to really think carefully about all this. We can't go teaching people the awakened skills—Limit Breaker and

Criticality Breaker—even by accident. Since it's possible they're not even a thing in this world."

Ado was *saying* that as conjecture, but at the very least, he thought that Limit Breaker, the first awakened skill, probably existed here.

His reason for that was that while someone of Level 300 would be considered the strongest person around in this world, there *were* people who'd exceeded Level 500. Those people were called 'transcendentals,' and unlike the heroes, who were summoned, they were true residents of this world.

Going by that, then, Ado figured it only made sense that this world had either Limit Breaker or another skill that did something similar.

Though, of course, he'd need more time to confirm it.

These reincarnators were incredibly strong, sure, but there was a lot they didn't know. And so, by calmly going over what he'd found in his research—as well as Lisa's and Shakti's opinions—Ado reached the conclusion that they were existing under different laws of nature from the people who were born here.

It was dangerous, after all, to simply assume that the laws of nature here were a perfect match with the game design from *Swords & Sorceries*.

"So I guess we can assume we're living under different laws of nature from the people who were born in this world, yeah? That's only how things seem from our research, but if it's really true, there's the risk we could make some big mistakes."

"You're right... This chat is going to make me have to think about things."

"To put it in a bad way, we're a big threat as far as this world is concerned, right? We're not gonna get eliminated or something, are we? I'm kinda scared..."

"We should be fine. What worries me are the laws of nature in this world. Now, it's just a possibility, but this world might be...starting to break. I hope I'm just overthinking things..."

The other two paused for a moment, dumbfounded. Then, together: "*Huh?*"

It was like Ado's words had frozen the very air in the room, if only for an

instant. That was the impact they'd had.

The world was starting to *break*? They didn't know what evidence he had for this, but it sounded like pretty bad news.

"A-Ado? What makes you think that?"

"Yes. Can you tell us more?"

"Comparing all of the folklore and history books and so on passed down after the Dark God War, it seems like the whole concept of levels started with the summoned heroes. Then the concept of 'skills' popped up about three hundred years after that. But that's weird, right? Are the laws of nature in a world really meant to just change over the course of two thousand and something years? Just...logically, it doesn't make sense, does it? So it makes *more* sense to assume that something's abnormal with the world."

"Is that true, Ado...?"

"I mean, it's the best answer I managed to reach from all the info I found, but it's nothing concrete. Just my intuition at the moment."

"Hmm... In that case, tell us after you get some more conclusive evidence. We can't really say much for now."

"Got it. Well, I think it's just about time for the library to close, so let's head back to the inn. We've gotta start getting ready to head back to Isalas tomorrow, after all. And there's one pain-in-the-ass job left to do..."

"I don't *want* to go back to Isalas. The food there's not exactly great..."

"I thought you promised not to talk about that, Shakti? Just go buy some spices or something. Okay?"

This would be the last day that Ado and his group visited the library.

Back at the inn, they started getting ready for their last job. Then three days later, they checked out and disappeared without a trace.

A little while later, dangerous potions started to circulate throughout the underworld...but that was a story for another day.





The Diary of A  
**MIDDLE-AGED**  
**SAGE'S**  
Carefree Life in Another World

**5**  
story by  
Yasukiyo  
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» Miska

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He looked in the direction the bolt had come from and saw a woman with purple-tinged black hair and glasses. Beside her stood a man with his



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by Kotobuki Yasukiyo

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